The importance of queer community resilience

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A few years ago, I was asked to write a blog post about what I saw as key challenges for disaster management research, policy and practice. Since then, I have learnt that LGBTQIA+ inclusion requires supporting resilience capacities as much as it does addressing disaster vulnerabilities.

In that post, one area I wrote about was the need to widen the scope of 'diversity' in disaster management, especially relating to inclusion of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual and other minority gender and sexual identities (LGBTQIA+).[1] I reflected on my experiences as a PhD student attending 'diversity' sessions at prominent emergency management conferences, only to see that diversity appeared to mean gender as a male-female binary and narrowly focused on things like quotas for women in emergency organisations. Moreover, it appeared diversity didn't include other intersectional diversity factors such as sexuality, race, ethnicity, class, indigeneity, disability, age and more.

I have been encouraged more recently by the increasing visibility and recognition of the diverse needs, inequalities and disaster vulnerabilities experienced by LGBTQIA+ individuals and communities, including studies by world-leading researchers in Australia[2] and other articles in this issue. These works highlight the marginalisation and oppressions of queer people in societies exposed during, and exacerbated by, disasters. This has been vitally important, even if challenges of translating research into disaster policy and practice persist.[3] But LGBTQIA+ inclusion also requires better understanding and support of the coping capacities and resilience qualities of LGBTQIA+ people and groups. I describe some of the ways queer communities supported each other during the COVID-19 pandemic and associated lockdowns and offer some potential ways forward to value, support and grow LGBTQIA+ disaster resilience.

Queer community resilience during COVID-19

During the pandemic, I led a project exploring the experiences of LGBTQIA+ people in the United Kingdom (UK)[4] and in Brazil[5], particularly during what is generally understood as the 'first wave' in 2020. While significant challenges were experienced by LGBTQIA+ people in both contexts, such as mental health decline, isolation from supportive people and identity-affirming spaces, discrimination and disruption to transgender health care, to name a few, our research also uncovered stories of resilience. People were drawing on their existing coping capacities and collective resources to help others. LGBTQIA+ community organisations and peer-support groups were vital during the pandemic.

Community groups filled critical gaps in providing mental health support and reducing isolation through mutual aid and the creation of safe and identity-affirming (online) spaces. One UK study interviewee, whom I will call 'Omar', worked for an organisation supporting LGBTQIA+ Muslims. Omar described how the need for support increased during the pandemic with many community members suddenly stuck at home in lockdowns with unsupportive or trans/homophobic family members. Omar's organisation quickly adapted to delivering virtual and online support rather than their usual in-person activities. They started reaching out to people further afield. Omar said:

> We had a Pride event and we reached out to countries like Saudi Arabia, Egypt, where being homosexual is against the law and you

would be imprisoned or even worse, sentenced to death. So, we had people sitting in their bedroom saying 'wait a minute, I'm in Saudi Arabia. It's 3am, I'm listening to your event and I'm actually at a Pride!'. So, our reach was huge! It was amazing.

Omar's and other stories from our research into LGBTQIA+ experiences of the pandemic are presented in a recent animation video titled, LGBT+ and Covid-19: stories from the UK and Brazil, and the need for more inclusive crisis responses.[6]

In another example, 'Ken' and a group of friends started a community group (prior to the pandemic) to provide a safe space for queer people to express their identities, share food, socialise and network. The group identified a need for a community space that was more welcoming and inclusive than both the dominant cisgender-heteronormative spaces of society and the often gay-male-dominated nightlife culture (recognising that marginalisation also exists *within* LGBTQIA+ populations).

The group performed several important coping functions. Like Omar, they set up online events and spaces, such as virtual queer cabaret nights and weekly social catchups via Zoom. Some transgender members of the group started a trans mutual aid initiative, cooking and delivering food and care packages to isolated and vulnerable transgender people (e.g., people recently returned home from surgeries). Ken described how being part of the community group and running the activities was what was keeping them going during the pandemic, not just being able to express themselves safely with peers but the feeling of helping others.

In Brazil, under an ultra-conservative government delivering an inadequate pandemic response that has received national and international criticism and where LGBTQIA+ people, especially trans and non-binary people, live in an increasingly hostile environment[7], we heard similar stories of queer people helping each other in the absence of adequate formal government support.

'Laura' described how racism in Brazil[8] compounds the marginalisation and inequality of black queer people, especially trans women of colour. In this context, community peer support was essential for helping many people survive during the pandemic. Laura witnessed groups of black lesbian and bisexual women coming together to assist with loneliness, wellbeing and financial stress by fundraising and providing social, health and income support for poorer black LGBTQIA+ people.

Supporting LGBTQIA+ disaster resilience

Resilience and coping capacities for crises, like vulnerability, are developed through everyday experiences of societal marginality in 'normal' times.[9] For instance, the roles played by LGBTQIA+ community groups during the pandemic echo pre-pandemic needs and activities. Such groups already operated in 'normal' times due to existing gaps in services and exclusion from mainstream society, with queer people developing their own supportive and safe spaces. What we saw in the pandemic was, in principle, the same groups doing what they have always done to support each other in the absence of adequate LGBTQIA+ inclusion in society and public policies, albeit perhaps using some different approaches and more online tools.

In seeking to support LGBTQIA+ disaster resilience, we must look beyond short-term needs during crises like COVID-19 and focus on long-term risk reduction. We must address the political, economic and social structures that constitute root causes of vulnerabilities, as disaster studies have long informed. But alongside this should be a closer and more active assessment of the existing resilience capacities of LGBTQIA+ people (and other diverse/minority groups). Comprehending how people cope during crises will aid better understanding of the everyday marginality contributing to the need for such coping capacities. This, in turn, assists in future risk reduction and the development of tailored strategies to support and grow resilience.

As a start, existing LGBTQIA+ community groups and organisations should be supported through funding and resources to maintain and improve work they are already doing. Disaster and emergency organisations should build strategic partnerships with queer people as well as the groups and organisations that represent them to facilitate knowledge sharing and targeting of support to where and who it will be most effective. As the stories presented demonstrate, LGBTQIA+ people have the best wisdom about LGBTQIA+ lives and communities, especially at local levels.

Finally, care should be taken with the language of vulnerability. Placing too much emphasis on indicators of vulnerability (such as gender) can fail to adequately account for the complexity of lived experiences, including of marginalisation. Labelling people as 'vulnerable' can be disenfranchising, overlooking other aspects of their personhood, such as the strength, coping capacities and important resilience qualities of queer people highlighted during the pandemic.

Endnotes

1. Different terms are frequently used for these populations. I use the term LGBTQIA+, interchangeably with 'queer', to include any/all non-cisgender, non-heterosexual, and/or non-normative identities.

2. Dominey-Howes D, Gorman-Murray A & McKinnon S 2014, *Queering disasters: on the need to account for LGBTI experiences in natural disaster contexts. Gender, Place and Culture, vol. 21, no. 7*, pp.905–918.

3. Seglah HA & Blanchard K 2021, *LGBTQIA+ People and Disasters. DRR Dynamics. At: https://irp.cdn-website.com/cde3424c/files/uploaded/LGBTQIA%2B%20 report-3.pdf.*

4. Haworth BT 2021, *Learning from the UK's LGBTQIA+ experiences of COVID-19 for future crises. HCRI Policy Brief Series, 01/21. At: www.hcri.manchester.ac.uk/ research/publications/policy-brief-series/lgbtiq-covid-experiences/.*

5. Cassal L, Haworth BT & de Paula Muniz T 2021, *Aprendendo com experiências de pessoas LGBTI+ durante a Covid-19 em SP e RJ. HCRI Policy Brief Series. At: www. hcri.manchester.ac.uk/research/publications/policy-brief-series/lgbtiq-covid-experiences/lgbtiq-covid-experiences-brazil/.*

6. Research into LGBTQIA+ experiences, at https://youtu.be/McaYq-k4WOw.

7. Cowper-Smith Y, Su Y & Valiquette T 2021, *Masks are for sissies: the story of LGBTQI+ asylum seekers in Brazil during COVID-19. Journal of Gender Studies.*

8. The International Institute on Race, Equality and Human Rights 2020, *What is the color of the invisible? The human rights situation of Afro-LGBTI population in Brazil. Rio de Janeiro: The International Institute on Race, Equality and Human Rights. At: https://raceandequality.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Dossier_Brazil_ENG.pdf.*

9. Gorman-Murray A, Morris S, Keppel J, McKinnon S & Dominey-Howes D 2017, *Problems and possibilities on the margins: LGBT experiences in the 2011 Queensland floods. Gender, Place & Culture, vol. 24, no. 1*, pp.37–51.