Prognosis critical: resilience and multiculturalism in contemporary Australia

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Introduction

Most developed countries, including Australia, have a strong focus on national, state and local strategies for emergency management and response in the face of disasters and crises. This framework can include coping with catastrophic dislocation, service disruption, injury or loss of life in the face of natural disasters such as major fires, natural emergencies or other large-scale and impact natural events as well as more frequent or smaller scale events such as bombings, biological agents, cyber-attacks targeting essential services such as communications networks, or other crises affecting large populations. Emergency management frameworks for crisis and disaster response are distinguished by their focus on the domestic context for such events; that is, how to manage and assist the ways in which civilian populations, who are for the most part inexperienced and untrained in dealing with crises and disasters, are able to respond and behave in such situations so as to minimise the impacts of a catastrophic event.

Even in countries like Australia that demonstrate a strong public commitment to cultural pluralism and social cohesion, ethno-cultural diversity can be seen as a threat or need to national security and values at times of political, natural, economic and/or social tensions and crises. Australian government policymakers have recently focused on the need to foster ‘resilience’ in order to meet the challenge of managing urban diversity and enhancing emergency preparedness and response. In some sense, this is the result of a tacit acknowledgement by government agencies that there are limits to what they can do for domestic communities should such a catastrophic event occur, and accordingly, the focus in recent times has shifted to how governments can best help people to help themselves in such situations, a key element of a contemporary ‘resilience’ agenda. Yet despite the robust historical nature of Australian society, explicit engagement with Australia’s cultural diversity flickers only fleetingly on this agenda, which continues to pursue approaches to community resilience in the absence of understandings about how these terms and formations may themselves need to be diversified to maximise engagement by all citizens in a multicultural polity.

Reflections

There have been some recent efforts in Australia to move into this direction, for example the Australian Emergency Management Institute (AEMI)’s recent suite of projects for ethnic communities education, the current National Institute of Indigenous Studies (ACON) and the current Australia-New Zealand Counter-Terrorism Committee-supported project on “Harnessing Resilience Capital in Culturally Diverse Communities to Counter Violent Extremism” (Grossman and Tahini), which I discuss in a longer forthcoming version of this essay (Grossman). Yet the understanding of ethno-cultural identity and difference that underlies much policy thinking on resilience remains problematic for the way in which it invests in a view of the cultural dimensions of community resilience as relic rather than resource – thus overlooking the preserving of and respect for cultural norms and traditions, but silent on what different ethno-cultural communities might contribute toward expanded definitions of both “community” and “resilience” by virtue of the transformative potential and existing cultural capital they bring with them into new national and also translocal settings.

For example, a primary conclusion of the joint program between AEMI and the Australian Multicultural Commission is that CALD communities are largely “vulnerable” in the context of next generation disaster threats, and, as a result, the majority of the national disaster risk reduction program to date has focused on mainstream, ‘mainstream’ neighbours in western settings (Ungar 2).

In short, contemporary thinking about resilience suggests it is neither entirely personal nor strictly social, but an interactive and iterative combination of the two. It is a quality of the environment as much as the individual. For Ungar, resilience is the complex entanglements between “individuals and their social ecologies [that] will determine the degree of positive outcomes experienced” (3). Thinking about resilience as context-dependent is important because research that is too trait-focused or other factors can create patterns of resilience. Finally, a comprehensive understanding of the interrelated nature of protective mechanisms and risk factors is imperative for designing effective interventions and tailored protective strategies (Weine 65).

Locating ‘Culture’ in the Literature on Resilience

However, an understanding of the role of culture has remained elusive or marginalised within this trend; there has been comparatively little sustained investigation into the applicability of resilience constructs to non-western cultures, or how the resources available for survival might differ from those accessible to western populations (Ungar 4). As such, a growing body of researchers is calling for more rigorous inquiry into culturally determined outcomes that might be associated with social cohesion and community resilience to recover from disasters and crises. How might we do differently in thinking about the broader challenges for multiculturalism itself as a resilient transnational concept and practice?

The Concept of Resilience

The meanings of resilience vary by disciplinary perspective. While there is no universally accepted definition of the concept, it is widely acknowledged that resilience refers to the capacity of an individual to do well in spite of exposure to acute trauma or sustained adversity (Liebenberg 219). Originating in the Latin word resiliō, meaning ‘to jump back’, there is general consensus that resilience pertains to an individual’s, community’s or system’s ability to adapt to and ‘bounce back’ from a disruptive event (Mohaupt 63, Longstaff et al. 3).

Over the past decade there has been a dramatic rise in interest in the clinical, community and family sciences concerning resilience to a broad range of adversities (Weine 65). The debate continues over which discipline can be credited with first employing resilience as a concept, Mohaupt argues that most of the literature on resilience cites social psychology and psychiatry as the origin for the concept beginning in the mid-20th century. The pioneer researchers of what became known as resilience research studied the impact on children living in dysfunctional families. For example, the findings of work by Garmezy, Werner and Smith and Rutter showed that about one third of children in these studies were coping very well despite considerable adversities and traumas. In asking what it was that prevented the children in their research from being negatively influenced by their home environments, such research provided the best leads on resilience resilience...
of other cultures; the emphasis here is not so much comparatively inter-cultural as intensively intra-cultural (VanBreda 215). A culturally focused resilience model thus involves a dynamic, interactive process in which the individual negotiates stress through a combination of character traits, cultural background, cultural values, and facilitating factors in the sociocultural environment" (Clauss-Ehlers 199).

In understanding ways of 'coping and hoping, surviving and thriving', it is thus crucial to consider how culturally and linguistically diverse communities navigate the cultural understandings and assumptions of both their countries of origin and those of their current domicile (Ungar 12). Gunnesstad claims that people who master the cultural adaptability skill, that is, those who feel more proficient in their cultural background than in those of their current domicile, show a more resilient change in their own culture at the expense of adjusting to their new environment. They are also more resilient than those who forego their own culture and assimilate with the host society (14). Accordingly, if the combination of both valuing one's culture as well as learning about the culture of the new system produces greater resilience and community resilience to disaster, then an approach to multiculturalism would be to encourage people to embrace their own cultural heritage and use it as a resource to enhance their personal and community resilience. In the way it has framed policy discussion on managing national responses to disasters and threats, has arguably been more muted than some of the European historical, sociocultural and national life. Yet we still struggle with the idea that newcomers to Australia might fall on the surplus rather than the deficit side of the ledger when it comes to identifying and harnessing resilience capital.

A brief example of this trend is explored here. From 2006 to 2010, the Australian Emergency Management Institute embarked on an ambitious government-funded four-year program devoted to strengthening community resilience in relation to disasters with specific reference to engaging CALD communities across Australia. The program, Inclusive Emergency Management with CALD Communities, was part of a wider Australian National Action Plan to Build Social Cohesion, Harmony and Security in the wake of the London terrorist bombings in July 2005. Involving CALD community organisations as well as various emergency and disaster management agencies, the program ran various workshops and agency-community partnership pilots, developed national school education resources, and commissioned an evaluation of the program's effectiveness (Farrow et al.).

While my critique here is certainly not aimed at emergency management or disaster response agencies and personnel themselves – dedicated professionals who often achieve remarkable results in emergency and disaster response under extraordinarily difficult circumstances – it is nevertheless important to highlight how the assumptions underlying elements of AEMI's presence and outcomes reflect the persistent ways ethnocultural diversity is rendered as a problem to be surmounted or a liability to be redressed, rather than as an asset to be built upon or a resource to be valued and mobilised. AEMI's explicit effort to engage with CALD communities in building overall community resilience was important in its tacit acknowledgement that emergency and disaster services were (and often remain) under-prepared and under-staffed in their efforts to engage with the diversity of communities and cultures, particularly those of the CALD groups particularly those from new arrival and refugee communities, are not vulnerable in at least some of the ways and for some of the reasons suggested in the program evaluation.

However, the consistent focus on CALD communities as 'vulnerable' and 'in need' is problematic, as well as partial. It casts members of these communities as structurally and inherently less able and less resilient in the context of disasters and emergencies: in some sense, as those who, already 'victims' of chronic social deficits such as low English proficiency, social isolation and a mysterious unidentified set of 'cultural factors', can become doubly victimised in acute crisis and disasters under-laying elements of AEMI's presence and outcomes. By now it is a familiar trope that the descriptor of what we do not know, what they do, and what they do or can contribute to how we respond to disaster and emergency events in our communities.

A more profound problem in this sphere revolves around working out how best to engage CALD communities and individuals within existing approaches to disaster and emergency preparedness and response. This reflects a fundamental but unavoidable limitation of disaster preparedness models: they are intricately spatially and geographically constrained to operate within the traditional paradigms of expanding definitions of 'community' to include the dimensions of community-as-social-relations. While some good engagement outcomes were achieved locally around cross-cultural knowledge for emergency services workers, the AEMI program fell short of asking some of the harder questions about how emergency and disaster service scaffolding and resilience-building approaches might themselves need to change or transform, using a cross-cutting model of 'communities' as both geographic places and multicultural and transnational settings (Bartowiak-Théron and Crenah) in order to be more effective in national scenarios in which cultural diversity should be taken for granted.

Most significantly, the AEMI program did not produce any recognition of the ways in which CALD communities already possess resilience capital, or consider how this might be leveraged against threats and potential adverse circumstances. For example, individuals and institutions that draw on reservoirs of practices, knowledge, values, and worldviews and is crucial for preparing the system for change, building resilience, and for coping with surprise' (Adger et al.). Consequently, if we accept the challenge of mapping an approach to cultural diversity as resource rather than deficit and a strengthening community in its own right, then new strategies and conceptual frameworks can be developed.

For a whole range of reasons, no diversity-sensitive model or measure of resilience should invest in static understandings of ethnicities and cultures; all around the world, ethnocultural identities and communities are in a constant and sometimes accelerated state of dynamism, reconfiguration and flux. But to ignore the social memory of communities faced with responding to emergencies and crises. Such wellsprings of social memory 'come from whatever their origins, for culturally diverse societies to achieve genuine resilience in the face of both natural and human-made disasters, it is critical to call on the ‘social memory’ (Folke et al.) of communities faced with responding to emergencies and crises. Such wellsprings of social memory “come from the diversity of institutions and individuals that draw on reservoirs of practices, knowledge, values, and worldviews and is crucial for preparing the system for change, building resilience, and for coping with surprise” (Adger et al.). Consequently, if we accept the challenge of mapping an approach to cultural diversity as resource rather than deficit and a strengthening community in its own right, then new strategies and conceptual frameworks can be developed.

This highlights a common feature in community resilience-building initiatives, which is to focus on those who are already ‘robust’ versus those who are ‘vulnerable’ in relation to resilience indicators, and whose needs may require different or additional resources in order to be met. At one level, this is a pragmatic resourcing issue: national agencies understandably want to put their people, energy and dollars where they are most needed in pursuit of a steady-state unified national response at times when they can be argued to have least some of the CALD groups, particularly those from new arrival and refugee communities, are not vulnerable in at least some of the ways and for some of the reasons suggested in the program evaluation.

Toward Acknowledgement of Resilience Capital

Whatever their origins, for culturally diverse societies to achieve genuine resilience in the face of both natural and human-made disasters, it is critical to call on the ‘social memory’ (Folke et al.) of communities faced with responding to emergencies and crises. Such wellsprings of social memory ‘come from the diversity of institutions and individuals that draw on reservoirs of practices, knowledge, values, and worldviews and is crucial for preparing the system for change, building resilience, and for coping with surprise’ (Adger et al.). Consequently, if we accept the challenge of mapping an approach to cultural diversity as resource rather than deficit and a strengthening community in its own right, then new strategies and conceptual frameworks can be developed.

For a whole range of reasons, no diversity-sensitive model or measure of resilience should invest in static understandings of ethnicities and cultures; all around the world, ethnocultural identities and communities are in a constant and sometimes accelerated state of dynamism, reconfiguration and flux. But to ignore the resilience capital and potential protective factors that ethnocultural diversity can offer to the strengthening of community resilience more broadly is to miss an important opportunity to foster a more proactive approach to intercultural connectedness and social inclusion on the one hand, and reactive approaches to threats, national security and disaster response on the other, undermining the effort to advance effectively on either front.

This means that dominant social institutions and structures are willing to contempt their own transformation as the result of transnational engagement, rather than merely insisting, as is often the case, that ‘other’ cultures and communities conform to existing hegemonic paradigms of being and of living. In many ways, this is the most critical step of all. A resilience model and strategy that questions its own culturally informed yet taken-for-granted assumptions and premises, goes against the status quo and the current social and political environment. The consequences of new frameworks based on the new knowledge it acquires, would reflect genuine progress toward an effective transcultural approach to community resilience in culturally diverse contexts.

References


Notes

1. The concept of 'resilience capital' I offer here is in line with one strand of contemporary theorising around resilience – that of resilience as social or sociocultural capital – but moves beyond the idea of enhancing general social connectedness and community cohesion by emphasising the ways in which culturally diverse communities may already be robustly networked and resourceful within micro-communal settings, with new resources and knowledge both to draw on and to offer other communities or the 'national community' at large. In effect, 'resilience capital' speaks to the importance of finding 'the communities within the community' (Bartowiak-Théron and Crehan 11) and recognising their capacity to contribute to broad-scale resilience and recovery.

2. I am indebted for the discussion of the literature on resilience here to Dr Peta Stephenson, Centre for Cultural Diversity and Wellbeing, Victoria University, who is working on a related project (M. Grossman and H. Tahiri, Harnessing Resilience Capital in Culturally Diverse Communities to Counter Violent Extremism, forthcoming 2014).