bushfire CRC

RISK PERCEPTION, PREPAREDNESS AND RESOURCE THEORIES: THE AUSTRALIAN BUSHFIRES

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An ongoing frustration for hazard and disaster managers is the seeming lack of appropriate public response to recommendations that are devised to avert disaster and save lives. Why is it that some members of the public react appropriately to warnings, and yet others not only ignore, but often seem to deliberately act against advice? In seeking to answer this question, more questions arise: 'how do these individuals assess risk in times of actual or predicted crisis'? Who do they talk to in order to inform their evaluation of risk? What rhetorics, personal or cultural discourses are used to understand hazard threats? What motivates some members of the public to heed risk advice, and what demotivates others? **How are risk decisions made and do past experiences and ways of thinking about risk, influence evaluations about new risks**? Just because an expert says something is thus, does not necessarily mean that the public will believe them ; so when will the public follow experts' advice? **Perhaps when their assessment of the risk tells them that they should.**

Through the examination of public, policy and scientific responses to recent bushfires, this research aims to add to existing knowledge about risk construction, communication, representation, perception and framing of potentially devastating hazard events.

'Warning Fatigue'

What happens when authorities alert the public to risks that do not eventuate? *'If warnings are issued too early, too frequently or in a context of heightened scientific and social uncertainty, they may result in cynicism and indifference and stifle sustained investment'* (Brown cited in Nerlich & Halliday, 2007:48). A recognised term for this cynicism or apathy is 'warning fatigue' which can have real implications for the creators of risk messages. Warning fatigue poses a risk communication challenge where dissemination of "high alarm" messages that do not eventuate in an event of corresponding magnitude, can lead to reduced vigilance and preparation, despite the very real nature of the threat.

This research will explore whether warning fatigue is a reality for those individuals and communities threatened by potential bushfires and what, if any, are the consequences.

Methodology

A sequential mixed methods design integrating qualitative and quantitative methodologies will use thematic and critical discourse to formulate questions for semi-structured interviews, and inform the design of quantitative surveys. Multivariate and structural equation modeling (SEM), will identify positive and negative factors that enable psychological preparedness. Quantitative analysis of the interview transcripts will identify variables such as resources (objects, personal characteristics, conditions and energies), psycho-social constructs (risk, uncertainty) media effects (priming, agenda-setting, sensationalism) as well as self-reported anxiety and warning fatigue.

The theoretical perspective is Social Constructionist; a core tenet of which asserts that it is through the everyday interactions between people in the course of social life that versions of knowledge and ways of understanding the world are shaped.

Research Questions

1) **What psychological resources enable effective risk evaluation and prudent hazard preparedness?**

2) **What discourses of risk and uncertainty do people use in negotiating issues of personal and community preparedness?**

3) **How do media influence the perception of risk messages?**

4) **Is there evidence of 'warning fatigue?'**
a) **does this effect influence the perception of risk**
b) **is this a 'one-off' or a cumulative effect?**
c) **what is the size of this effect?**
d) **is there a congruence between risk messages (and their intended purposes), public understanding of these messages, and preparedness?**

Case Study

As a result of the devastating loss of life and property in the Victorian bushfires of 7 February 2009, the Victorian government established a Royal Commission to investigate the *'causes of, preparation for, responses to, and impact on infrastructure of the fires'* (Victorian Parliament, 2009). Amongst the eleven specific foci that the commission was tasked with investigating, was *'the preparation and planning by governments, emergency services, other entities, the community and households for bushfires in Victoria, including current laws, policies, practices, resources and strategies for the prevention, identification, evaluation, management and communication of the bushfire threats and risks'* (Victorian Parliament, 2009: ix).

It is the psychological resources that individuals use for the prevention, identification and evaluation of the bushfire threats and risks that this research will examine.

Aim/Outcome

This research will examine social and psychological influences on the quality of people's planning for bushfires and their ability to implement their plans, including how people interpret and respond to warnings. A theoretically robust model will be developed that identifies positive and negative aspects of people's psychological experience of bushfires and how these aspects interact to influence psychological preparedness. This will provide an evidence-based framework identifying psychological and dispositional factors that need to be accommodated in risk communication strategies.

This research will provide agencies with ways to engage with communities by identifying issues associated with warnings processes and just as importantly, identify how to frame and communicate hazard warnings in ways that reduce the risk of warning fatigue and community complacency.

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