

AJEM readership favourite papers



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Since 1986, the *Australian Journal of Emergency Management* (AJEM) has published an estimated 2,000 peer-reviewed research papers from Australia, New Zealand and around the world.

This growing body of knowledge has documented the tremendous expansion in emergency management planning and policy, the growth in rigour in academia and practice, the transfer of research within the sector and the adoption and testing of improved approaches to much of how we plan, respond and renew after disaster events. In its 40th year of publication, AJEM is publishing reflections from readers around the world to recall their favourite and most influential paper(s).

The psychological impact of responding to agricultural emergencies

By Meredith Jenner

Volume 22(2): 25-31, 2007

<https://search.informit.org/doi/pdf/10.3316/agispt.20072387>

Submitted by Nathalie Brown

Victorian Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action (DEECA)

Why is this paper significant to you and why has it held your attention?

I found this paper the first I had read about the impact of agricultural emergencies. We speak about the impact of emergencies on firefighters and to the community, but the agricultural aspect wasn't as obvious. I was working with Agriculture Victoria (within the Department of Natural Resources and Environment) from 2000-2010 and there were so many impacts to our staff.

How has this paper influenced your work? Or, how has this paper had a significant influence in this area of emergency management?

I was able to use this learning to help prepare staff for emergency response. I circulated to many of my regional colleagues, specifically the livestock teams. It helped ensure that during the 2009 fires we had Employee Assistance Program councillors on site at every morning and afternoon briefing to discuss how staff were going, offering tips and eventually spending time with a few highly impacted staff. It is possibly the catalyst for my focus on supporting the supporters years later,

improving how DEECA (formerly DELWP) looked after the recovery wellbeing of their staff.

Beyond 2026, what's next in this field of research or practice that builds on this paper?

With emergencies becoming more frequent and severe, I think it is critical that we continue to look at new ways to look after our emergency responders, including during the recovery phase, to ensure that they are not traumatised and there is growth in the way we do things.

The psychological impact of responding to agricultural emergencies

Meredith Jenner overviews the literature on the unique psychological impacts of responding to agricultural emergencies

Abstract

It has increasingly been recognised that emergency responders may suffer stress and adverse psychological reactions to their exposure to traumatic events and the nature of the work they are expected to perform. However, little previous research has focused on the psychological impact of responding to agricultural emergencies. While these types of emergencies have some stressors in common with traditional emergencies, there are a number of factors that are more specific to agricultural emergencies. These are explored in the context of the existing literature and interventions or preventative measures suggested to mitigate the possible negative impact of responding to agricultural emergencies.

Most people are familiar with the stereotype of the 'superhuman' emergency responder, able to work tirelessly in extreme conditions whilst remaining invulnerable to stress and emotion¹. However, in recent years there has been increasing recognition that emergency responders can be affected by their exposure to traumatic events. While emergency responders 'display an implicit willingness to expose [themselves] to potentially distressing situations and the associated risks to [their] well-being'² through choosing to work in the field, the effects of this exposure can range from feeling overwhelmed and overwhelmed during the event to the development of long-term psychological difficulties such as anxiety, depression, anger or aggression³, and even post-traumatic symptoms similar to those seen in the 'victims' of the event⁴.

An emergency scene is, by its very nature, a dynamic and ever-changing work environment, which 'bring[s] together some of the most distressing aspects of human experience'⁵. Emergency responders work 'under stressful and chaotic conditions, face unprecedented personal demands⁶ and may even be faced with

situations that threaten their own lives and safety. There may also be the threat of further events impacting on and worsening the situation. Time pressures are high, with rapid and effective action essential, work hours may be long and resources may be limited or stretched to capacity.

Emergency responses involve the breakdown of routine and familiar frameworks and may require emergency responders to perform unfamiliar tasks. Communication problems may also be a source of stress⁷, particularly at the start of a response when the situation is unclear. Despite all this, emergency responders must operate under the rules and expectations of their organisation⁸ to ensure that the response is coordinated and achieves its objectives.

Due to the high profile of many emergency events, this may be compounded by 'politically motivated demands for immediate and effective action, accompanied by intense administrative pressure'⁹. All of these factors combine to present an intense experience for emergency responders and may cause them to experience stress reactions of various degrees.

Stress is distress caused by a physical or mental strain¹⁰ and results in a state of extreme emotional and physical arousal. Once stress becomes overwhelming and reaches a level where performance deteriorates and personal well-being is seriously impaired, this can have serious implications for emergency management organisations. Most seriously, exposure to a life-threatening situation can lead to the development of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). The prevalence of PTSD in the general population is 1-2% but has been reported as being as high as 30% or more in emergency responders after serious incidents¹¹. PTSD is characterised by several potentially debilitating symptoms which, if left untreated, can continue for months or even years and severely impact on the quality of life of sufferers. The majority of the literature on stress reactions in emergency responders focuses on the traditional first responders such as fire fighters, police, ambulance attendants and other rescue personnel. These are the emergency responders most likely to encounter life-threatening situations as part of fulfilling their duties.

The epistemological non-sense of disaster studies and some more sensible prospects

By JC Gaillard

Volume 37(1): 14-15, 2022

<https://knowledge.aidr.org.au/resources/ajem-january-2022-the-epistemological-non-sense-of-disaster-studies-and-some-more-sensible-prospects>

Submitted by Mark Trudinger

Northland Civil Defence Emergency Management Group, Northland Regional Council, New Zealand

Why is this paper significant to you and why has it held your attention?

This paper stands as a landmark in disaster studies, primarily in terms of questioning the very epistemology of the field, the dominance of Western hegemony and the importance of people who are affected by disasters, especially those 'at the margins'.

How has this paper influenced your work? Or, how has this paper had a significant influence in this area of emergency management?

As someone who is profoundly interested in the intersection of theory, practice, and guidance (or ideas, praxis, and co-research), this paper challenged – and continues to challenge – my thinking and practice. The paper should have had a far greater influence on emergency management than it has – the fact that it hasn't is not a reflection on the paper, but on the very issues with both the disaster studies and emergency management fields, that the paper explores.

Beyond 2026, what's next in this field of research or practice that builds on this paper?

Both research and practice could benefit from being more widely exposed to the disaster studies Manifesto and the Accord – 2 documents that are foundational for, in turn, understanding JC's paper from AJEM. Overall, both research and practice need to put communities first - not bureaucracies, methodologies, theories, and programs from on high.

The Manifesto and Accord are available here: <https://www.radixonline.org/manifesto-accord>

NEWS AND VIEWS

The epistemological non-sense of disaster studies and some more sensible prospects

JC Gaillard

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*Terms such as 'masculine' and 'feminine' are notoriously changeable; there are social histories for each term; their meanings change radically depending upon geopolitical boundaries and cultural constraints on who is imagining whom, and for what purpose. J. Butler**

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There is a puzzling paradox in disaster studies. Many, if not most of its proponents, claim that disasters are social constructs. However, we, in our vast majority, also resort to concepts, methodologies and broader epistemologies that we take for universal. For instance, we use and apply concepts such as 'disaster', 'vulnerability', 'resilience' and 'risk', which share a Latin etymology, in all sorts of contexts around the world, assuming that they help us understand how people across very diverse cultures and societies make sense of what we call 'natural hazards'. This is antithetical, an epistemological non-sense.

This tension between, on the one hand, our theoretical claims, and, on the other hand, our actual epistemological approaches reflects the hegemony of Western, Eurocentric discourses on disaster. So hegemonic that they have become common sense in Gramsci's lingo: "According to feminist scholar Ferguson":

...the questions we can ask about the world are enabled, and other questions disabled, by the frame that orders the questioning. When we are busy arguing about the questions that appear within a certain frame, the frame itself becomes invisible; we become enframed within it.

In disaster studies, this frame is a Western one and reflects a scholarly legacy that dates back to the Enlightenment ages. Contemporary disaster studies can be tracked to Europe in the 18th Century when disasters were explicitly positioned at the interface of nature and society, or hazard and vulnerability in the jargon of the field. It is then that the project of modernity made it a priority to free people from the hazards of nature so they could live a prosperous life: "Since then, the nature/hazard-society/

vulnerability binary, celebrated in the famous mnemonic 'disaster = hazard x vulnerability' (or any iteration of this), has polarised disaster studies. This is true in the West, where the binary makes sense, but beyond, its relevance is rather dubious. Nonetheless, the binary between hazard and vulnerability and the different paradigms it sustains have been considered as the only relevant truth wherever in the world; the 'imperial truth of the West' in Eboussi-Boulaga's words."

The study of gender in disasters reflects the same Western legacy. It is predominantly framed through the dialectical lens of the categories of man and woman in a binary interpretation of the world that some have brought under an overarching polarisation of nature and society/culture akin to the dominant understanding of disasters.^{1,2} Furthermore, the dominant view that both gender and disasters are intertwined social constructs is at odds with the near-universal prominence given to biological dimorphism in underpinning gender identities. It becomes hard to disagree with Nigerian gender scholar Oyèwùmí³ that:

...if gender is socially constructed, then gender cannot behave in the same way across time and space. [...] From a cross-cultural perspective, the significance of this observation is that one cannot assume the social organization of one culture (the dominant West included) as universal or the interpretations of the experiences of one culture as explaining another one.

The hegemony of such Western discourses on both gender and disaster results from unequal power relationships between researchers around the world; a legacy of centuries of colonialism and imperialism on the side of Europe. Disaster studies

The influence of organisational culture on learning lessons: implementing a lessons management life cycle

By Lisa Marie Jackson

Volume 31(1): 18-23, 2016

<https://knowledge.aidr.org.au/resources/ajem-jan-2016-the-influence-of-organisational-culture-on-learning-lessons-implementing-a-lessons-management-life-cycle>

Submitted by Russell Buzby

Captain, NSW Rural Fire Service (RFS)

Why is this paper significant to you and why has it held your attention?

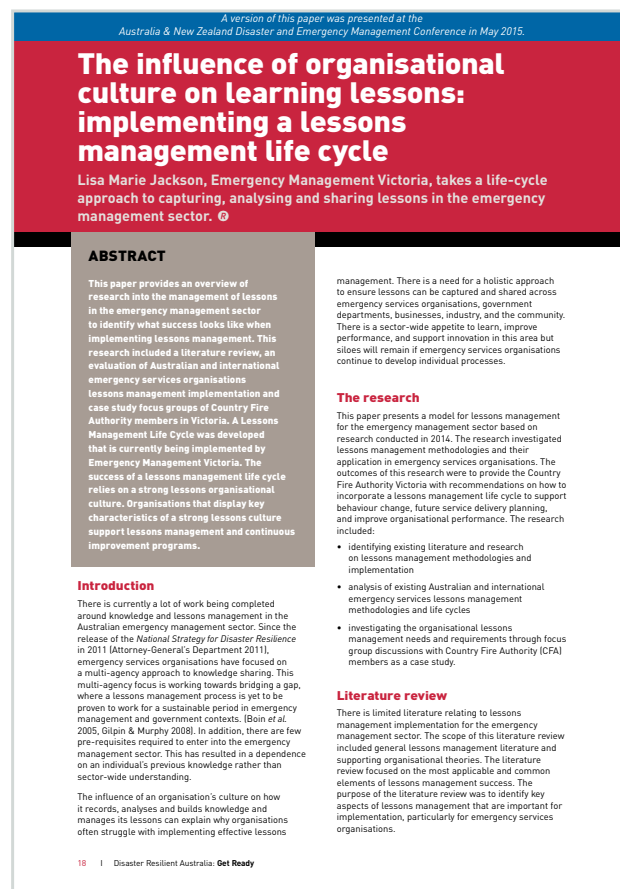
I came to it from two directions at once. I am a volunteer with a rural brigade in southern New South Wales, where I run training, and I spend my working life on organisational change in the Commonwealth. Jackson's paper is the only thing I have read that speaks to both without translating between them. Her conclusion is that the lessons management life cycle works where a lessons culture already exists, and stalls where it does not. That is an uncomfortable finding, because it says the process is not the intervention. It has held my attention for a decade because every organisation I have worked in since has proved her right, and none of them wanted to hear it.

How has this paper influenced your work? Or, how has this paper had a significant influence in this area of emergency management?

It changed what I do after an incident, and it changed what I sell. At brigade level I stopped treating the debrief as the lesson. A debrief produces material; whether anything becomes a lesson depends on what the brigade does with it over the following season, and whether the people who were there believe it is safe to say what actually happened. In consulting, it made me ask a question I did not used to ask: before designing a process that produces lessons, can this organisation hold one? Where the answer is no, a better template makes things worse, because it manufactures evidence of learning that nobody has done.

References

Medbury J, Brooks D and Coole M (2021) 'The efficacy of aligning lessons learnt from significant bushfire incidents to the organisational stratum', *Australian Journal of Emergency Management*, 36(2):26–33. <https://doi.org/10.47389/36.2.26>



Beyond 2026, what's next in this field of research or practice that builds on this paper?

Two lines already run from it. Medbury, Brooks and Coole (2021) argue that lessons sit on a vertical stratum and fail when pitched at the wrong level of work, and Glassey (2025) asks whether artificial intelligence can dissolve the documentation and silo problems that stop lessons landing. Both are agency shaped. What neither addresses – and what I would like to see – is lessons management in a volunteer organisation, where the culture that Jackson identifies as decisive belongs to a brigade of a few dozen people rather than to the agency above them. Cole and colleagues found in 2018 that post-event inquiry recommendations very rarely address volunteers at all. If the culture is where lessons live, and most of the people are volunteers, then most of the research is looking at the wrong stratum.

Glassey S (2025) 'Leveraging Artificial Intelligence for enhanced lessons management: The RAID Model', *Australian Journal of Emergency Management*, 40(4):61–65. <https://knowledge.aidr.org.au/resources/ajem-october-2025-leveraging-artificial-intelligence-for-enhanced-lessons-management-the-raid-model>