

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to explore the psychological impact for people who had to make impromptu decisions in a disaster, such as whether to evacuate their home or not. While there is a vast amount of literature available on the psychological impacts of people in disasters in general, little research has been undertaken to explore how the decisions people had to make in the lead-up to, and during, a disaster have impacted them. Drivers for the study stem from a gap in knowledge about the potential negative psychological impacts on individuals who made decisions and took actions based on those decisions after they had lived experience of a disaster, given: the worsening and changing risk picture of increased global warming, the intensified frequency and severity of disasters, and the multiple concerning negative impacts after a disaster, in terms of deaths, injuries, property damage, and the longer-term psychological impacts and economic losses on the individual.

The study took a qualitative approach using a hermeneutic phenomenological methodology informed by Max van Manen's life world existentialism. A total of 15 adults aged over 18 years from across Australia, who had experienced 4 types of disasters, fire, tornado, flood, and cyclone, took part in semi-structured in-depth interviews. The interviews explored the participants' experiences of the disaster and specifically focused on the decisions they made and the actions they took in the lead-up to, and during, the disaster and the resulting psychological impacts.

The collected data was analysed through a combination of van Manen's thematic and existential approaches. Four themes were identified: *Making sense of my world; making sense of my decisions; my sense of regret, guilt, and anger; and my new sense of self*. Four distinct moments of time were also found which delineate the period of the disaster that the participants comments refer to and they are referred to throughout this study as: *the prelude* (the lead-up to the disaster); *the crisis* (during the disaster); *the aftermath* (the few days, weeks, and months after the disaster); and *the long haul* (years after the disaster). The exploration of the participants' shared lived experiences enabled a number of new phenomena to be revealed, including:

- participants found their experience started well before the actual impact of the disaster struck

- the participants' experiences in the disaster were long-lasting and characterised by chaos and confusion
- the chaos and confusion associated with the urgency of the required decision-making was often fraught with uncertainty and feelings of helplessness
- there was a lasting loss of a sense of ontological security
- the *aftermath* was characterised by a sense of surprise about the decisions and what had happened, and there was a drive to make sense of these decisions, even more so after the disaster had passed
- there was also a drive to look back and review what had happened, together with a sense of regret, guilt, and anger that were companions throughout the experience

This study reveals that the mental and emotional toll of making quick, life-altering decisions during a disaster is significant and has long-lasting psychological effects. Understanding these effects contributes to a more comprehensive view of how individuals respond to crises beyond the aftermath of the disaster itself. The knowledge gained from this study can inform preparedness efforts, training, policies, response protocols, and post-disaster interventions, ultimately helping to mitigate the negative psychological effects of disasters on affected populations.