OLDER ADULTS’ EXPERIENCES OF A FLOOD DISASTER: MAKING SENSE OF AN EXTRAORDINARY EVENT

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Psychology at Massey University, Palmerston North, New Zealand.

Robyn Jean Tuohy
2009
Abstract

Disasters occur within the routines of everyday life and have a disruptive and destructive impact on human lives. To understand how older individuals make sense of a disaster, nine older adults in Kaitaia, New Zealand were interviewed about their experience of a flood they experienced in July 2007. These interviews were conducted with four residents living in a rest home and five pensioners living independently who were evacuated from their homes. The two groups differed in the levels of support and assistance received before, during, and after the disaster. The rest home residents experienced little disruption and did not require relocation; the pensioners experienced major disruption and relocation.

Thematic analysis was used to describe how these older adults’ accounted for their experiences of the flood. The narratives were influenced by the participants’ identity as either dependent rest home residents or pensioners living independently in the community. The analysis revealed that their accounts of the disaster were incorporated and integrated into the personal and social context of each person’s life story. Narrative themes that emerged from the analysis for the pensioner group were: coping with limited assistance, the importance of treasured possessions, and social support and community. The pensioner themes reflected their vulnerability to a disaster and the challenges they faced during the post disaster recovery phase. Themes for the rest home residents were ageing and dependency, and the importance of protection, care, and trust. These themes reflected the dependent world of the rest home residents and the security of being cared for.
Acknowledgements

This study was a collaborative research project between the School of Psychology and the Disaster Research Centre. I would like to thank Dr Christine Stephens who provided support, guidance and advice at all stages of my thesis. I would also like to thank Dr David Johnston for introducing me to the field of disaster research and the support he has given me over the duration of this thesis.

My thanks also go to the participants of this study for their willingness to take part and the time they gave me to talk about their experiences of the flood. Without their input this research would not have been possible. I would like to thank the welfare organisations that supported me in the research by handing out information about the study to participants. I would also like to thank the professionals who provided support to those participants who requested someone to be with them during the interview.

Finally, my special thanks to my wonderful family. The love and unfailing support of my husband, Pat, provided me with the freedom to complete my degree. Simon, Seb, Oliver, and Emma have remained constantly interested in the research that their mother has been doing. My love and thanks to you all.
Table of contents

Abstract ........................................................................................................................................................ ii
Acknowledgements ..................................................................................................................................... iii
Table of contents ......................................................................................................................................... iv

CHAPTER 1.................................................................................................................................................1
  INTRODUCTION......................................................................................................................................... 1
    Research question ............................................................................................................................... 8

CHAPTER 2 ............................................................................................................................................... 9
  METHODOLOGY ....................................................................................................................................... 9

CHAPTER 3 ............................................................................................................................................. 12
  METHOD ................................................................................................................................................ 12
    Participants ...................................................................................................................................... 12
    Ethical issues .................................................................................................................................... 13
    Enrolment of participants ................................................................................................................. 14
    Interview process .............................................................................................................................. 15
    Analysis ............................................................................................................................................. 16

CHAPTER 4 ............................................................................................................................................. 18
  RESULTS AND DISCUSSION ..................................................................................................................... 18
  BIOGRAPHICAL INTEGRATION ................................................................................................................ 18
    Introduction ...................................................................................................................................... 18
    Pensioner Narratives ........................................................................................................................ 21
    Rest Home Narratives ....................................................................................................................... 40
    Summary ........................................................................................................................................... 52
  THE FLOOD IN THE CONTEXT OF AGEING: PERSONAL AND SOCIAL VULNERABILITY .................. 54
    Introduction ...................................................................................................................................... 54
    Pensioner narratives .......................................................................................................................... 56