

Book reviews

Ride, Anouk & Bretherton, Diane (eds.). *Community resilience in Natural disasters*. New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2011 (198 pages) ISDN: 9780230114289

Published in 2011, Anouk Ride and Diane Bretherton's (eds.) book, *Community resilience in Natural disasters*, forms a valuable source for academics, (aid) practitioners, policy-makers and others engaged in disaster resilience. The book aims to better understand the experiences of local communities in order to enable outsiders to find ways to respect and build on local strengths in assisting communities. It shows that, although the exact implementation of community resilience is context specific, it can be found and should be acknowledged everywhere. The book is especially valid, as authors such as Levine et al. (2012) emphasise: *'the concept of resilience is at the centre of current debates in development, climate change adaptation and humanitarian aid. However, it is not clear what resilience is, or how it can or should be promoted during and after crises.'*¹ This book provides global insights, from the point of view that is often overlooked: communities dealing with disasters.

The book consists of seven key chapters, in which the first and the last chapter are a reflection of the subject matter. In the introduction, the editors set out the conceptual framework and clarify their understanding of concepts such as community, natural disasters and community resilience. The study employed two key data collection methods: literature reviews and interviews conducted in the field. From chapter 2 to chapter 6, five case studies are discussed in more detail. This includes insights from: the earthquake and tsunami in Indonesia

in 2004 (chapter 2), the earthquake in Pakistan in 2005 (chapter 3), the earthquake and tsunami in Solomon Islands in 2007 (chapter 4), the drought around 2009 in Kenya (chapter 5) and the cyclone in Myanmar in 2008 (chapter 6). The case study chapters all follow a similar structure. First insightful contextual information is provided, second the methodology is briefly explained and third descriptions of community responses to the disasters are presented. Each case study chapter is concluded with recommendations for interventions. At the end, chapter 7, the editors look across the case study findings through cross case study analysis. The authors conclude that across the globe, communities display resilience through agency, communication, cooperation, governance, identity and solidarity.

The book is designed to sensitise outsiders to the perceptions of local communities facing disasters and gives insights into related responses. The narrative approach allows the reader to experience what it means to be in the eye of the storm, at the height of the water and in the dust of drought. The rich descriptions illustrate how disasters can be a curse, and a blessing, and how they can engender both the best and worst of all actors involved. It illustrates how community members are capable and creative, and enable resilience through valuable contributions. They, for example, identify the missing, perform search and rescue activities, reunite families, provide spiritual and emotional support, volunteer in communal kitchens and childcare facilities and help to rebuild houses, etc. The solidarity and togetherness within communities, which arises after disasters, is key

to giving people strength, hope and '(.) to give the spirit back to the people (...)'(p. 31).

Alternatively, it highlights how, usually after a longer period of time, community responses can also be less positive.² For example, as a survivor of the earthquake in Pakistan explained (p. 179): *'we could see the competition for goods which were insufficient to get to everyone... so in the hysterics of the moment, you probably, you know, grabbed for whatever you could get, but when you came back and you thought and you re-analysed your position and people around you, you know your family and friends and all that, so then you shared once again'*. Negative community responses are often due to inappropriate interventions of external agencies. Frequently, this is caused by a lack of cultural sensitivity and understanding of local communities (including language skills) and can *'tear people apart'* (p.191). It can result in frustration, competition, hostilities or resentment, conflict and usually hinders cooperation, solidarity and community resilience. The authors also highlight the importance of understanding how communities make sense of the disasters and remember them. They argue that instead of only focussing on the negative role of traumatic memories and the need to forget, memories also have a positive role to play in terms of learning, adaptation, sharing, connecting and healing. Finally, the research stems from a commitment to the values of peace and the nonviolent resolution of conflict. Consequently, the authors have applied a conflict-lens throughout their research, for which they are applauded. This is often an underexposed domain when the predominant focus lies on natural events.

Despite the numerous strong points of the book, I am critical about a few issues. First, a key aim of the book is to provide insights to external agencies, and the recommendations for interventions at the end of each chapter are very helpful. Additionally, throughout the book various critical remarks are made of both the positive

and negative impacts of external agencies interventions after disasters. However, the picture remains one sided in the sense that no voice is given to governments, armed forces, international agencies nor the media. In my opinion, to be able to find effective ways that outsiders can build on local strengths, both sides of the story should be heard, understood and portrayed. This could, for example, have brought forward the fact that international agencies often work according to humanitarian principles, such as impartiality, neutrality and independence. These principles steer their actions and can explain some of their behaviour. Second, the focus of the book is predominantly on immediate and short term response and recovery, so one can question how it differs from longer term reactions. Especially given that interviews were often held a significant period after the disasters occurred, these insights would have been valuable. Third is a methodological issue since, in some case studies, it remains unclear how and why the key respondents were chosen and who they were. When drawing on a relatively small sample per case study (around 11 persons) clarity on these issues is of importance in terms of the representativeness of the findings.

To conclude, the value of this book lies in showing the qualities people have to survive extreme conditions and illuminating factors that can influence community resilience, both positively and negatively. The book is still very timely given the ongoing need for evidenced based insights. Especially insights of ways to enhance chances of communal survival, which are based on the strengths and integrity of local communities.

¹ Levine, S., A. Pain, S. Bailey, and L. Fan. (2012) *The relevance of "resilience"?* Policy Brief, HPG Policy Brief. London: Overseas Development Institute.

² External agencies refers to governments, armed forces, international agencies and the media.

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**Leveton, Eva (ed). *Healing Collective Trauma: Using Sociodrama and Drama Therapy*, Springer Publishing Company, New York. 2010
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The edited collection of *Healing Collective Trauma* consists of two parts: Trauma in America (six chapters) and International Applications (four chapters). The editor writes in her acknowledgement that many cooks have stirred the pot. This is evident from the different angles taken by the chapter authors, although the writing is strongly Moreno flavoured (widely seen as the father of sociodrama and psychodrama in the 1950s). A greater inclusion of cooks from the South, where oral histories and drama form an intrinsic part of the culture, would have strengthened the brew, but the edition as it stands could certainly whet your appetite. A good theoretical overview is provided, although it is slightly dated and does not take the current theoretical work around performativity on board.

The one overall message from the book, throughout its various chapters, is that working drama methods around problem stories raises energy from both sides of the therapist/facilitators, as well as the participants. Because it is done in groups and often with audiences, it breaks through isolation, which is a particular problem for people who are traumatised or marginalised. Many of the chapters include not only case studies, but actual practical exercises that could be used in the work. At the

beginning of each chapter there is an authors' profile, followed by an introduction, making it very interesting to see how the work of the authors has developed over time, and speaks of rich experience.

Chapter 1 by Antonina Garcia provides a helpful theoretical overview and describes the most commonly used forms of sociodrama and drama therapy, as it is applied by many of the chapter authors. The main concepts explained here include: sociodrama and psychodrama according to Moreno; sociometry; spontaneity/creative theory, with role theory also included. The chapter does not elaborate on the more post modern performance approach, which is illustrated in chapter 2 over Narradrama, with concepts like deconstruction and externalisation. Narradrama is based on Narrative Therapy, and applies the same strategies used for individual healing within a group context. There are other chapters that make use of post modern techniques where it is not the absolute truth that is focussed on, but rather the focus is on reality as it is co-constructed by the local people involved.

Chapter 3 by David Johnson talks about working with combat veterans, and cautions strongly against fooling ourselves about using real trauma stories within drama as a method of healing. In this case, pretending that we have intervened could be damaging, as the real issue remains unaddressed. His position could be seen as pessimistic or negative, but I would rather call it provocative; playing the devil's advocate highlights the factors that must be taken into consideration when working with drama or theatre productions dealing with trauma stories. As with any other approach, the limitations and risk involved must be carefully weighed up. It is not a question of anything goes, despite the fact that creativity plays a central role in the use of drama.

Chapter 4 by Mario Casso specifically illustrates the effects of compassion fatigue

when working with HIV over a long period of time, but his arguments are also valid when dealing with trauma work in other areas. It highlights the importance of experiential embodied work that goes deeper than merely exploring a story. Through the bodily enactment, an opportunity is created to build self-esteem, while breaking social isolation and promoting self-advocacy. He refers to a Zulu word, '*Ukubuyiselwa*', meaning to get back what belongs to you, including your dignity. He also pays attention to working with secondary victimisation, which becomes evident through the escalation of domestic violence, stigma, isolation and discrimination.

Using drama techniques is a powerful method to raise consciousness around issues of marginalisation and working with marginalised groups is referred to several times in the book. This is illustrated particularly well by Leticia Nieto (chapter 5), who works with Anti-Oppression Models to raise consciousness, as well as to strengthen agency by rendering voice. The raised consciousness is then very systematically applied within a framework that makes use of specific sets of skills. These skills are built according to development theory. The use of working with witnesses, both real (by making use of the audience), or evoked (by asking the participants to imagine the presence of the ancestors), plays an important role in enabling a process of healing by making use of the collective. The sharing of experience creates an opportunity to re-author the stories and enhance a sense of agency and restorative justice with the participants.

Eve Leveton and Armand Volkas, who wrote chapter 6, provide a rich example of how their own personal history not only influenced their work, but became their life work. In this case their experience not only informs their practice but the work itself offers healing '*... it allowed emotional expression, refuge, and escape*' (p.128). The added value of the lived and applied experiences of the

authors becomes clear in the case studies provided. It is the rich description of the context that renders the work credible. In this chapter, the model *Healing the Wounds of History* is used to address collective trauma and intercultural conflicts. The model takes the challenging view that all humans are capable of becoming perpetrators and works towards integration of everyone as part of the healing process. A major goal of the work here is to hold the complexity of two disparate emotional worlds, like rage and empathy, at the same time in order to inhabit a position of both perpetration and victimisation while dealing with ongoing trauma.

Thomas Ricco talks about working with indigenous performance in chapter 7. He applies this not only from the context he comes from, but illustrates how this approach can be used in contexts foreign to a facilitator who may not even understand the local language. It is potentially a strong contribution, but unfortunately much gets lost in the writing style. The tone seems to imply a way in which things should be done, rather than offering another creative approach that can be taken to render context sensitive strategies. The result of this pedantic style tends to close down creative space in the reader, but he does address an important issue with his reference of incorporating indigenous knowledge systems.

In chapter 8, Herb Propper and Yasmin Saba demonstrate the interplay of what happens when a society that is already traumatised by a natural disaster, in this case a tsunami, exacerbates the levels of stress that cultural oppression brings. The authors draw attention to the benefit of working with strengths and hope, instead of only focussing on problem saturated stories. Examples are given of how problems can be externalised as methodology. Volunteers are asked to play the role of Obstacles: '*Tell me Obstacles, just between the two of us – and I promise I will not tell the group*

anything you say – what is the secret of your power? Another volunteer roleplayer then answers: *‘Our power is actually their lack of self-confidence and low self esteem. When they believe in themselves our power goes away’*. The reflective space is then used to explore the impact or effect of what is said.

Jon Kirby and Gong Shu introduce culture drama in chapter 9 as a way into the *‘darkened and powerful areas of our cultural unconscious’* (p. 212). The cultural perspective focuses on collective differences and it aims at building bridges and integrating cultures and their world views. It is the position of the authors that by creating an understanding and acceptance of each other through different exercises, that it will become clear how different culture groups assign meaning to their worlds, and that this understanding will increase acceptance and tolerance to contribute to a new *‘peace culture’* (p.231). In one of the case examples, a highly volatile situation, based on a real life story, is used. There is a lot of fear among the participants, and the intervention begs a high level expertise from the facilitators. It should serve as a warning to readers to be mindful of using these strategies without professional training in conflict resolution and mediation. The collective healing in this case is an indirect outcome of the work.

Chapter 10, written by Alan Leveton, Eva Leveton and Martin Newman, offers examples of working with the perspectives of different generations during a period of rapid change in China. Detailed historical background is given on the effects that rapid change can have on society, and highlights the necessity of innovative strategies to facilitate transformation. The chapter takes the work to another level by demonstrating how knowledge and skills can be applied within a training programme, making use of experiential learning. Attention is drawn to the importance of institutional backup and the visibility of strong role models to enhance the possibility of success.

The book covers a wide *‘playing’* field, but it is a serious form of play with the purpose of healing. The performance space becomes a site of agency (p.155) catalyst and metaphor, a microcosm of the bigger picture of that community or society. It is in the reflective space after the performance, where ideas may shift and healing takes place.

At times the focus of the work is on the trauma event, or on the secondary effects of trauma, like isolation, marginalisation, or psychosocial problems like the escalation of domestic violence resulting from continuing high levels of stress. Other times, the facilitator needs to identify what is absent in the story, who does not have a voice or what issues are invisible. Overall, the approach requires an ability from the audience to understand the complex layers in which the drama is situated, and highlights the importance of having a skilled facilitator in place.

Some chapters are stronger than others, but overall the book gives us a good idea of the scope of performative methodologies. The mixture of theory, case study as well as detailed exercises makes it an interesting read. Caution, however, should be given against the random use of exercises without a bigger theoretical framework to bring together the different threads. In the worst case scenario, this would lead to further trauma.

Having 20 years of experience in the field myself, I have often grappled with how such specialised knowledge can be transferred into effective training, especially in resource poor countries that have a rich oral tradition that lends itself to working with drama. We need to explore this further. There may be magic in theatre, but there are no magical solutions. Collective healing is a process made possible by many. It happens in small steps while restoring and strengthening relationships. Whether it is working with static sculpture, interactive drama or rituals shaped collectively, it brings forth energy that opens

new possibilities for both the facilitators and participants. The book demonstrates the possibility of small movement contributing to transformational change and healing in large numbers of people. The potential exists for this field to expand enormously, if it gets enough support.

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