


Abstract

Major natural hazards in Australia are estimated to cost more than \$38 billion annually and contribute to ongoing financial, health and social consequences, particularly among systematically disadvantaged multicultural, multi-faith and multi-ethnic groups. While existing approaches to build community resilience are based on a rational and functional model, this paper argues that a conception of humanity, based on key principles of connectivity, diversity and interactivity, should be embedded in communications throughout emergencies and disaster events (e.g. before, during, after). Such an approach to resilience entails recognising evolving and diverse human needs and mobilises human subjectivity and agency in co-developing disaster resilience. Philosophically, the approach advocated is underpinned by ‘critical humanism’ theory. Guided by foundational conceptual positions, a model of humanistic communication that introduces principles of humanity (i.e. connectivity, diversity, interactivity) into the disaster cycle to foster community engagement and empowerment is proposed. This paper includes research priorities to inform further work based on these conceptual positions. Embedding humanity in building sustainable community resilience contributes to strengthening communities against disaster risks.

Embedding humanity in building sustainable community disaster resilience in Australia: a humanistic communication perspective

Peer reviewed

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‘Wicked’ communication problems in resilience building

Australia is prone to natural hazards (e.g. bushfires, floods, storms, drought, heatwave) that are exacerbated by climate change (Climate Council Australia 2014). Over the past 2 decades, Australia has experienced several, at times consecutive, major disasters including the 2009 Black Saturday bushfires, 2010–11 Brisbane floods, 2019–20 bushfire season, Cyclone Seroja in 2021 and floods across southeast Queensland and northern New South Wales in 2022. Deloitte Access Economics (2021) estimated that natural hazards cost the Australian economy more than \$38 billion per year with significant social affects. In 2018 the *National Disaster Risk Reduction Framework* (NDRRF) (Department of Home Affairs 2018), called for responsibility sharing within the capabilities of individuals and organisations. Further, the *Second National Action Plan* (NEMA 2023) provided strategies to implement the NDRRF, especially emphasising the importance of culture and setting important visions like: (1) ‘by 2030, unify and harmonise systems and processes that integrate efforts to strengthen resilience into the fabric of society’ and (2) ‘by 2050, integrate cultural, social, environmental and economic values in decision-making to ensure natural hazards have minimal impact on community and country’ (p.75). Recognising the needs of communities in disaster risks aligns with the *Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030* (UNDRR 2015),

which calls for a people-centred, preventative approach to disaster risks. This approach underscores human needs, rights and wellbeing while addressing the physical and structural damage from disasters.

Australia comprises a diverse and growing multicultural population. Nearly one-third of the population (27.6%) identifies as coming from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2021). Australia remains a popular destination for skilled migrants and humanitarian refugees who often originate from countries that are culturally distant from Australia's prevailing Anglo-Saxon population (Neumann 2015). To become culturally and socially integrated, new arrivals to Australia are expected to integrate through multiple levels of personal, institutional and social adaptation. For many, this includes learning a new language, reconciling new cultural and social values, understanding and following social norms and practices and settling into a host community. For marginalised and multicultural groups, understanding new disaster risks and building a new 'home' that not only withstands these risks but also provides a sense of belonging presents an enduring challenge and is probably one of their most pressing needs (Marlowe 2015).

Against this backdrop, effective communication is one of the key elements to build disaster resilience and to help all types of communities, including CALD communities, to have equal access to information, resources and services. Research by Liu (2022), Thomas et al. (2013) and Uekusa (2019) identified several 'wicked' communication problems in emergency management that highlight the challenges in meeting the diverse needs of people in CALD communities. First, disaster risk communication should be more than just providing or translating information into different languages. Risk communication needs to be contextualised within a relational and social dimension (Uekusa 2019). Second, most disaster risk communications underestimate the plurality and diversity of humanity, for example, assuming humanity as an abstract and homogeneous group, thus leading to a disparity between standard scientific instructions and local communities' subjective perceptions (Liu 2022). Third, it is often overlooked that communication is embedded within a web of power relations and structural inequalities (Ciszek et al. 2022). For example, not every community group will have equal access and resources for 2-way communication. Therefore, structural and power dimensions need to be interrogated and mitigated to meet these needs and also provoke agency of marginalised and disadvantaged groups (Thomas et al. 2013).

To address these problems, calls have been made to embed humanity as a core organising philosophy in building sustainable community resilience (Moser 2015). 'Humanity' is a multi-dimensional concept, defined by its

inherent principles of connectivity (relationship-based) diversity (difference-oriented) and interactivity (power-sensitive) (Zaharna 2022). From a critical perspective, humanity is shaped by power dynamics and social structures (Ciszek et al. 2022). Recognising humanity as multi-dimensional, fluid and contingent on socio-cultural contexts requires a shift from a functional approach that emphasises disaster information utility, rationality and mechanically partitions community into different language groups to a humanistic approach that recognises cultural sensitivity and diversity that addresses evolving human needs and welfare throughout a disaster. Such a humanistic approach to disaster resilience can be facilitated by humanistic communication.

Despite taking different angles, scholars (e.g. Elshof et al. 2022; Moser 2015; Werder 2019) define humanistic communication as human-centred communication that supports personal connections, co-creative meaning-making and collaborative decision-making through dialogue and mutual responsibility to develop and achieve shared outcomes. Humanistic communication within an emergency/disaster context is, therefore, one that builds on truthful and accurate information to connect, engage and empower diverse communities by acknowledging their strengths and vulnerabilities as well as creating opportunities for collaborative resilience building. In this sense, humanistic communication differs from conventional emergency/disaster communication in enabling mutual input from both authorities and communities rather than merely asking for individual and community compliance with official instructions. Humanistic communication cares about personal and community's social, cultural, spiritual and emotional needs when providing disaster-related information (Amin et al. 2021).

Humanity and what it means for resilience building

'Humanity' is commonly understood as a wide range of human and non-human connections located within historical contexts, nestled in webs of power relations, thus requiring an understanding of human and/or non-human as embedded, symbolic and embodied beings (Ciszek et al. 2022). On a collective level, humanity manifests itself in community—a term originated from the Latin word *communitas* that is often translated as 'human community, society, or community' and linked to 'kindness, sympathy, and companionship' to inform the practice of giving and receiving services (Polcarová and Pupíková 2022). In an emergency management context, community is typically understood as a group of people living in a geographical area (municipality, region) connected by social ties, shared interests (e.g. religion, culture, customs) and resources. The community members are exposed to similar hazards

and disaster risks (Dunham et al. 2006). Accordingly, emergency management agencies have realised the growing importance of community-driven and locally led resilience building (Villeneuve 2022).

On a philosophical level, we draw on critical humanism theory that encourages understanding the pluralistic forms of living and being, with greater attention to the particular than to the more universal assumption of humanity (Ciszek et al. 2022). In other words, diversity is inherent in humanity. A humanistic approach to disaster resilience building entails responding to context-specific needs and concerns of diverse groups, rather than leaning on prescribed solutions based on a generalised assumption of humanity. If disaster risk communication is to be informed by such a philosophical approach, it will include navigating the connectivity, diversity and interactivity of humanity, fostering cross-cultural collaboration and enabling relational constellations and dynamics. As the resource-allocator and decision-maker, emergency management agencies have an opportunity to seek alternative ways through recognising these conceptions of humanity in disaster risk communication and find better ways to bring inclusivity and diversity into building disaster resilience. One way that is being developed in Australia's emergency management sector is through the widespread adoption of the Person-Centred Emergency Preparedness framework and process tool (Villeneuve 2022).

Critical humanism theory underscores that humanity is shaped by power relations and social structures (Plummer 2021). In emergency management contexts, pre-existing power hierarchies and systematic inequalities privilege some groups over others. For example, the *Community experiences of the January – July 2022 floods in New South Wales and Queensland Summary Report* (Taylor et al. 2023) found that varied physical, economic, social and environmental vulnerabilities across flood-affected communities and the tendency of disasters to entrench pre-existing vulnerabilities, shaped different adaptive capacities of diverse communities. As Atallah et al. (2021) argue, 'human resilience is about contending with social suffering—collective anguish born from sudden catastrophes and intersecting long-lasting patterns of social inequality alike' (p.891). Therefore, implementing a humanistic approach to disaster resilience requires a thoughtful analysis of the systematic challenges faced by historically marginalised groups and communities to make space for them to play to their strengths while also building capability. Emergency management agencies have an opportunity to reflect on and address systematic inequalities that shape or perpetuate such conditions of humanity. Put simply, critical humanism identifies a social justice deficit in emergency management.

Given the fluidity of humanity (e.g. contingent on historical, socio-cultural contexts), resilience should be seen as a critical variable (rather than a constant) for different communities. Resilience requires culturally appropriate resources and support mechanisms to build self-defining adaptable capabilities. Disaster resilience building is best seen as a cultural practice that leverages local norms, relationship ties and social capital (networks) to help diverse, and indeed all, communities to prepare for, respond to and recover from disasters (Atallah et al. 2021). In this sense, resilience is relevant to all stages of the disaster cycle and requires systematic efforts *with*, rather than *to*, communities (Brown et al. 2019). As found in prior studies, a humanity focus connects communities with emergency management organisations to address various human rights issues across different contexts, for example, gender (Forbes-Genade and van Niekerk 2017), social justice and repression (Pfaff 2020) and legal accountability (Da Costa and Pospieszna 2015). All these examples support greater empowerment of communities rather than treating them as passive recipients of relief support (Da Costa and Pospieszna 2015).

In summary, this argument diverts from a universal assumption of humanity and emphasises humanity as a multi-dimensional and evolving concept, recognising its pluralistic forms of living and being and its situatedness within socio-cultural contexts, power relations and structural inequalities (Ciszek et al. 2022; Plummer 2021; Zaharna 2022). In emergency and disaster management processes, this humanity focus requires a humanistic approach to building community resilience that interplays with culture (e.g. shared values, cultural heritage, resources). Culture informs what resilience means to the community and how it is developed over time and in practice (Atallah et al. 2021). Therefore, emergency management organisations are encouraged to understand and leverage those cultural ties and resources in ways that build capacities across communities (Atallah et al. 2021). By synthesising the preceding theoretical tenets (i.e. humanity, resilience), this study offers the following definition:

A humanistic approach to community disaster resilience is attentive to cultural differences, power sharing, and positive interaction and acknowledges previous or current social suffering or injustice, to generate communication strategies for the promotion of trust, collaboration, healing and equity.

Towards a model of humanistic communication for resilience building

To operationalise humanistic communication, a model was developed that fuses the principles of humanity (i.e. connectivity, diversity and interactivity) into the

development of humanistic communication strategies in accordance with different stages of emergency management. Across all stages, humanistic communication emphasises putting humanity at the forefront and enabling power sharing, participation and agency from the community (see Figure 1).

The before stage: embedding humanity in preparedness and prevention

The starting point (i.e. preparedness and prevention) requires an understanding of what local communities perceive their risks to be and how they want to prevent

or prepare for those risks. To support communities, humanistic communication seeks to understand what resilience means to diverse communities and how they want humanity to be fulfilled before a disaster event. As Atallah et al. (2021) note, ‘resilience is not an entity in and of itself’ (p.893). Understanding resilience as a socially constructed and culturally informed ‘work in progress’ offers opportunities to challenge the assumption of humanity as an ambiguous whole. A cultural perspective of resilience involves reflecting on agency-community collaboration in preparedness and prevention against local and socio-cultural contexts. Emergency management organisations can support communities by episodic

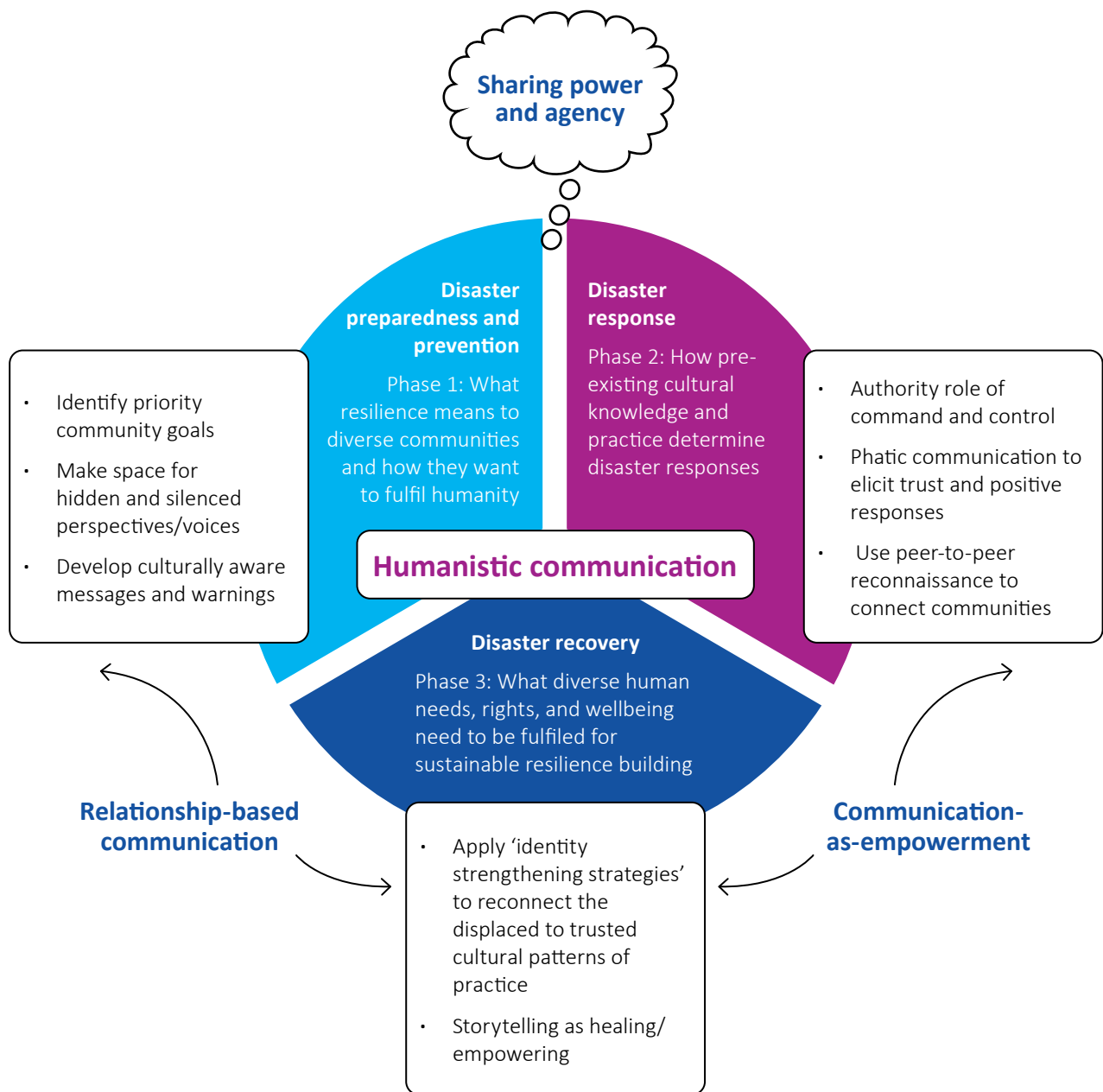


Figure 1: A model of humanistic communication for resilience building.

consultation and also through longer-term relational communication to maintain dialogue and connect them to knowledge and influence that shape policies (Johnston and Lane 2018). Humanistic communication before an emergency or disaster entails a proper understanding of community rituals, routines, feelings and actions, as individual and community members grapple with various disaster risks.

Specifically, humanistic communication needs to consider the relational and pluralistic aspects of humanity—how to establish and sustain trustful relationships between emergency management and diverse communities. For this purpose, communication can start by identifying the priority targets/groups, especially those in marginalised or isolated communities who require tailored support structures. The humanistic lens asks what communities think about resilience, whether and why it is different from the traditionally functional/rational approach and explores the underlying cause(s) for those differences. Empowering under-represented groups to voice concerns and expectations can capture different experiences and perspectives to inform new ways to involve communities in prevention and preparedness. To remove potential barriers to reaching out and engaging with communities, the emergency management sector can better integrate multiple media and platforms ranging from interpersonal, peer-to-peer, community-based, organisational, mass, social and ethnic media (e.g. a popular outlet within a cultural/ethnic group).

Addressing the needs of First Nations peoples and people in CALD communities as active participants and partners in co-designing resilience plans (Weir et al. 2020) is an important priority. Recognition of culture is key to ‘how’ this process can be done. Since resources are often limited, finding ways to develop shared approaches to inform preparedness and prevention is important. When promoting desired behaviours to prepare for disasters, it is necessary to go beyond providing multilingual translations of scientific instructions and develop culturally sensitive messages that truly resonant with different communities. For example, good practice includes using culturally relevant symbols and tools (e.g. bamboo alert, megaphone, message stick) for disaster warning and alerts across different communities. Co-design strategies are needed to learn and implement culturally sensitive approaches to effective communication with diverse communities.

The during stage: embedding humanity in response

In the disaster response stage, humanistic communication prompts emergency management agencies to be wary of the pre-existing cultural knowledge and practices of communities that shape response behaviours. On a deep

level, the immediate reaction of community members to emergencies is largely linked to their cultural habitus—a repetitive behaviour pattern informed by cultural values and disposition (Carter and Kenney 2018). For example, in New Zealand during the 2010–11 Canterbury and the 2016 Kaikōura earthquakes, the Māori kaitiakitanga (cultural guardianship) for iwi (Māori kinship groups)—a unified and well-integrated approach to ensure the wellbeing of local Māori as well as the broader community during adversity—has been central to the success in disaster response (Carter and Kenney 2018). Such collective values have also been found in other ethnic communities in different forms to guide people’s disaster responses, such as *tongzhougongji* (cross a river in the same boat) in Chinese society (Fu et al. 2022) and *Gotong royong* (mutual help) in Indonesian communities (Taylor and Peace 2015).

While emphasising individualism or self-suppliance in disasters (e.g. ‘do your own part’) is relevant under certain circumstances, leveraging connectivity of humanity—especially the cultural ties or social bonds—is helpful to foster collective action. Such connectivity-based disaster response is particularly important in CALD communities that often rely on bonding social capital (close relationships within a cultural group such as family, relatives, friends) than bridging social capital (connections with authorities, service agencies) to receive information (Oishi and Komiya 2017). For this reason, a way to develop humanistic communication strategies (e.g. how to alert, update and unite a community in culturally appropriate ways during emergencies) could be to partner with community leaders for collective action planning, rather than treat them as information messengers or liaisons (Liu 2022). Community-led responses appear more effective than the prescriptive template to address local needs and challenges (Polcarová and Pupíková 2022). For example, Fire and Rescue New South Wales drew on factors of translation, tailored messaging and multi-modality to address cultural competence gaps among firefighters and redevelop humanistic communication strategies in partnership with CALD communities to produce a suite of video-based education resources (Delmo et al. 2024).

During disaster response, command and control is appropriate as it requires emergency services organisations to take control during hazardous situations and for community members to follow safety instructions (Neumann 2015). During this stage, using culturally appropriate channels, messages and mechanisms is important to provide truthful and actionable information. Using images and figures also helps to support language and literacy needs. Humanistic communication requires the use of phatic communication, which primarily aims to create and maintain relationships (Amin et al. 2021). When combined with scientific education, humanistic

communication helps to elicit trust and positive emotional responses such as calm, hope, proactiveness and well-informed decision-making during disasters, rather than inducing panic, passivity or pessimism (Moser 2015). All these outcomes can be achieved by working with trusted community leaders to reinforce the importance of following official instructions and advice that are supposed to be culturally tailored to community members. In addition, humanistic communication will benefit from using peer-to-peer reconnaissance (mutual care between community members) and community ties to help messaging reach those who are likely to be disconnected from mainstream communication paths, for example, elderly people living alone or those without English skills.

The after stage: embedding humanity in recovery

To help affected communities to recover and build sustainable resilience, humanistic communication directs attention to safe return to normalcy after a disaster and also to the renewal and growth of a stronger life that can weather future risks. This is what Moser (2015) calls the 'restorative power' of humanistic communication (p.408). Recovery effort at this stage entails a long-term, strategic focus to build individual and community capacities for adaptation without disregarding the culture, community ties and traditions that make diverse communities. A central question at this stage relates to what diverse human needs, rights and wellbeing are required to build sustainable resilience. For example, previous studies (e.g. Gianisa and Le De 2018; McGeehan and Baker 2017) found that religious groups and faith leaders played a critical role in bringing people together and offering healing services when external intervention was limited. It is helpful to recognise human needs to support rebuilding a physical and a spiritual 'home' where affected communities can flourish.

The interactivity of humanity can be fully used at this stage to identify shared learnings from the past and co-develop new visions about the future. While digital technologies, especially social media, can facilitate community interaction, there is still a great need for human-coordinated disaster relief efforts ranging from rapport-(re)building, problem-solving, collective healing and action-taking to develop sustainable resilience. Among these challenges, the question of how to rebuild community trust and confidence in the emergency management sector is key. There could be new opportunities for the emergency management sector to show support and be involved with locally led, community-driven initiatives to develop trustful and mutually supportive relationships. For example, in addition to providing financial support after disasters, creating a wellbeing resource centre that garners culturally diverse resources (e.g. arts, therapeutic music,

story circles) could help communities build individual and collective resilience.

Humanistic communication can focus on communication as empowerment—empowering individuals and communities to be capable and proactive in (re)creating a constructive life after the disaster event. Specifically, humanistic communication prompts emergency managers to support communities to strengthen their cultural and social identities by reconnecting them with displaced community members and re-establishing cultural patterns of behaving (e.g. recovering a cultural practice disrupted by disaster events). Activities include promoting self-endorsement, encouraging reciprocal behaviours, reframing the circumstances, generating a feeling of hope and renewing a sense of community beyond the disaster. Cultural identity strengthening can be achieved through re-establishing important cultural symbols, ceremonies, artefacts, objects or reconnecting communities to a structural level of relationships and support mechanisms. In addition, participatory storytelling offers therapeutic potential to heal communities by creating a safe space where people can share and validate experiences as well as receive mutual support (Hou 2023). Essentially, leveraging participatory storytelling and collective healing offers alternative approaches to conventional recovery and resilience building.

Discussion

This paper explored how to embed humanity in building sustainable community resilience to disasters from a communication perspective. This requires a humanistic approach to disaster resilience building facilitated by humanistic communication. Humanistic communication, as a way of operationalising humanity in this effort, is built on critical humanism (Ciszek et al. 2022; Plummer 2021) that promotes understanding humanity as diverse forms of living and being who are connected and interacted within socio-cultural contexts and webs of power relations. We emphasise that beyond information dissemination and translation into different languages, relationship-based communication and using communication as empowerment are key to build a trusting and mutually supportive relationship between emergency management and local communities. Embedding humanity in different disaster phases will collectively serve to reduce communication barriers and hidden inequalities that disproportionately affect different communities throughout a disaster.

This paper makes several contributions to theory and practice in resilience building and disaster risk communication by operationalising key principles of humanity within different disaster phases. By shifting from a functional (e.g. assuming rational human actors) (Werder 2019) to a humanistic approach that attends to

both social suffering and human agency (Ciszek et al. 2022), this research contributes to understanding the necessity of mitigating structural inequities and empowering all types of communities to achieve, what Weir et al. (2020) call, ‘disaster justice’. Despite the growing prevalence of digital technologies in emergency and disaster management, a humanistic approach is important to mobilise human subjectivity, reflexivity and agency; all of which are essential to co-develop resilience plans. In a practical sense, our model provides a useful guide for humanistic communication that supports engagement with diverse communities by leveraging social and cultural heritage to address evolving needs and challenges throughout each disaster stage.

Future disaster resilience research can benefit from a thoughtful analysis of the inherent connectivity, diversity and interactivity of humanity to provide insight into diverse or sometimes competing human needs, desires and aspirations. More empirical research is needed to test or further explore how a humanistic approach to disaster resilience building will enable emancipatory (not consultative) participation for co-constructing praxes with diverse communities. In this process, it is important to *recognise* rather than *instrumentalise* human participants. Research methods can consider participatory action research, narrative co-inquiry and citizen sciences. The following questions are posed to guide future research:

- What dimensions of humanity (e.g. connectivity, diversity, interactivity) are we aiming for while designing approaches, strategies and solutions to disaster resilience building?
- How can we leverage the technological advantages of AI to enhance participation of human and non-human beings in co-designing resilience plans?
- How can we better remove structural and systematic inequalities that prevent CALD groups from achieving the same level of resilience as those who are well resourced?
- Is there a culturally sensitive approach to inform our understanding of humanity within a social group that experiences a major natural hazard?
- How can we advance humanity as a common goal by working towards improving public understandings of disaster inequalities and social sufferings?

This research agenda should be grounded in community-centred knowledge, lived experiences and diverse sense-making of disasters in ways that contribute to resilience building in marginalised communities, particularly given the new reality of a disaster-prone environment. A humanistic approach to resilience interrogates the ingrained structural inequalities to empower those who were, and still are disproportionately affected by disasters.

Conclusion

Grounded in critical humanism that emphasises the connectivity, diversity, and interactivity within humanity, this paper presents a model of humanistic communication for disaster resilience building. At each stage, a humanistic focus guides emergency managers to ask different questions about critical issues, navigate various aspects of humanity, and develop effective communication strategies for building collaborative resilience with communities. Humanistic communication plays a significant role in achieving this goal through adding care for human autonomy, dignity and welfare (a fundamental human drive) to essential information dissemination. This is especially so in the contemporary digital world. Only humans can strive for humanity in disasters and create adaptive futures for all communities.

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