

Are Bushfires Women's Business?: a Reflection on Bras, Nappies, Chainsaws and Suitcases.

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Abstract

This presentation will examine the results of research conducted in Victoria including: the effects of culture and social networks on individuals; and gendered behaviour during the bushfire. These behaviours will be framed against bushfire education programs and products.

Research was completed through a case study using the historical accounts of 25 households affected by the Bendigo Fire Complex on Black Saturday 2009. Using a mixed methods approach, the behaviours and fire effects within the community were studied. The results revealed characteristics which could influence education programs for this community.

Further research evaluated the constraints and enablers for effective emergency service education in increasing community preparedness and bushfire resilience through 'Fire Ready' community meetings. Community educators, for one hour a year, participate directly in the community and influence bushfire survival behaviour.

INTRODUCTION

This project examines the link between education and bushfire resilience in peri-urban (edge of towns) communities.

Part one involved studying 25 household responses to the Bendigo Fire Complex on Black Saturday 7th February 2009. Bendigo is a peri-urban community, much like Canberra (affected by fires in 2003).

Part 2 has begun, with evaluation of the Victorian Country Fire Authority (CFA) 'Fire Ready' program. Research was completed in high risk peri-urban communities across Victoria during summer 2012/13. The study included reviewing 12 meetings, conducting 66 preliminary and 52 follow-up community surveys, and 13 agency staff interviews.

This paper reflects on the social construct of 'leaving early' as a resilience strategy when a bushfire threatens.

STAY OR GO

To preserve life, fire authorities want residents to minimise their risk and make safe decisions during a bushfire. Across Australia over the last 50 plus years men are most likely to die defending outside and women are most likely to die when leaving late or passively sheltering in their homes during a bushfire (Haynes et al., 2008). There are two options for fire defence that fire authorities promote. That is 'leave early' or 'stay and defend'. This dichotomy is presented by CFA, NSW Rural Fire Service (RFS), South Australian Country Fire Service (CFS) and other emergency service agencies nationwide. Leaving early is promoted as the safest option, and the option to take if you are not prepared: the easy option.

LIMITS ON LEAVING EARLY

Young women, or those with children, have been shown to want to leave an area threatened by bushfire (DeLaine, Pedler, Probert, Goodman, and Rowe, 2008; Proudley, 2008). Evidence suggests that children are also more likely to be 'sent' than their mothers (Whittaker, Handmer, and Mercer, 2012). Concerns for how women will occupy dependents offsite for extended periods could delay a decision to leave their home (Delica, 1998; Fordham and Ketteridge, 1998).

GENDER AND SOCIAL RESILIENCE

One of the criticisms of policy and its implementation is that it can ignore gender differences (Bolin, Jackson, and Crist, 1998; Enarson and Morrow, 1998b; Stehlik, 2003). Gender differences are well documented, but also not universal, for instance women with young children are particularly vulnerable during a disaster (Bolin et al., 1998; Enarson and Morrow, 1998b; Fordham and Ketteridge, 1998; Goodman and Proudley, 2008; Parkinson, 2012; Proudley, 2008). Men in their latter years are more likely to appear in bushfire fatality statistics than other groups (Handmer, O'Neil, and Killalea, 2010; Haynes et al., 2008).

Different needs and experience are found by all people, including those with pre-existing vulnerabilities (Fordham and Ketteridge, 1998), and these different needs and vulnerabilities are usually socially constructed (Cox, 1998; Scanlon, 1998). Researchers have identified a need to look at root cause of vulnerability (Enarson and Morrow, 1998a) rather than assuming homogeneity in order to increase community resilience.

EVIDENCE DOES NOT SUGGEST IT IS EASY TO LEAVE EARLY

On Black Saturday, there were few instances of people leaving early with bags packed - the un-gendered, easy, option. Social construction of their lives meant the leaving process was more complicated, with women more likely than men to leave.

Leave experiences were highly diverse. While some women showed great resilience, others struggled. Leaving involved grabbing valuables, children, neighbours and recalcitrant family members, leaving behind partners and/or adult children and finding a safe route out. Women also had to recover from the effects of not being able to return to the house, discovering what had been lost, as well as managing the welfare of dependents after the fire.

In this research, one woman escaped with a suitcase but later found it was empty. Another woman coerced children into packing their toys and getting in the car only to discover her jewellery was left behind. A young mother described her children flying into the front seat when she applied the brakes as neither her, nor her husband had fastened their seatbelts. Some women sent their children with friends or took their neighbour's children. Another called and called for her husband to leave as she hopped in the car. She never saw him alive again.

The findings were consistent with international research showing that choices are gendered, with men more likely to stay and women more likely to leave. This is not based on biology, but on gendered social relations e.g. women responsible for children make decisions based on welfare of both themselves and their child. A more accurate description of

experiences is they are highly variable and socially constructed, and as described by Enarson and Morrow (1998), *'they are a mosaic'*.

WHAT DO THE FIRE AUTHORITY EDUCATORS COVER?

While educators spoke at length on planning to 'stay and defend' or making a choice to 'leave early' less time was spent on how to practically leave early and the need to practice leaving. More than one presenter said *'the decision to leave early is easy if you have children'*. Only one presenter acknowledged the extreme difficulty of leaving for some people. No presenters provided advice about how to leave the home all day or multiple days (amuse children, protect the elderly etc.). Leaving was covered most frequently through a facilitated conversation and/or demonstration of packing an emergency evacuation kit.

PACKING

Educators showing what to pack had an immediate survival response to the disaster, for example, torch, radio, gloves, mask, jumper, water, official documents etc. Less explored was the social context of decisions and longer-term implications. Items less frequently covered included pets, women's personal needs, normal clothing, food, photos, children's toys, men's personal needs and infant supplies. The effect of 'forgetting' items was not discussed.

SOME ISSUES FOR CONSIDERATION

I hope to lift the lid on gender effects on resilience. While it is easy to replace some items lost in a bushfire, toothpaste for example, it would be difficult at best to ask a stranger if they have size 14DD bra

up their sleeve. Imagine looking after your baby, without access to clean nappies and baby wipes.

While 'Fire Ready' sessions may not appear to be gendered, the Australian bushfire experience is. Ignoring the difference is ignoring the socially constructed disaster experience. Educators may need respond to this and build resilience in men and women, particularly those with elderly or young dependents. Fire authorities may need to focus on social behaviours during bushfire events and:

- discuss that it can be hard to leave;
- talk about the socially constructed differences between the behaviour of men and women;
- encourage communication between family members, neighbours and the community;
- identify strategies for amusing children or keeping the elderly or pets comfortable away from home;
- encourage repeated 'leaving early' practice runs; and
- be prepared to talk about bras, nappies, chainsaws and empty suitcases.

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BIOGRAPHY

Ms Toni Domaschenz has fifteen years experience developing collaborative community engagement programs in natural resource and emergency management fields. Following work with clients including CFA Victoria, Toni is extending her expertise by undertaking post graduate research. Her interest is in evaluating community education programs and investigating hidden curriculum and values. Living in a sustainable Maiden Gully home, in a high risk bushfire area, Toni has reviewed the

Black Saturday Experience in Bendigo.
She is now evaluating the bushfire 'Fire Ready' program delivered in Victorian high bushfire risk areas. It is her hope the results will be used to inform 2013/14 planning.