# Well-Being of Community Disaster Resilience

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#### **Exceptionalism of Community Disaster Resilience**

Community resilience to hazards is a young and still (understandably) immature corpus of scholarship. Its current popularity suggests that a wide range of scholars acknowledge its potential to benefit society. There is a widespread urgency, catalyzed by practitioners, to quantify and assess community resilience to disasters that has outpaced our theoretical understanding. My concern with this state of scholarship is that it may ultimately endanger our ability to effectively promote and apply community disaster resilience. More and better theoretical scholarship into community resilience is needed so that researchers can more systematically pose and investigate testable propositions. This will hasten subsequent implementation and applications, such as metrics, indicators, decision support tools, and policies.

#### Foundations of Community Disaster Resilience

There are two distinct types of conceptual models that are necessary for theorizing community disaster resilience (theoretically or otherwise): *static* and *dynamic*. Static conceptual models identify critical variables of community resilience, as well as the relationships between those variables, that are sufficient for describing states or conditions before and after a hazard event. Dynamic conceptual models represent the multi-dimensional processes that propel the myriad of post-event trajectories of the static variables.

I believe that four static constructs are both necessary and sufficient for representing community resilience to hazards: *well-being, identity, services, and capitals*. Collectively, I refer to these constructs as WISC. Ultimately, well-being of a community is dependent on its capital assets, whether built, social, natural etc. While community well-being is dependent on capitals, these constructs are mediated by the two intervening constructs of identity and services.

The goal of community resilience should go beyond safety or functioning and ultimately ensure the well-being of communities. Common variables of well-being are material needs, security, health, affiliation, autonomy, and satisfaction. Extreme events can change the identity of communities and in turn impact members of those communities. Many non-disaster studies have empirically linked community identity to variables of well-being. Broadly, services are tangible and intangible flows that provide the benefits that are needed and desired by communities, such as mobility, sustenance, and emotional support. Services are derived from capitals. The community capitals concept, of course, is widespread within the community resilience literature.

Dynamically, relationships of community resilience with respect to WISC can be adequately described by the interplay of three constructs: *metabolism*, *geography*, and *sufficiency*. Urban metabolism describes the circulation, exchange, and transformation of materials and energy that uniquely support the well-being of particular human settlements and the communities within them. The construct of geography refers to variables of space, time, scale, and spatio-temporal topology. Currently, these commonly known variables are insufficiently integrated in theories

and applications of community resilience. Efficiency focuses on the speed in which supply is reestablished after a disaster. The focus of sufficiency includes efficiency but, more importantly, includes time-variant balances between supplies *and* demands. From the perspective of sufficiency, the debate of whether to define recovery as reaching the pre-event state, the without-disaster state, or some new normal is no longer relevant. We can move on from this debate.

#### **Boundaries of Community Disaster Resilience**

Few conceptual models in the literature approach theory because boundaries and assumptions are not made explicit. The theoretical spatial boundary of community resilience to hazard events is a particular human settlement. For community resilience to be operational, human settlements must be assumed to be infinitely resilient that do not collapse from a single hazard event. Our focus is the resilience of communities *within* respective human settlements and to what degree their well-being and identity strengthens or weakens due to individual hazard events. Practically, this only means that care be put into defining the spatial extent of the human settlement in question, as well as the criteria for identifying the communities of interest within it.

The temporal boundary for community disaster resilience is one just large enough to represent a particular community's recovery from a *single* hazard event. This then excludes disturbances with onset speeds of greater temporal scales. For example, while resilience to climate change is a valid and much-needed area of scholarship and practice, it is out of the theoretical scope of community disaster resilience because of its temporal nature—it is a different topic of research.

Theories of community disaster resilience should only apply to hazard events that change, at least temporarily, the states of some communities within the chosen human settlement. This means that, by definition, communities can never be fully resilient and are perpetually resilient to some degree. This assumption means that if a community enters a new state that is not vulnerable to the previously harmful hazard intensities, theoretically grounded propositions are no longer applicable to that case and are now only applicable to combinations of vulnerabilities and hazards intensities that *will* result in disaster. Empirically, this means valid hypothesis can only be evaluated using cases where a hazard event has impacted a community. In comparing the resilience of two or more communities, all communities must have suffered damage or loss in order to make valid, meaningful cross-case conclusions. This constraint may seem unnecessary or burdensome but it serves to clearly delineate the resilience from vulnerability—terms often confused or erroneously seen as opposites. The fact that a community does not suffer impacts from a particular event does not mean that the community is resilient; if vulnerability increases after an event, it does not mean the resilience also decreases or was even low to begin with.

### **Transcendence of Community Disaster Resilience**

Scholars of community disaster resilience do not need to be caught up in debates regarding the origins and applicability of discipline-specific definitions of resilience. Instead, I suggest that we assert and promote the exceptionalism of community disaster resilience—conceive and evaluate theoretical frameworks that are specific to the needs of representing and understanding communities within long-term, post-disaster contexts. Given the nature and complexity of community disaster resilience, demarcating and maintaining disciplinary perspectives is not desirable or sufficient. I think this is retarding or distracting from advancing community disaster resilience. We can stop being concerned about a lack of unity between disciplinary perspectives on resilience. For the well-being of community disaster resilience (and to lose buzzword status),

scholars of the subject need to transcend disciplinary conceptions of resilience, even if we borrow from them.