

Queer vulnerability & resilience to natural disasters

Kieran Higgins, Ulster University

Claire Kilpatrick, Queen's University Belfast

Seth Atkin, Queers for Climate Justice

Stephan Dahl, The Quinta Project

Proud/Loud/Heard... ?

Exploring LGBT+ identity, being and experiences

LGBT+ research conference 2023

SUMMARY

So-called “natural disasters” have devastating impacts on society, and the increase in the frequency and intensity of these disasters due to climate change means the impact of these are an increasingly salient concern to all. However, previous research has shown the disproportionate impacts of said disasters on marginalised populations, including the queer community, who are vulnerable to these impacts before, during and after. Through the framework of social constructionism, this paper explores how we as a society create inequity for queer people, respond to disasters without inclusion and recover from them with exclusion, which is what makes them a disaster, and an unnatural one at that. The paper also looks to the queer community and their acts of resilience as a lever to recast them from the role of victim, whilst acknowledging the limitations and sometimes harmful impact of expecting individuals and groups to be resilient in the face of such disasters.

INTRODUCTION

A natural disaster is typically defined in the natural science sphere as a negative interaction between geophysical elements and the human socio-economic sphere that leaves hefty and long-lasting impacts on the latter, including loss of life and property (Alexander, 1997). This definition usually implies that the force of said event was so inexplicably great that the ability of the surrounding institutions to respond was overpowered (Kalatzi Pantera *et al.*, 2023), and that the event could be neither predicted by nor caused by humans (McEntire, 2001). However, the theoretical framework of social constructionism would offer a different definition. Social constructionism suggests that our understanding of reality is not a series of purely objective events, but is instead influenced by human interpretations, meanings, and social interactions (Gigliotti, 2020). Therefore, the causes, perception, impacts and responses to natural disasters are not solely and unavoidably determined by the physical event itself but also by the social systems, power dynamics, and cultural beliefs that exist within the impacted society and the wider world (O’Keefe *et al.*, 1976). Different societies have varied interpretations of what constitutes a disaster, and which events are deemed significant, which in turn mediates and moderates the preparation for and response to these events, thereby determining which social groups are most affected (Thomas *et al.*, 2013). Marginalised and disadvantaged communities often bear a disproportionate burden of the impacts and may face greater challenges in accessing resources, receiving assistance, and recovering from the disaster (Galliard, 2015). Given both the media representation and the religio-cultural significance of these disasters, marginalised groups may be omitted from prevailing narratives (McKinnon *et al.*, 2017), or outright blamed for them, further shaping how people cope, adapt, and recover from disasters (Urbatsch, 2016). More positively, social constructionism also highlights the importance of social interactions, collective meanings, and social processes in disaster response and recovery. Utilising this theoretical framework, this paper contends that for queer people around the world, disasters are not *natural*, both in that they are caused by humanity’s actions such as anthropogenic climate change (Kilpatrick *et al.*, 2023), but also that in how we as a society create inequity for queer

people, respond to disasters without inclusion and recover from them with exclusion is what truly makes them a disaster. However, we also emphasise that while the social positioning of the queer community makes it particularly vulnerable to disaster events, its unique nature and historical context equips queer people to tackle these disaster events like no other, even if they should not have to.

QUEERNESS AS PRIOR CONTEXTUAL VULNERABILITY

The queer community faces significant prior vulnerabilities in the context of what is termed natural disasters, which are shaped by social and economic circumstances and magnify the harmful effects experienced by marginalised groups (Rice, Long and Levanda, 2022). The evidence presented here is drawn from studies across Canada, United States, Australia, New Zealand, and Japan, as well the developing countries of Haiti, India, Indonesia, The Philippines, and Nepal (Kilpatrick *et al.*, 2023). Despite the prevailing notion of "gay affluence," poverty is a common reality among queer people (Goldsmith *et al.*, 2021). This economic disparity, coupled with the tendency for queer people to reside in disaster-prone areas with limited investment in services (McTighe & Haywood, 2017), hinders their disaster preparedness efforts, including access to insurance and essential safety equipment (Goldsmith *et al.*, 2021). Moreover, homelessness is disproportionately prevalent within the queer community, particularly affecting queer youth who often experience rejection from their families (Page, 2016). The lack of stable housing further exacerbates their vulnerability and compounds the challenges associated with disaster preparedness. Similarly to homelessness, incarceration rates among queer people are three times higher than among the general population, which introduces additional vulnerabilities during disaster events (Goldsmith *et al.*, 2021). Dependence on prison guards and public officials for safety, along with increased health risks such as the spread of diseases and heightened susceptibility to heat-related illnesses due to inadequate cooling capabilities, limited access to personal protective equipment, and delayed evacuation decisions, all contribute to their heightened vulnerability (Goldsmith *et al.*, 2021). Disparities in physical and mental health between the queer community and the general population also contribute to their increased vulnerability to disaster events. Reduced access to healthcare and insurance, discrimination within the medical system, as well as stress resulting from prejudice and lifestyle choices influenced by poverty, all contribute to these disparities (Goldsmith *et al.*, 2021). Additionally, individuals living with HIV within the queer community may face heightened susceptibility to infections resulting from environmental pollution triggered by disaster events (Gomez, 2012).

Additionally, those queer people whose identities overlap with other marginalised groups such as indigenous groups, people of colour (especially trans people of colour), people who are undocumented, people with HIV, people with disabilities, the socio-economically disadvantaged, and elderly queer individuals, in particular those who are Black and Latinx, experience further vulnerability (Goldsmith *et al.*, 2021). Indeed, Rice *et al.* (2022) use the term 'climate apartheid' to conceptualise the uneven impact from climate change, which natural disasters have been and will continue to be a recurrent component of (Kilpatrick *et al.*, 2023). Climate apartheid is defined as a "co-produced system of privilege and precarity—a system that, while possessing some unique features, is built upon historical legacies of

colonisation, racial capitalism, and hetero-patriarchy” (Rice *et al.*, 2022, p.626). In other words, normativities within racial and heteropatriarchal societies provide privilege to white heterosexual men, establishing their needs as the norm and insulating them to a greater degree from disaster events, while marginalised communities live more precariously. Social constructionism emphasises the role of social and economic circumstances in shaping individuals' experiences. The marginalised position of the queer community, including disparities in health, economic situations, and social position, is evidence of the systemic social constructs that contribute to their heightened vulnerability during disaster events. Were these disparities to be addressed, queer people would not be as especially vulnerable to disaster events in comparison to the general population.

QUEERNESS AS VULNERABILITY PER CALAMITATEM

During disaster events, queer people often experience unique traumas linked to their specific identities. The loss of their homes can force members of the queer community to either conceal their identity or share it under challenging circumstances (McKinnon *et al.*, 2016). In some cases, individuals may be compelled to return to their family homes or seek alternative accommodations where they feel the need to essentially "re-closet" themselves to ensure safety and avoid discrimination. Others may be required to disclose their sexual orientation or gender identity to various individuals or organisations in order to access appropriate support, which can heighten anxiety about potential discrimination and judgement (Parkinson *et al.*, 2022). Faith-based organisations, which often play a frontline role in emergency management (Gorman-Murray *et al.*, 2018), have been known to discriminate against queer people. Negative past experiences with such organisations further discourage members of the queer community from seeking help from them, especially when they are in a heightened state of vulnerability following a natural disaster (Parkinson *et al.*, 2022).

Within disaster shelters, queer people may face the distressing experience of being separated from their partners and families. Instances such as the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina demonstrated that the definition of "family" was often limited to heterosexual couples with children, leading to the separation of same-sex couples and their relocation to different cities (Dominey-Howes *et al.*, 2014). Similarly, in the aftermath of the Great East-Japan Disaster in 2011, same-sex partners were denied the ability to live together in temporary accommodations due to the lack of legal recognition for same-sex couples in Japanese law. They were even denied visitation rights and updates on their partner's safety, as they were considered unrelated under the law (Yamashita *et al.*, 2017). If accessed, emergency shelters can become environments where additional traumas occur. There have been instances where members of the queer community faced physical, verbal, and sexual abuse within these shelters. For example, in the aftermath of the Japanese earthquake and tsunami in 2011, a trans woman was verbally abused by a shelter volunteer, and others felt unsafe using the shower facilities while, in Haiti, gay and bisexual men were coerced into engaging in sexual acts to access food or money, while lesbian and bisexual women experienced instances of corrective rape (Dominey-Howes *et al.*, 2014). Throughout

documented disasters, indigenous groups such as the Aravani of India, the Waria of Indonesia, and the Bakla of the Philippines who do not identify as male or female were excluded from sex-segregated emergency shelters while those who could access shelters reported discrimination and abuse there (McKinnon *et al.*, 2017).

For trans people, disaster events can significantly impact their transition and gender expression. The maintenance of their trans identity often requires access to regular hormone replacement therapy, which cannot be easily halted without significant effects. Stockpiling these medications or ensuring their storage and discreet delivery may not be feasible within emergency housing. Similarly, challenges arise with access to gender-affirming clothing, cosmetics, and other products that support their gender identity and presentation. Overall, disaster events result in a traumatic loss of their trans space and the familial support that accompanies it, adding to their distress (Gorman-Murray *et al.*, 2018).

The challenges faced by queer people during disaster events demonstrate how societal constructs of discrimination intersect with the impact of disasters, revealing the limitations in disaster response systems that are created by the existing biases and prejudices that exist in society. Even in the midst of a disaster, when people should come together to support and help one another, biases and prejudices that are ultimately inconsequential in the face of loss of life and great harm still persist. Some of these are the work of misguided individuals, but others are systemic, with a failure from certain bodies to recognise that diversity exists, even in the face of tragedy. This unfortunate reality underscores the urgent need for society to confront and dismantle these unfounded biases, reminding us that the darkness of natural disasters should never overshadow the importance of empathy and compassionate treatment for all.

QUEERNESS EXCLUDED FROM DISASTER RECOVERY

After the conclusion of a disaster event, the queer community may continue to face lasting impacts, as natural disaster recovery strategies often prioritise heterosexual, nuclear families. This bias is evident in examples like the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, where the rebuilding efforts prioritised heteronormative spaces and tourist neighbourhoods in New Orleans that capitalised on queer culture, while neighbourhoods where the queer community resided were neglected (McKinnon *et al.*, 2017). The loss of a home is particularly challenging for the queer community, as it represents a safe space where they can establish boundaries against the marginalisation experienced in broader society. The destruction of homes and queer neighbourhoods profoundly affects the queer community, as these locations hold significant meaning as "sites of memory" and play a crucial role in the creation and preservation of queer identities (McKinnon *et al.*, 2016). Disaster events are highly stressful events for all affected, but for the queer community, existing mental health issues can be exacerbated. They already experience higher levels of suicide, suicidal ideation, anxiety, and depression compared to the general population (Jonas *et al.*, 2022). Therefore, the occurrence of a natural disaster can compound mental health problems, especially among young queer individuals. A multi-year study conducted after the 2016 Fort

McMurray wildfires in Canada revealed elevated levels of mental health distress among trans and gender-non-conforming youths compared to comparable cohorts (Brown *et al.*, 2021). As the recovery phase progresses, the experiences of queer people can be marginalised or erased. Mainstream media often fails to report on the experiences of the queer community, instead favouring coverage of those within heteronormative family structures. Even queer media quickly moves past the disasters, offering limited participation in discussions or critiques of natural disaster response (McKinnon *et al.*, 2017). In some cases, queer people may face irrational vilification, with moral judgments against gay people becoming more negative immediately following disasters, particularly among religious males (Urbatsch, 2016).

These findings reveal how biases and prejudices persist even in the aftermath of natural disasters, further marginalising the queer community. The prioritisation of traditional family structures and the neglect of queer neighbourhoods in recovery efforts highlight the heteronormative social constructs embedded within disaster response systems. That is, if queer people are considered at all, as it is often easier to erase their story or make them the villains of another's than to confront it directly. Addressing these biases within the social constructionist perspective is vital to achieving equitable and inclusive disaster recovery that recognises and supports all individuals.

QUEER RESILIENCE TO DISASTER EVENTS

Queer resilience is the unique ability of queer people to thrive in the face of adversity, developed through experiences of oppression and discrimination in order to survive and thrive in a world that is hostile to them (Asakura, 2016; Greteman, 2021). Primarily this is achieved through social bonds, community organising, and activities that contribute to sense-making and meaning-making. With regard to disasters, Yamashita *et al.* (2017) argued that LGBT people should not be confined to “the role of victim but emphasise their positive contributions as a force for recovery”. Given many years of discrimination and marginalisation that has prevented access to various types of services, the queer community has an indubitable record of recreating disaster related services in a grassroots and affirming way. This includes supporting each other through friendship circles, networks, or organisations (Gorman-Murray *et al.*, 2017), collecting relief goods for the community (Dominey-Howes *et al.*, 2014), donating to and providing accommodation to other queer people who were unwilling or unable to access relief shelters (Gorman-Murray *et al.*, 2018), and volunteering clean up services, and personal grooming assistance (Dominey-Howes *et al.*, 2014).

However, resilience narratives, while often celebrated as stories of strength and perseverance, can inadvertently perpetuate harm. These narratives tend to oversimplify the experiences and challenges (Barrita and Wong-Padoongpatt, 2021) faced by queer individuals and dismiss the urgent need for targeted support and resources specifically tailored to the diverse needs of queer communities, further marginalising queer people. This is a recurring issue throughout research on the queer community. Discussing an emerging focus toward the internal psychological coping mechanisms of queer individuals, Kitzinger (1987, p.56) argued “psychology offers salvation through individual change rather than

system change” and “discourages explicit political action”. Building on Kitzinger’s arguments, Greteman (2021, p.9) argues current discourse on queer resilience is limited as “there is, in most conceptualizations of resilience, a limited sense of growth with an emphasis on overcoming or getting back up.” Barrita and Wong-Padoongpatt (2021, p.604) emphasise the “burden of being resilient” and argue research which romanticises resilience ultimately places the burden of change on the queer community and hides oppressive systems. Instead, they argue, “queer people’s acts of resistance must be amplified to challenge the systems that marginalised them”. Thus, instead of solely focusing on resilience, it is crucial to acknowledge the systemic inequalities and discrimination that queer people often face during disaster situations, as highlighted here, and work towards inclusive policies and interventions that address their specific needs and promote genuine equity and support.

CONCLUSION

Through the lens of social constructionism, we have argued natural disasters are *created* by humans rather than *natural*. Disasters are worsened by human-led climate change, but the impacts from these disasters are also unequally distributed to those in marginalised communities. We outlined how the queer community experiences unique traumas linked to their specific identities before, during and after the event, due to the social positioning and exclusion of the queer community. Furthermore, we emphasised that while the social positioning of the queer community makes it particularly vulnerable to disaster events, its unique nature and historical context equips them with resilience strategies to cope with these disaster events like no other. Finally, we discussed the importance of recognising ‘the burden of resilience’ and urged for discourse around the queer community and natural disasters to focus on systemic inequalities and work towards inclusive policies and interventions that promote genuine equity and support.

REFERENCES

Alexander, D., 1997. The study of natural disasters, 1977–97: Some reflections on a changing field of knowledge. *Disasters*, 21(4), pp.284-304.

<https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-7717.00064>

Asakura, K., 2017. Paving pathways through the pain: A grounded theory of resilience among lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and queer youth. *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, 27(3), pp.521-536. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jora.12291>.

Barrita, A.M. and Wong-Padoongpatt, G., 2021. Resilience and Queer People. In *Encyclopedia of Queer Studies in Education*, pp. 600-605.

https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004506725_118

Brown, M.R., Pazderka, H., Agyapong, V.I., Greenshaw, A.J., Cribben, I., Brett-MacLean, P., Drolet, J., McDonald-Harker, C.B., Omeje, J., Lee, B. and Mankowski, M., 2021. Mental health symptoms unexpectedly increased in students aged 11–19 years during the 3.5 years after the 2016 Fort McMurray wildfire: Findings from 9,376 survey responses. *Frontiers in Psychiatry*, 12, Article ID: 676256. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsy.2021.676256>

Dominey-Howes, D., Gorman-Murray, A. and McKinnon, S., 2014. Queering disasters: On the need to account for LGBTI experiences in natural disaster contexts. *Gender, Place & Culture*, 21(7), pp.905-918. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0966369X.2013.802673>

Gaillard, J.C., 2015. *People's Response to Disasters in the Philippines: Vulnerability, Capacities and Resilience*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

<https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137484291>.

Gigliotti, R.A., 2020. The perception of crisis, the existence of crisis: Navigating the social construction of crisis. *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, 48(5), pp.558-576.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/00909882.2020.1820553>.

Goldsmith, L., Raditz, V. and Méndez, M., 2022. Queer and present danger: understanding the disparate impacts of disasters on LGBTQ+ communities. *Disasters*, 46(4), pp.946-973.

<https://doi.org/10.1111/disa.12509>.

Gomez, M. 2012. Natural Disasters and People Living with HIV and AIDS. *Office of HIV/AIDS and Infectious Disease Policy*. Available at:

<https://www.hiv.gov/blog/natural-disasters-and-people-living-with-hiv-and-aids-2/>.

(Accessed: 11 July 2023).

Gorman-Murray, A., McKinnon, S., Dominey-Howes, D., Nash, C.J. and Bolton, R., 2018. Listening and learning: Giving voice to trans experiences of disasters. *Gender, Place & Culture*, 25(2), pp.166-187. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0966369X.2017.1334632>

Gorman-Murray, A., Morris, S., Keppel, J., McKinnon, S. and Dominey-Howes, D., 2017. Problems and possibilities on the margins: LGBT experiences in the 2011 Queensland floods. *Gender, Place & Culture*, 24(1), pp.37-51.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/0966369X.2015.1136806>

Greteman, A., 2021. Queer Resilience. In *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Education*, pp.1-14. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190264093.013.1397>.

Jonas, L., Salazar de Pablo, G., Shum, M., Nosarti, C., Abbott, C. and Vaquerizo-Serrano, J., 2022. A systematic review and meta-analysis investigating the impact of childhood adversities on the mental health of LGBT+ youth. *JCPP Advances*, 2(2), Article ID: 12079.

<https://doi.org/10.1002/jcv2.12079>.

Kalatzi Pantera, D., Böhmelt, T. and Bakaki, Z., 2023. The transnational influence of natural disasters on environmental attitudes. *European Journal of Political Research*, 62(3), pp.761-780. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6765.12572>.

Kilpatrick, C., Higgins, K., Atkin, S., and Dahl, S., 2023. A Rapid Review of the Impacts of Climate Change on the Queer Community. *Environmental Justice* (published online ahead of print 10th July). Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1089/env.2023.0010> (Accessed 11th July 2023).

Kitzinger, C. 1987. *The Social Construction of Lesbianism*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.

McEntire, D. 2001. Triggering agents, vulnerabilities and disaster reduction: towards a holistic paradigm. *Disaster Prevention and Management*, 10, pp.189-196.

<https://doi.org/10.1108/09653560110395359>.

McTighe, L. and Haywood, D., 2017. "There is NO justice in Louisiana": Crimes against nature and the spirit of Black feminist resistance. *Souls*, 19(3), pp.261-285.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/10999949.2017.1389584>

McKinnon, S., Gorman-Murray, A. and Dominey-Howes, D., 2016. 'The greatest loss was a loss of our history': natural disasters, marginalised identities and sites of memory. *Social & Cultural Geography*, 17(8), pp.1120-1139.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/14649365.2016.1153137>.

McKinnon, S., Gorman-Murray, A. and Dominey-Howes, D., 2017. Disasters, queer narratives, and the news: how are LGBTI disaster experiences reported by the mainstream and LGBTI media? *Journal of Homosexuality*, 64(1), pp.122-144.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/1088868313490248>.

O'Keefe, P., Westgate, K. & Wisner, B. 1976. Taking the naturalness out of natural disasters. *Nature*, 260, pp.566-567. <https://doi.org/10.1038/260566a0>.

Page, M. 2017. Forgotten Youth: Homeless LGBT Youth of Color and the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act, *Northwestern Journal of Law & Social Policy*, 12(2), pp. 17–45.

Parkinson, D., Duncan, A., Leonard, W. and Archer, F., 2021. Lesbian and bisexual women's experience of emergency management. *Gender Issues*, 39, pp.1-24.

<https://doi.org/10.1007/s12147-021-09276-5>.

Rice J.L., Long, J and Levanda, A., 2022. Against climate apartheid: Confronting the persistent legacies of expendability for climate justice. *Nature and Space*, 5(2), pp. 625–645.

Thomas, D., Phillips, B., Lovekamp, W. and Fothergill, A., 2013. *Social Vulnerability to Disasters*. Boca Raton, FL: Taylor & Francis Group.

Urbatsch, R., 2016. Judgement days: moral attitudes in the wake of local disasters. *Disasters*, 40(1), pp.26-44. <https://doi.org/10.1111/disa.12138>.

Yamashita, A., Gomez, C. and Dombroski, K., 2017. Segregation, exclusion and LGBT people in disaster impacted areas: experiences from the Higashinihon Dai-Shinsai (Great East-Japan Disaster). *Gender, Place & Culture*, 24(1), pp.64-71.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/0966369X.2016.1276887>.