

Understanding interest-based conflict in disaster recovery collaborations

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Introduction

The range of challenges encountered in disaster recovery clearly cannot be addressed by any single organisation (Chung 2016; Waugh and Streib 2006). Different agencies bring specialised skills, knowledge and resources and working collaboratively increases overall capability and capacity, reduces redundancy and integrates diverse perspectives into decision-making. The value of a networked as opposed to top-down approach to collaboration is increasingly recognised, with expectations for cooperation across the public, private and community sectors (Tierney 2012).

However, there is a tendency to oversimplify collaboration as a 'magic bullet' (Dewulf and Elbers 2018, p.2) solution to complex societal challenges like recovery. Existing literature focusing on collaboration tends to focus on the organisational preconditions necessary for effective collaboration, such as inter-organisational structures, trusting relationships and role clarity (Curnin and O'Hara 2019; Glavovic 2014; McNaught et al. 2024; Prakash et al. 2022; Quarantelli 1988). Other scholars suggest that institutional features such as the fragmentation of structures can also lead to relational dynamics that impede collaboration, such as poor communication, feelings of alienation and reactive behaviour due to a lack of contextual knowledge or understanding (Chuang 2019; Drennan et al. 2016; Manandhar et al. 2022; Tierney 2012). What is often overlooked or underexplored is that collaboration between organisations increases the potential for conflict by inviting agencies with both shared and divergent interests, practices and values to work together and contribute to decision-making. Collaboration may be essential, but conflict is inevitable.

Although conflict is sometimes acknowledged as a feature of collaborative relationships, it rarely receives direct attention. Conflict is usually considered peripherally in other disaster research and is consistently portrayed as inconvenient and exclusively detrimental. Terms such as dissension (Oliver-Smith and Hoffman 2020), divisions (Alexander 2015; Matthewman 2015; Mulligan 2013), contests

Abstract

The complex challenges of disaster recovery cannot be addressed by any single individual, organisation or institution. However, collaboration is often oversimplified as a 'magic bullet' solution to those challenges. Current approaches to understanding collaboration often fail to acknowledge that collaboration inevitably involves conflict, as it brings together organisations with divergent interests, practices and values. This study explored this challenge through semi-structured interviews with 38 Australian disaster recovery practitioners on their experiences of conflict in collaborative partnerships. This paper finds that psychological, procedural and substantive interests all play a role in inter-agency conflict and suggests that understanding them can help recovery workers to better navigate collaborative relationships. It also argues that we need to rethink collaboration and conflict.

(Boin et al. 2008; Boin and t'Hart 2003), differences of opinion (Davis 2005), friction (Aldrich 2019) and corrosive community dynamics (Brunsma et al. 2010) are frequently used. Some of these terms are euphemistic, while others lead to the misguided assumption that all conflict leads to harm and unnecessary distress. For instance, Fisk et al. (2019) argue that the presence of minimal conflict is a marker of effective recovery.

This aversion to conflict is not unique to disaster studies; it is a widespread belief that conflict signals something is broken and has inevitably damaging consequences (Lewicki et al. 2016). Some researchers within disaster recovery challenge this view. For example, Rosenthal et al. (1991) suggest that conflict need not carry exclusively dysfunctional connotations (p.229). However, a more nuanced understanding of conflict remains largely absent and there is still a significant lack of research on the potential positive functions of conflict in disaster recovery. The peripheral treatment of conflict in the literature, coupled with its mostly negative portrayal, underscores the need for this research.

For this research, 'conflict' refers to an expressed struggle between 2 or more interdependent parties, who perceive incompatible values, claims, goals or interests (Spencer and Hardy 2014, p.52–53). 'Causes' refers to the diverse and multiple factors that drive, catalyse or contribute to conflict, typically involving both long-term structural influences and short-term issues or interests (Dugan 1996). It should be noted that the causes of conflict may not be immediately evident, nor agreed by parties. The perception of what 'causes' an individual or prolonged conflict will vary between actors (Fisher and Ury 1981; Lederach 1995).

'Disaster recovery collaborations' refers to the process of inter-organisational collaboration whereby 2 or more separate but interdependent organisations come together to deal with a challenge or goal (Schruijer 2020, p.2), in this case related to disaster recovery. Collaboration in disaster recovery activities can range from informal and episodic cooperative activity to highly formalised organisational processes delineated by contract (Simo and Bies 2007, p.125). Regardless of the formality of the arrangement, what is shared is the notion of interdependence and of working together to navigate a shared challenge. It should be noted that although this research is focused on the organisation as the unit of analysis, the individual is still relevant. Individual interests intersect with organisational interests. Individuals serve as conduits to their organisations, bringing their personalities and agendas to the table, thus altering the nature of agency relationships and, at times, causing conflict.

Within disaster recovery collaborations, poorly managed conflict can stall processes, waste resources, damage relationships and result in a long, protracted tail end to recovery (Aldrich 2019; Chung 2016). In contrast, well-

managed conflict can reveal a diversity of knowledge, encourage negotiation, produce more robust decisions (Rosenthal et al. 1991) and contribute to social change (Hilhorst 2013). Individuals and organisations may also benefit, and there is evidence that affected populations can have more positive recovery outcomes when they engage in constructive controversy with government leaders (Chen et al. 2017). Therefore, effective conflict management can benefit disaster recovery by reducing distress and division and creating opportunities to collectively deliberate recovery decisions.

This research contributes to the effective management of conflict by firstly stepping back and asking: What causes conflict in disaster recovery collaboration? This approach aligns with the advice of conflict scholars who emphasise that effective conflict management is predicated on understanding the causes of conflict (Deutsch 1949; Galtung and Fischer 2013; Pruitt et al. 2004).

Interests

One of the causes of interagency conflict is organisational interests, which is the focus of this paper. Interest-based approaches focus on conflict caused by differences related to the immediate dispute. Interests represent the actual and perceived needs or concerns parties seek to address or satisfy (Fisher and Ury 1981; Jeong 2008; Moore 2014; Wehr 2006). In a conflict, interests can be shared and common, different but not incompatible, or entirely incompatible (Moore 2014; Fisher and Ury 1981). Importantly, interests are distinct from positions. While positions reflect specific demands made by one party towards another and usually result in 'win-lose' thinking, interests represent the underlying motivations of the conflict. Critically, the potential compatibility of interests makes them an ideal site for negotiating and navigating conflict, hence the focus on interests.

Interest-based approaches are widely used and form the basis of common alternative dispute resolution practices, such as mediation and conciliation. Despite their promise as a site for concentrating conflict management efforts, there can be a risk they encourage a focus on manifestations of conflict rather than their underlying cause (Furlong 2020; Lederach 2015) or perpetuate oppressive structures (Scimecca 1987). Interests are also invariably more compound, contradictory, ambiguous, variable, and political than regularly assumed (Hay 2016). However, it is suggested that interest-based approaches are most applicable in contexts where fundamental values such as the belief in human equality, shared community and non-violence are shared (Vallacher et al. 2013), which is the case in the disaster recovery sector in an Australian context.

In this paper, interests are categorised into 3 broad types, psychological, procedural and substantive, collectively termed the 'triangle of satisfaction' (Moore 2014: p.128).

Psychological interests concern the need for respect, recognition, dignity, professionalism and trust. Procedural interests refer to preferences regarding how decisions are made, problems are solved, or negotiations are conducted, encompassing desires for transparent, fair, participatory and equitable processes (Moore 2014). Psychological and procedural interests are distinctive because they cannot be solved, bargained or negotiated (Furlong 2020; Moore 2014). Substantive interests pertain to tangible outcomes or objectives in a conflict, including material resources such as money, property, survival or shelter (Furlong 2020; Moore 2014). Table 1 provides definitions, examples from research and a fictional vignette.

The paper finds that the organisational interests manifest in certain ways in conflict within disaster recovery collaborations. Firstly, psychological interests are anchored in the essential need for trust and respect. Secondly, procedural interests raised in this research centre on fairness, justice and reward. Underlying all interests, but especially the procedural, was the expectation organisational competence and commitment to community needs should be recognised and rewarded through transparency, funding, respect or delegated responsibilities. Thirdly, substantive interests in recovery primarily revolve around issues related to organisational survival, such as legitimacy, reputation or access to the community.

Method

This study forms part of a PhD project undertaken with the School of Political Science and International Studies, The University of Queensland. The project explored the causes of conflict in disaster recovery collaborations. It is underpinned by qualitative methodology, which is well-suited to the task of understanding conflict due to its capacity for thorough exploration of complex issues, its ability to facilitate meaning-making, and its provision of rich, contextual data that supports theory development. Semi-structured interviews are the primary research method.

Participants were recruited via purposive sampling, targeting disaster recovery actors across various organisations and jurisdictions. Various strategies were used to secure participants. For example, direct approaches were made through the researchers existing contacts, a flyer was shared through sector networking platforms and overarching agencies (such as local government associations or community sector peak bodies) and government departments (such as local government areas that had experienced numerous disasters, or specific recovery teams from state government) were contacted. Snowballing, in which new participants are secured through those already interviewed, occurred through existing contacts and through interviews.

Table 1: The triangle of satisfaction.

Cause	Definition	Example from the research relating to category	Vignette on how cause might manifest
Psychological interests	The desire for respect, recognition, dignity, professionalism, and to trust and be trusted (Furlong 2020; Moore 2014). They cannot be solved, bargained or compromised.	Respect is a psychological interest. It is suggested that the desire for respect both motivates actions and fosters collective motivation (Deutsch 2006; Thomson et al. 2006) and that respect for diversity in group settings can enhance constructive interactions among different groups (Jeong 2008).	<i>Conflict emerges in a disaster recovery committee when the chair, who also lost their home and thought they were going to die in the disaster, repeatedly belittles and undermines other members. Other organisations represented write a formal letter of complaint to the minister.</i>
Procedural interests	The desire for processes and decision-making mechanisms to be transparent, fair, participatory and equitable. These cannot be solved but continually negotiated (Furlong 2020). Procedural conflict may also include processes related to resolving the conflict (Mayer 2020).	Various researchers raise the need for processes and decision-making mechanisms in recovery to be transparent, fair, participatory and equitable (Fraser et al. 2020; Gibbs et al. 2018).	<i>Conflict emerges when a newly created non-government organisation receives a large contract to provide recovery support in a bushfire affected community. An established non-government organisation that has been lobbying to government for funding for years believes the funding process lacked transparency and overlooked their expertise, experience and ongoing contribution to the community, and refuses to collaborate with the new organisation.</i>
Substantive interests	The tangible requests or goals of a conflict. This may include money, property, resources, or shelter (Furlong 2020; Moore 2014).	Reputation is a substantive interest can relate to how the crisis is managed (Boin et al. 2017; Caruson and McManus 2012) and meeting expectations. For example, the government seeks to meet the electorates expectations (Choi and Honda 2019), and non-government organisations donor and the publics expectations (Choi and Honda 2019; Grellmann 2022).	<i>Local government seeks to change their planning scheme to prevent rebuilding on a floodplain. non-government organisations are concerned about this contributing to homelessness or displacement and state government are concerned about implications for future large-scale infrastructure projects.</i>

Between April and August 2023, 38 recovery practitioners from 5 Australian jurisdictions were interviewed:

- Victoria (5)
- Western Australia (4)
- New South Wales (25)
- Queensland (2)
- South Australia (2).

Participants were concentrated in areas that had experienced recent or frequent disasters. Participants represented diverse organisational types: local government (10), state government (15), commonwealth government (2), peak bodies (2), local non-government organisations and community organisations (9) and large national non-government organisations (18). Many participants had worked for various organisations in recovery, hence the distribution specified above.

Typically, participants were highly qualified with experience across numerous disaster events; 33 had worked in recovery for over 5 years and 26 had held management or executive responsibilities. They had worked across a range of recent and past events including the Boxing Day Tsunami, Port Arthur, the Thredbo Landslide, the summer bushfires of 2019–20, Cyclone Seroja, Blue Mountains (various) Northern Rivers floods (various) and Queensland floods (various), as well as smaller disasters. Several recent disasters occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic, which was mentioned as an additional layer of complexity for some participants.

The interviews followed a semi-structured format. Participants were asked to focus on their broad experiences, to describe the nature of their collaborative relationships and to provide examples of conflict. Following introductory questions, each participant was asked to describe how 8 categories influenced conflict in disaster recovery collaborations, namely institutions, data, values, relationships, systems and substantive, procedural and psychological interests. These categories were developed initially by mapping conflict analysis categories drawn from Moore's (2014) Circle of Conflict model to insights on conflict from disaster recovery research.

Preliminary data analysis was conducted using NVivo. Data was organised into manageable themes through coding. The analysis initially employed a deductive approach by anticipating broad themes as is common in qualitative research (Saldana 2015). For a theme to be validated, interviewees needed to describe conflicts in ways that aligned with the category definition and then provide further elaboration when prompted. To avoid prematurely aligning theory with data and to remain faithful to participants' experiences, as recommended by Galletta (2013), an inductive approach was employed to explore data outside the pre-identified themes. This involved frequently revisiting the literature and theory to test initial insights

and comparing differing perspectives across interviews, as suggested by Silverman (2013).

Ethics statement

Ethics approval for this research was granted by the University of Queensland Human Research Ethics Approval 2023/HE000074.

Findings

The study developed an analytical framework that identified 4 key drivers of conflict in disaster recovery collaborations, namely values, the recovery system, organisational interests and relational dynamics. This paper presents findings related to the influence of organisational interests in contributing to conflict, focusing on substantive, procedural and psychological interests. As noted the potential compatibility of interests makes them a useful place to focus conflict management efforts and justifies the focus of this study's findings.

Shared interests across organisations

Before discussing each category of interest, it is important to establish that all the recovery workers who were interviewed were unified in their commitment to community and collaboration. Most participants often prefaced descriptions of conflict by stating their belief that most recovery workers were well-intentioned and collaborative work enabled recovery. Typically, the conflict described occurred between agencies holding shared interests. Participants' shared dedication to community and to collaboration are briefly discussed.

All the participants expressed a belief that agencies shared a common motivation in supporting a disaster-affected community to recover. Representatives from numerous agencies stated: 'no-one's in this business to make a profit' (P8), 'there's a common goal as a headline' (P2), organisations possessed 'a genuine commitment to go good' (P29) and 'people who work in recovery ... it's always for the greater good of the community and individuals we serve' (P33). Several participants noted that agencies or individuals perceived to blatantly hold different interests were ostracised, disregarded or ignored. For most, the minimal threshold for being considered a collaborative partner in recovery was an overt commitment to supporting the community.

In addition to prioritising community, all participants described a commitment to fostering collaboration, assuming collaboration would lead to improved community outcomes in recovery. As one non-government organisation participant described, 'The benefit of good collaborations is that the community does better and recovers better' (P5). Agencies invested considerable effort into developing strong partnerships and organisational relationships, describing attempts to 'forge our way

through' (P11), 'sit at the table and do it together' (P21) and 'get to know one another as human beings' (P5). Deliberate processes such as identifying shared goals and agendas, debriefs after events, shared exercises, seeking representative participation on networks and working groups, and having coffee after formal meetings to maintain relationships were described. One manager of a community sector peak body detailed their ongoing efforts to strengthen collaboration between the local community sector, larger non-government organisations and local and state government entities:

We have decided to collaborate, decided to build relationships of trust. It started in 2013, and we've been building on it ever since. Is it perfect? No. Does it work? Yes. The idea is to use the relationships of trust ... to encourage collaboration, to get the biggest bang for the sometimes-non-existent-buck to benefit our local community.
(P26)

All participants were unified in their belief that underneath it all, recovery agencies were driven by the betterment of community and committed to productive collaboration. This consensus gives rise to optimism about the successful prevention, handling or resolution of conflicts in disaster recovery partnerships. Nonetheless, it is crucial to comprehend the underlying interests contributing to conflict.

Psychological interests

Two key psychological interests dominated participant descriptions of conflict in disaster recovery collaborations: trust, and the desire for respect.

Many participants described trust as crucial for collaboration. Trust was related to other agencies' motives and competence and led to a willingness to collaborate and depend on them. Agencies described both distrusting other agencies and being the subject of distrust themselves.

Trust is the belief and willingness to act on another actor's words, actions and decisions (Lewicki et al. 2016). It is argued high levels of trust foster collaborative behaviour and increases information sharing (Butler 1999), reducing the likelihood of destructive conflict. Conversely, organisations with histories of conflict often have low levels of trust, leading to decreased commitment, manipulative behaviour, and dishonest communication (Ansell and Gash 2007).

Trust played a protective role in collaborations, facilitating effective conflict management and allowing for a tolerance of differing opinions. Many participants noted that, in situations where trust existed, minor slights or disagreements were easily managed and resolved. One community sector peak body manager explained: 'The relationships of trust are a prerequisite to collaboration. If you don't have those, they don't happen' (P26). In

contrast, distrust led to conflict escalation. Once trust was broken, it was difficult to rebuild, creating a cycle where distrust fostered stereotypes, rumours and suspicion. In such cases, every action was interpreted as signalling the other party's ill-intent. Trust was also linked to pre-existing stereotypes about agencies, with several participants recounting instances where they were distrusted simply because of the type of organisation they represented. One participant, who had worked for both state and local government, described their experience of being distrusted based on the assumption that, as a government employee, they must be self-interested and bureaucratic:

One thing that sticks out to me is the distrust I experienced working for local government. As soon as you say anything related to either local government or government, distrust comes into it, whether it's community or another agency. There's that automatic – 'you're not actually here for the community. You just want to tell us what to do. And you just want to sort of push us around and make us do what you want to do you, you're just all about the bureaucracy'.
(P25)

The subject of trust varied, with trust mainly related to the motives or competence of other agencies. Often, agencies distrusted the motives of other agencies and suspected they were not concerned with a community imperative. Several organisations mentioned sharing data or information with other individuals because they trusted their motives, with one participant who had worked for local and state government and the commonwealth describing: 'But that was all trust and relationship-driven, knowing whoever you're sharing information with was doing it for the right reasons' (P33). Motive mattered to participants, with the 'right reasons' focused on the good of community, not the good of the organisation.

At other times, agencies distrusted one another's competence. Several participants described a cycle whereby once an agency knows its competence is distrusted, it becomes less confident, reinforcing others' beliefs about its capability. For example, one manager of a non-government organisation working in recovery for over a decade described how a government restructure led to delays and inefficiencies undermining trust in 'the system':

In terms of creating conflict, it certainly caused a lot of disbelief and anger and a breakdown in trust ... of the system. And a breakdown in confidence that the institution was in a stable enough place to provide the support that services programs and projects on the ground required to get out to the communities as quickly as possible.
(P29)

Many recovery workers claimed a desire for trust and the existence of distrust drove conflict in recovery collaborations. Related to trust is the psychological

interest of respect. The recognition and respect of skills, knowledge, role and expertise mattered to participants, with 27 recovery workers mentioning a lack of respect leading to conflict. These participants acknowledged recovery relied on the involvement of interdependent but dissimilar organisations; therefore, different skills, expertise and geographical focus were inevitable. Respect for agencies' unique contributions was therefore essential to navigating and forging collaborations.

In conflict research, respect is considered a fundamental human need, and a lack of respect is tied to feelings of helplessness (de Matos 2006; Jeong 2008; Sandy 2006). In collaborative relationships, earning the respect of colleagues is vital for contributing to the collective good (Deutsch 2006; Thomson et al. 2006). Respect for diversity fosters constructive interactions between different groups (Jeong 2008), whereas polarisation indicates escalating conflict, threatening trust and respect (Fisher and Keashley 1991).

Participants who raised this topic perceived disrespect was based on generalisations about their agency rather than the substance of their interactions or demonstration of skills, knowledge or expertise. Frequently, feeling disrespected was a feature of new or early relationships where trust and rapport were not yet established. Lack of experience and relationships meant stereotypes, sometimes accompanied by disrespect, dominated interactions. For example, some agencies described feeling disrespected by individuals or agencies parachuted into recovery, with one participant urging:

You felt like just slapping them around the head and saying, 'How about taking 5 minutes to understand your space? Just listen to people, listen to all these perspectives and experiences around you and acknowledge you don't know enough yet.'
(P7)

Respect was considered not just about attitude or verbal recognition. To demonstrate or bestow respect, tangible demonstration was required, such as receiving funding, being consulted in crucial decisions, being included in committees, being 'bought in the loop' (P20) or being given a 'slice of the pie' (P26). Conflict and resentment occurred when agencies perceived their hard work, expertise or skills were not respected with concrete acknowledgment. For example, a participant from a large non-government organisation described how their agency had invested heavily in relief efforts, only to see other agencies receive long-term recovery funding. This caused frustration, as they felt: 'There was the belief ... they had put in the hard work, and it was compensation for having filled a gap where other people hadn't been able to' (P3).

The desire for respect was a deep psychological interest for interview participants. Failure to address the need for respect led to resentment, hurt and anger, contributing to conflict.

Procedural interests

Many recovery worker participants described a failure from other agencies to address procedural interests that led to conflict. Two main themes emerged concerning procedural interest conflict: conflict over territory or turf and the requests for transparency. Underpinning these 2 procedural interests was the desire for fairness and justice.

Participants who raised this topic described conflict motivated by the desire to protect their organisations or communities from competition or disreputable outside forces. Words such as 'turf' (2 participants), 'gatekeeping' (5), 'ownership' (3) and 'territory' (15) were used. Participants described behaviour motivated by a desire to control access to a particular location, area of expertise or responsibility. Sometimes, participants expressed protectiveness concerning their own community or 'patch', and sometimes participants described conflict caused by the perceived exclusionary ambitions of others. These turf-related conflicts were primarily driven by concerns about organisational survival and fairness. Established organisations felt it was unfair and undeserved for new or external groups to gain immediate access to communities or funding. This sentiment was particularly strong where the long-standing organisation had made a significant investment in building relationships, fostering trust and providing services over time.

Two key types of turf or territory conflict emerged: conflict between local and 'outsider' organisations and conflict between established and emergent recovery entities. Territorialism was regularly raised as a cause of conflict by interview participants, despite the lack of direct interview question. For example, one participant from a large non-government organisation summarised, 'There were a few different types of conflict there. One was ownership by existing agencies. One was the whole local versus not local. Our turf versus your turf' (P10). One participant from a large non-government organisation described ongoing territorialism between agencies in their community, extending beyond their current recovery context:

There is open conflict, there's a lot of gatekeeping, it's very territorial ... and my analysis is it's all based on funding and keeping people employed ... Council and the community service provider, they want to be seen as the go to for everything and the source of all knowledge and all truth. And so, when there's conflict comes, it's when people don't come and kneel at their feet and ask what they should be doing, is the sense you get.'
(P32)

Territory-related conflict existed between local and 'outside' organisations, raised by 21 participants, some multiple times. 'Outside' organisations included state government and large non-government organisations that

did not usually provide services in the geographic area of a disaster-affected community. Local organisations perceived outside organisations had unfounded assumptions regarding community need, arriving in their community and trying to take over. Being local was viewed *by locals* as desirable, trusted and credible. Being local was associated with having an honourable, community imperative. However, participants from 'outside' organisations also described the local/outsider conflict dynamic and expressed frustration concerning the hostility and antagonism directed towards their efforts to fulfil their responsibilities. One participant from a large non-government organisation described the experience of working in a regional community and navigating the 'local/outsider' divide:

It's important to mention the dynamics. It's 2 hours from Canberra, and 6 hours from Sydney, and there's not really a lot going on. So it feels quite isolated ... And so there is a real sense of like, 'we're out here in the bush doing it on our own, and then people just come in from Sydney and tell us what to do'. There is a strong divide at the agency level all the way down to people in community. And that plays a big role.
(P32)

Distinct from the local/outsider dynamic, 15 participants referred to conflict between established recovery organisations and new or emerging entities. Instead of geographic access to the community, the 'turf' at the heart of the conflict was the delegated or assumed legitimacy to provide a certain type of recovery support, which, by implication, contributed to the existence or survival of the organisation. The few participants from emergent organisations viewed themselves as 'good people doing good things people needed help with' (P18). However, established non-government organisations were often critical, describing emergent organisations disapprovingly as 'copycat organisations' (P3) or 'pop-up not for profits' (P23), accusing them of taking unnecessary risks, acting with haste to 'fix' recovery, not understanding the recovery context and undermining community-led recovery. Notably, established non-government organisation participants repeatedly raised concerns about emergent organisations not having qualifications, procedures or protocols. The unspoken implication was emergent groups were not legitimate recovery actors, in part because they had not 'invested' the requisite effort to meet legislative or bureaucratic standards. Attempted territorial control, whether related to geography or role, was described by some participants as a cause of conflict in disaster recovery collaborations.

Transparency was also regarded as an important procedural interest. Disclosure regarding decision-making rationale was considered a necessary accompaniment to quickly allocated funding and rapid policy choices. Transparency aided clarity and supported 'sense-making' in the fast-paced recovery

environment. At a surface level, the desire for transparency may partly have been motivated by self-interest (e.g., why did they receive funding, and we didn't?). However, many participant responses indicated transparency was also associated with procedural interests such as fairness, authenticity and integrity and was considered necessary for an interagency relationship to be truly collaborative. Regardless of the underpinning motivation, accidental or deliberate neglect of transparency contributed to conflict in disaster recovery collaborations.

Twenty-one participants raised conflict due to a lack of transparency regarding upcoming announcements, policy decision-making logic and rationales for funding distribution. Non-disclosure was perceived as especially aggravating where 'outside' organisations made decisions with local implications, without explaining how these decisions were made. A lack of transparency was linked to a lack of trust, a cyclical loop making conflict more probable. For example, some funded organisations automatically distrusted their funders, perceiving them as holding unjust power. Therefore, mutual transparency was unlikely. Conversely, if an organisation was perceived as untransparent, participants believed them also untrustworthy. One ex-state government employee described the cyclical relationship between trust and transparency:

I saw a real lack of transparency ... If people have a high level of trust, they are more likely to be transparent with what's going on and say, 'I trust if I say this, you're not going to- whatever- undermine my values'. Or 'you're not going to steal my money, or get more kudos than me, or be seen as more of a hero than me'. But I saw a lot of people holding things closely. So- the desire for things to be transparent, I didn't see that. I saw the desire for things to be closed and not shared ... which is obviously a positive reinforcement loop of: you're not transparent, you lose trust. You lose trust, you don't want to be transparent.
(P23)

Frequently, the desire for transparency related to the allocation of funding. Most participants accepted that time pressure in a disaster recovery context required atypical processes to allocate funding than normal. Especially in early recovery, recovery workers understood funding or services might be procured based on incomplete or changeable information. Yet some participants described conflict where funding was awarded based on perceived favour and attributed to previous relationships, nepotism or convenience. In these cases, participants described feeling a sense of injustice and the discretion applied to funding allocation meant such an accusation was hard to disprove. One participant who had worked for local government and non-government organisations in recovery described the resentment and conflict caused by funding decisions about early service provision:

There's been some resentment from the local services about one locally funded service getting funding, and not another. But it's that transparency around decision-making, and a lot of the times funding in the initial stages of recovery is allocated based on ... - well, it is merit-based, but it's not a competitive merit-based process. So the challenge is balancing the necessity to get services on the ground quickly, as quickly as possible ... and transparency. (P31)

Services overlooked for funding often described processes as arbitrary and unfair, leading to them distrusting both the recipient organisation and the funding body. Non-funded recipients described their disconcertion as motivated by a desire to protect a community imperative, asking questions such as, 'is government even checking the credentials of the people getting the funding?' (P10) or questioning the recipient organisations' motivations, 'there was also a perception they were very savvy. And so that's a perception- whether it's right or wrong. And I know they do decent good work, but -they were savvy' (P13). This dynamic, whereby the overlooked organisation questions the fairness of process, links the desire for transparency to the substantive interest of funding. One highly experienced recovery manager considered such questions as inevitable: if agencies did not receive funding, they would continually question the decision's transparency or legitimacy: 'until you give the people money, they're going to ask the question from different angles ... what they're on about is 'I want some money and I didn't get any' (P22).

Some participants raised conflict whereby recovery workers were expected to be conduits for policy or government decisions. Frequently, workers felt stymied, unable to be transparent regarding the logic and reason behind decision-making. Typically, recovery staff understood unfavourable and tough decisions might be necessary but believed other agencies and community members were more likely to accept or understand hard decisions backed by transparent logic. Transparency implied integrity and trustworthiness, attributes they wished to uphold. One participant who had worked across local and state government described the importance of communication, even when decisions may be disappointing:

The desire for things to be transparent, fair, and equitable is mainly because the decision-making is happening at a higher level than at a local level. And so, when you're the one on the ground that has to speak to the community, you're the face of their recovery process. It becomes important you know what's happening and that you're able to tell them. Even if things aren't going well, even if the funding isn't coming. It's that communication that's critical ... So as long as you can tell them exactly what's happening, upfront, rather than saying, 'I have no idea that's not my job' ... And when you're at a state level, there's a disconnect ... You're more concerned about making sure the decision is right, before you tell anyone

anything. But it's just about giving us something, some sort of information, so we can make sure that when we're speaking to the community, we're being honest with them. (P25)

A lack of transparency indicated to participants another agency was untrustworthy, with distrust impeding conflict in disaster recovery collaborating and pre-empting conflict.

Substantive interests

Interview participants identified a variety of substantive interests contributing to conflict in disaster recovery collaborations. Broadly, different organisational types, such as local and state government agencies and non-government organisations shared similar substantive interests. Conflicts often revolved around survival, reputation, legitimacy and external pressures, such as political dynamics and media scrutiny.

The theme of organisational survival emerged as a significant factor underlying examples of substantive conflict and this was raised by many participants. The theme of organisational survival is raised in various ways in disaster recovery and other research. Rosenthal et al. (1991), for example, emphasises the bureaucratic imperative to safeguard organisational existence during crises, where agencies defend their turf and reputation through their post-disaster performance. For organisations responsible for disaster recovery, the post-disaster phase represents a critical opportunity to demonstrate their value to other agencies and the public. Outside the field of disaster studies, Hanegraaf and Poletti (2019) use the term 'mortality anxiety' (p.126) to describe this phenomenon. Other researchers suggest anxiety is amplified by factors such as direct competition, organisational size, limited resources, and ongoing change (Halpin and Thomas 2012; Heylen et al. 2018), all characteristic of the disaster recovery context.

Participants frequently attributed conflict to substantive interests, such as funding, reputation or media involvement. However, a deeper analysis reveals these conflicts were often underpinned by a fundamental drive for organisational survival. The data suggests conflicts were triggered by actions aimed at safeguarding organisations from existential threats. The nature of these threats, and the mechanisms for survival, differed between organisation types. For instance, non-government organisations were often more reliant on external funding. One participant noted, 'they're a smaller organisation that has to struggle to survive, and fight or flight sort of kicks in' (P27). In contrast, government entities were seen as more dependent on reputation, legitimacy and maintaining the approval of constituents. While some participants regarded organisational survival as a pragmatic and reasonable interest, justifiable when it served the broader goal of supporting communities, others viewed it as self-interest that could undermine the shared goal of community recovery.

Recovery workers often described the 'mortality anxiety' of other agencies, believing it contributed to conflict. Where actions were seen to be motivated by a 'threat to the future of ... the organisation' (P10) or an attitude of 'we must stay alive at all costs' (P23), organisational survival was suspected of superseding the desire to support the community to recover and therefore betrayed the shared cause. For example, organisational action unrelated but tied to recovery was viewed as duplicitous or as taking advantage by seeking to 'piggyback off the disaster' (P1) or 'sneak the business-as-usual things through' (P20). One non-government organisation manager described how, as the recovery sector grows, more organisations are clamouring to 'do good' while holding a dual interest in securing available funding for organisational expansion:

My cynical hat might say it's a bit of empire-building. They're setting themselves up. Because let's be pragmatic here- when I started working in the disaster sector, it wasn't a sector. Now, it's an industry. And people keep saying, 'You'll never be out of work'. And it's true. It's growing. It's an actual sector in and of itself. So everyone wants a piece of the pie- including the local place-based organisations, right? So it's motivated by doing good. It's motivated by expanding on what they already offer. And it's motivated by 'we need a piece of this pie'. (P29)

While not all substantive conflict is linked exclusively to organisational survival, the theme frequently recurred, driving conflict related to reputation and legitimacy and fear regarding external threats.

Interviews revealed that the interrelated influences of politics and the media were believed to contribute to conflict in disaster recovery collaborations, exacerbating mortality anxiety and having a direct impact on reputation and legitimacy.

Recovery operates as an open system, continually subject to external influences, including politicians and the media. These external influences were viewed as holding the power to either announce 'policy on the run' or publish critiques of recovery agencies, setting off chain reactions to defend legitimacy or reputation. Media and politicians were considered powerful, external to formal recovery, yet with great influence. Participants expressed frustration at their inability to challenge or influence these forces, describing themselves as vulnerable to what they perceived as unpredictable, misinformed and sensationalised threats to their organisations. External political and media pressures were viewed as impeding both community and organisational interests, ultimately fuelling conflict.

Many participants believed the actions of politicians had cascading effects leading to conflict. A total of 26 participants mentioned the role of politics in driving conflict in disaster recovery collaborations. The connection

between the actions of politicians and the conflict between collaborating agencies was indirect but significant. Government participants especially felt powerless against the announcements and demands of politicians having flow-on effects concerning their time, attention and reputation.

Participants who had worked for government frequently emphasised the challenge of dealing with the 'political whims' of elected representatives, often first discovered by government staff via media announcements. Sometimes announcements were viewed as electoral politicking, sometimes as a well-intentioned but misdirected desire to expedite recovery. After an announcement, public servants described unwillingly acting as conduits, managing the expectations of communities and other agencies and delivering policy 'on the run'. One local government employee described dealing with unplanned policy announcements designed to 'fix things' and the difficulty presented for staff:

The doorstep policy announcement of grant support is really problematic, and it can create conflict ... Every political bit of machinery in a government will want to get in there and give these dollars- 'we need to do this, we need to do that'. And of course, the policy detail is not worked out before the announcement. Expectations are raised, and it becomes incredibly difficult to manage. It's done, a lot of times, with the best of intentions. I don't think it's politicking, purely politicking. There is a lot of good intention- 'we need to support our communities'. But it's not thought through. So, it creates conflict because you're trying to manage something, and you don't know the details. And that's a really difficult space. (P34)

Eleven participants brought up the topic of media influence on conflict in disaster recovery collaborations. Despite not being prompted with a related question, they expressed concerns about biased and uninformed media coverage negatively affecting the agency's reputation, employee wellbeing and identity. Perceived reputational damage was seen as a contributing factor to conflicts in collaborative relationships. Participants described the media as having power over them, noting the lack of opportunity to respond to or dispute such coverage.

The media causing conflict was raised mainly by participants from state government and large non-government organisations, who were subject to purportedly unwarranted scrutiny. As a result, the community and other agencies would criticise agencies for matters raised in the media causing reputational damage and psychological harm to recovery workers. Many managers described staff taking media criticism as a personal insult in a highly volatile and demanding environment. A state government employee who had also worked in the non-government organisation sector spoke about the impacts of media on staff:

I've seen ... the negative and emotional impacts of media on this team when they've worked so hard for so long. And then having to deal with hearing those stories and feeling like they're a failure. And with the failure of our agency, feeling they were to blame for that. It was extremely challenging, the results, the flow-on effects.
(P21)

Politics and the media were viewed as interconnected and interdependent. Together, they reinforced the narrative that the 'system is broken'. Participants regarded both media and politicians as not understanding the complexity nor the institutional arrangements supporting recovery yet holding the power to shape public discourse and detrimentally affect agency reputations and dynamics. One ex-government employee expressed their frustration with the role of media in oversimplifying recovery and fuelling conflict:

The media plays into conflict as well. I found it enormously disappointing to see what media would pick up on and write about; I'd go, 'How can you possibly think this could be a helpful thing right now'? Do you think you're alerting government to the needs, or 'shining a light' on something happening?' It's actually so complex, you can't possibly represent it in this article. So, I think the media plays a really significant piece ... in either starting or fuelling conflict.
(P24)

Despite operating outside the formal recovery system of recovery arrangements and plans, these external actors were seen as wielding significant power over time, attention, reputation and perceptions of other agencies, contributing to conflict.

Discussion

The findings from this study focused on the role of organisational interests in generating conflict within disaster recovery collaborations.

Firstly, psychological interests were anchored in the essential need for trust and respect, elements not extensively addressed in the disaster recovery literature. While trust is often cited as critical to collaborative efforts (Curnin and O'Hara 2019; Glavovic 2014; McNaught et al. 2024; Prakash et al. 2022), it is typically clustered with institutional features such as interorganisational structures and role clarity. However, trust must be more than just 'designed into' recovery arrangements or committees. It is cultivated over time through consistency, communication and reciprocity. Therefore, the challenge to existing research highlighting trust as essential to collaborative relationships is to expand on how trust is built. Trust cannot be design into policies or plans; it is developed through sustained actions.

Secondly, procedural interests raised in this research centred on fairness, justice and reward. There was the

expectation organisational competence and commitment to community should be recognised and rewarded through transparency, funding, respect or delegated responsibilities. New agencies skipping the queue and gaining access to funding and legitimacy was perceived as an affront to procedural fairness. These assumptions are inherently meritocratic and are tied to the myth of a manageable, just and predictable world. While much has changed since Young (1958) coined the term 'meritocracy', the idea that effort or performance should be impartially rewarded is still prevailing as an idea (Kim and Choi 2017). Within disaster studies, a meritocratic ideal presents a new and underexplored frame for understanding how agencies interact.

Thirdly, substantive interests in recovery primarily revolve around issues related to organisational survival, such as legitimacy, reputation or access to the community. This focus on organisational survival as a substantive interest is crucial but often overlooked in scholarship. For organisations involved in disaster recovery, the post-disaster phase is a critical opportunity to prove their value; their continued existence hinges on defending their reputation and establishing legitimacy through effective post-disaster performance, resulting in 'mortality anxiety' (Hanegraaf and Poletti 2019, p.126). While similar pressures have been examined in bureaucratic settings (Rosenthal et al. 1991), mortality anxiety within non-government organisations remains largely unexplored. As these findings have demonstrated, government agencies may face consequences for poor post-disaster performance, such as restructuring, budget cuts, media scrutiny or even judicial review, but they generally continue to exist in some form. In contrast, non-government organisations face a more fundamental existential threat. Perceived poor post-disaster performance may lead to the withdrawal of funding or exclusion from formal disaster recovery processes, potentially rendering the organisation non-viable. Furthermore, factors heightening mortality anxiety for non-government organisations, such as direct competition, organisational size, limited resources and change (Haplin and Thomas 2012; Heylen et al. 2018), are amplified in the post-disaster context. As a result, the stakes of post-disaster performance become critical drivers of organisational behaviour for non-government organisations and can result in conflict.

A new conversation

This study starts a conversation about conflict in disaster recovery. It brings conflict from the margins of research to a central position, highlighting it as a topic deserving focused and ongoing investigation. Conflict should not be treated as a minor inconvenience or sidenote but as a critical dynamic within disaster recovery. It can reveal problems with how recovery is organised, how we engage with one another and ensure different needs are

considered. But only if we are willing to acknowledge and examine it. This paper focused on one specific driver of conflict: perceived unmet organisational interests.

One reason conflict has been overlooked is the prevailing uncritical approach to collaboration in disaster studies and disaster recovery practice. This approach emphasises harmony as an ideal and collaboration as inherently good. If we assume collaboration is inherently good and that minimal conflict is a marker of good collaboration (Fisk et al. 2019), then seamless collaboration becomes not simply a way of working to achieve a shared goal, but a desired outcome itself. However, pursuing collaboration as a goal in its own right, rather than a means to achieve specific outcomes, can have adverse consequences. Conflict scholars warn against this, arguing that prioritising collaboration over its actual purpose can ignore power imbalances (McKeown 2013; Vallacher et al. 2013), reinforce the status quo (Rogers and Ramsbotham 1999) and compromise rigorous advice by prioritising consensus (Emerson et al. 2003). While the benefits of collaboration are unquestionable, the current uncritical approach, which treats smooth, friction-free collaboration as the ultimate goal, has created a blind spot requiring closer examination, a task this research has instigated.

A shift in perspective is necessary. Disaster studies would benefit from forgoing idealised notions of collaboration and embracing the idea of 'constructive controversy' which conveys how well-managed conflict can foster innovative problem-solving (Ayoko et al. 2014; Johnson et al. 2006; Tjosvold 2008), promote respect between stakeholders (Chen et al. 2017) and strengthen the rigour of research (Tjosvold 2008). Rather than treating conflict as an inconvenience to be avoided or a purely destructive force, it should be recognised as a vital component of recovery requiring careful management. Attempting to eradicate conflict is unrealistic and overlooks its potential to improve recovery outcomes. Thus, the aim of understanding conflict is not to eliminate it from collaboration but to reduce the harm it causes, harness it to uncover diverse perspectives, broaden decision-making considerations and improve the overall quality of recovery efforts. It is time to reimagine the role of conflict within disaster studies.

Conclusion

This research examined one cause of conflict in disaster recovery collaborations and organisational interests and has opened avenues for investigation. Several themes identified have received limited scholarly and empirical attention in the disaster recovery literature. Concepts of mortality anxiety, constructive controversy, trust and respect warrant closer examination and investigating them could offer insight into post-disaster conflict dynamics. This research deliberately refrained from exploring how to address conflict. Future work should consider how conflict in recovery collaborations might be navigated.

Such approaches should not aim to eliminate conflict but to prevent and respond to its destructive potential, and to transform interagency relationships so they are robust, equitable and fair, and ultimately contribute to effective recovery for affected communities.

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