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Queensland Parliament's Community Support and Services Committee Inquiry into Social Isolation and Loneliness

Committee Secretary
Community Support and Services Committee
Parliament House
George Street Brisbane Qld 4000

Dear Committee Secretary

I would like to present a brief overview of the following research which resulted in the development of the Resilience Through Images (RTI) Model providing crisis-impacted communities with a set of strategies to help build resilience based on relationships and collaboration through reification and artefacts. The research outcomes of the 'Our Strength During the Drought, Barcaldine' (2018) research in Central Western Queensland was duplicated in the 'Our strength During COVID-19, Burton' (2020) project in South Australia.

Research
The 'Our Strength During the Drought, Barcaldine' research project responded to the increasing number of significant challenges faced by regional communities, as evidenced by the ongoing crippling drought in Central Western Queensland. The use of expressive processes to respond to a crisis is one way to increase resilience. The question "To what extent does participation in an image producing project foster resilience?" became my key point of departure to explore how photographic images might promote resilience and capacity building for communities faced with environmental crises. My research investigated whether encouraging people to express their experiences through photography could increase resilience during the ongoing drought crisis in the communities of the Barcaldine region in Central Western Queensland. It investigated the connection between images, resilience and wellbeing.

Our Strength During The Drought (2018), Barcaldine Exhibition.
Photographer Research Volunteer

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My research was undertaken to investigate a community's understanding of their strength during an ongoing drought through the collaborative reification of photographic images. Reification in this context means to express something that is immaterial (that is, resilience and wellbeing) through something material, such as an image. The key area of investigation for this research was resilience and what I envisaged as the two main characteristics that contribute to resilience: wellbeing and community capacity building. My intent in conducting my research was to use the creative mechanism of photography to make a significant contribution to the steadily growing body of research on community resilience in crisis. In addition, I believe that my research is pertinent to ongoing debates around climate change and the increasing frequency and severity of events such as droughts, floods and cyclones and now the COVID-19 Pandemic. While this was not a politically motivated project, it did emphasise the need for long-term thinking, by governments at all levels, about strategies to help communities that will be increasingly affected by environmental and other crises events.

While undertaking the above research project, I was approached by local governments who were interested in how the project's processes might be transferred to other communities facing crises events. A six-step process can be used by communities during a crisis to develop expressive or image-making practices by locals that can enhance and manifest resilience. I have named this the Resilience Through Images Model (RTI), which can be used to structure other expressive projects in communities, the model focuses on providing crisis-impacted communities with a set of strategies to help build resilience based on relationships and collaboration through reification and artefacts (images or expressive material). This research project confirmed that image making can provide a powerful tool for the advocacy and agency of community members by sharing and amplifying social responses to adverse issues. As occurred on my project, communities using this model could regularly reflect on a practice as it is being undertaken (e.g., through reflective journals, Facebook, vlogs or blogs). In this way, archiving also becomes an important outcome, and local governments (who may drive the project) can promote further engagement on their websites and other digital portals.

While the model may be implemented at any time to enhance community resilience, wellbeing and capacity building, I believe it is most beneficial during crisis events. Further to this, I recommend that the model is embedded into and activated simultaneously with community and local government disaster management plans. The model can help in the preparation of mitigation measures to maintain and grow community resilience and wellbeing during and after a crisis event, enhancing community capacity building and connectedness mitigating social isolation.

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Our Strength During the Drought, Barcaldine (2018) Exhibition,
Photographer: Research Volunteer

Benefits of the RTI Model

Increases in Community Connection and Mitigating Social Isolation

There are many benefits of the RTI model in crisis-impacted communities. One of the greatest is an increased sense of community connection. By sharing images and stories during a crisis event, individuals can feel more connected to each other, which enhances the opportunity to support others in the community and reduce loneliness/despair. Another benefit for individuals is that they become more "seen" through the project, and this increases their agency as an advocate for their community.

Increases in Emotional Investment and Empowered Advocacy

The model increases emotional investment from a wider group of community members. The model should not be "hijacked" by any one interest group, but, rather, "owned" by people "at the coalface" of the issue, who then regularly share their images/insights in both live and digital platforms. Live expressions include talks and developmental planning groups who can gather, present and discuss project data. As suggested earlier, all these instances can be leveraged to increase agency and advocacy of communities to government.

Story making of the Crises

Another benefit of the model is that it can provide a chronological and emergent history of a crisis as it unfolds, particularly if that crisis is spread over a lengthy period (e.g., a long drought or a pandemic crisis that may require long-term recovery). The chronological story of

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a community's journey can be expressed in real time during and after a crisis through images and narratives made at the site of the crisis. Following the crisis event, the data can be collated with images and stories identified for an exhibition, inviting community to attend, sharing their experiences and their resilience. This collective sharing nurtures and builds community resilience, wellbeing and capacity and is a final celebration of the community's collective journey onto the other side of the crisis.

Data for Disaster Management

The key benefit of the model to government is access to unfolding conditions on the ground during and after times of crisis. If the model is embedded into disaster management plans, it could be used to help adjust and improve those plans as time goes by. Real-time information from individuals directly impacted by the crisis would ensure that crisis responses and support can be tailored to the needs of the community and provide the opportunity to identify and respond to emergency situations as they unfold. The analysis of data (images and narrative) from a dedicated Facebook page may provide all levels of government with information to help efficiently allocate future crisis funding and improve disaster management planning. This evidence might also provide all levels of government with greater confidence that crisis relief funding is delivered more effectively to initiatives that will enhance community resilience, wellbeing and capacity. The model also provides governments with regional data in images and narrative and the opportunity to include community representatives in a crisis debrief using the data generated by the model.

Conclusion

This model can be implemented by all levels of government both in Australia and internationally. It can be implemented in crisis events to support communities during and after the crisis. It is designed to help build resilience, wellbeing and community capacity by developing social cohesion through relationships and collaboration based on reification and producing artefacts (images)

Isolation

The feelings of isolation experienced as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic required a new perspective in relation to the delivery of community projects. Community arts projects can provide the important benefit of connecting socially isolated participants to the mainstream thus connecting individuals to the wider community.

The 'Our Strength During COVID-19, Burton' (South Australia) offered a creative method for individuals to participate in a community project and feel connected and not alone during COVID-19 lockdowns thus building individual and community resilience, wellbeing and capacity during a time of crisis. The Burton project duplicated the positive outcomes of the 'Our Strength During the Drought, Barcaldine' (Queensland) research project by implementing the Resilience Through Images (RTI) model which was developed from research in the drought impacted communities of Central Western Queensland. The RTI model offers a unique method of connecting individuals through images uploaded onto social media platforms.

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'Our Strength During COVID-19, Burton' (2020), Project purpose, design and aims

The 'Our Strength During COVID-19' project sought to enable a positive and productive medium with which the community could stay connected during the pandemic whilst the Community Centre remained closed. The Burton project was coordinated from a not-for-profit Community Centre with employees working from home. The most beneficial outcome of this project was social connectedness which reduced the feelings of isolation ensuring continued social interaction during long lockdowns.

The project-maintained community connections during COVID lockdowns with the participation of the community in storytelling through images, a community remotely supporting one another sharing images on social media. Participants used their phone cameras and uploaded their images onto the Burton community centre Facebook page. The project has enabled the community centre staff to stay connected to the community they service demonstrating a strength far beyond what they had previously realised.

Bear, *Our Strength During COVID-19, Burton* (2020)
Photographer: Jo Scott

Community Resilience

The Burton community has continued to stay connected to the community centre continuing to use the online communication option, sharing their COVID journey through images posted on a social media platform has encouraged community to embrace an alternative communication method during the closures and this has improved their ability to be connected to a new expanded network. The centre offers additional computer training sessions because of the additional interest in technology from the community and these are well attended.

The research outcomes evidenced in the 'Our Strength During the Drought, Barcaldine' project was mirrored in the 'Our Strength During COVID, Burton' project, building resilience, wellbeing and capacity in both communities. Whilst the projects were in different states, Queensland and South Australia responding to two different crisis events Drought and COVID-19 both have been able to evidence that the RTI model connects communities and

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builds their resilience in times of crisis and social isolation. The RTI model requires no specialised training, expertise or equipment and is cost-effective, it can be implemented almost immediately with minimal preparation and has proven results in building community resilience, wellbeing and capacity across two communities in two states addressing two crisis events, a drought and COVID-19

Smith, A.S. (2018), Resilience and wellbeing through photography: How might images influence community capacity building. file:///C:/Users/User/Downloads/Anne-Smith-PhD%20(1).pdf