

**“WE’VE GOT TROUBLE GETTING  
AROUND BUT WE’RE STILL  
ALRIGHT”**

**PHYSICAL DISABILITY AND  
BUSHFIRE PLANNING**

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# PHYSICAL DISABILITY AND DISASTERS

- Black Saturday: a third of those who died were people experiencing a disability or chronic illness
- People experiencing a disability may not have a plan or be able to prepare for a natural disaster



# WHAT CONDITIONS INFLUENCE PLANNING AND PREPARATION?

- Access to resources
- Communication challenges
- Self and social identities of people experiencing a disability
  - Negative self-identity
  - Role expectations
  - Stigma



# IDENTITY, ROLES AND STIGMA

- People who experience a disability may struggle to develop a coherent narrative of the self, particularly in relation to independence and work
- Social constructions of disability as 'tragic' and 'abnormal' => shapes how people see themselves, and the feelings of inadequacy and inferiority are internalised
- Social roles in rural areas, particularly for men, emphasise physical work and ability, independence and autonomy

# IDENTITY, ROLES & STIGMA AND BUSHFIRE PLANNING AND PREPARATION

- Bushfires and bushfire planning can highlight physical dis/ability
- Not having a plan, or having a plan which it may not be possible to carry out, is understandable as a way to maintain a positive self and social identity and reject negative identities associated with experiencing a disability

# THE DATA AND THE PEOPLE

- 2014 South Australian bushfires in Bangor, Rockleigh and Eden Valley
- Interviews with 27 households - 37 people in total
- 9 respiratory conditions, 18 mobility impaired, 5 chronic or terminal illness, 3 sensory impairments, 2 unspecified
- 6 households included more than one person experiencing a disability, and 4 people experienced multiple disability
- Ages from 18 months to 81 years
- Facing multiple risks:
  - Age (17 people were over 65, and 4 over 75)
  - 25 living on disability or aged pension
  - Most properties in close proximity to bush
  - Most households included pets (small and large)
  - Most could ask neighbours for help, but only 8 had close relationships with neighbours

# CONSTRUCTIONS OF PHYSICAL DISABILITY AND BUSHFIRE RISK

- No risk
- A particular defined risk
- Conflicted risk
- Significant risk

## 'NO RISK'

- *No not really, I've got cancer. I'm going into hospital soon to have my prostate out but apart from that I'm okay.*



# 'A PARTICULAR DEFINED RISK'

*I'm not going to risk my insurance ... to try and defend the place and try and risk my life because I've just had two knee replacements in August last year and I'm not one to be running around and trying to put flames out...I thought, well look I've got the bus; I can push the clutch in...*

# 'CONFLICTED RISK'

- *It sort of cuts out a whole choice because to stay you'd have to... on reflection we could have stayed but maybe not because the house was absolutely full of ash.*

# 'SIGNIFICANT RISK'

*Yeah, we had the discussion previously and we decided that there's just circumstances that were possible that they would take the property. We discussed it in response to what's happening and decided that given our physical condition and the fact that they are out fighting and were very exposed to risk, that we wouldn't, we'd leave.*

# CONSTRUCTIONS OF RISK & IMPLICATIONS FOR PLANNING AND PREPARATION

No risk

A particular defined risk

Conflicted risk

Significant risk

- No plan
- Plan to stay and defend

- Changing plans

- Plan
- Plan including medical needs
- Plan to evacuate

Challenges in preparing property and for leaving

# NARRATIVES OF SELF

- Useless and unwanted

*Somebody's got to take responsibility and get rid of the people that are in the way. And I realize in retrospect that we couldn't do anything*

- Stoicism, fatalism and not being a burden

*If it happens, it happens, what can you do. I mean, I can't wrap myself up in cotton wool.*

- Protecting family and children

*Obviously, one of the main things also is the girls. They're both young. My eldest is diagnosed with asthma, so smoke and asthma don't mix.*

# IMPLICATIONS

- Positive alternative representations of people experiencing a disability and bushfire planning and preparation
  - Alternative images of independence and autonomy
  - Alternative images of helping the community
- Normalising evaluating physical limitations - something everyone does

# Positive Examples:

**There are very few positive examples of disability from within any form of media yet there examples of which the disability can be seen to be used as a way of power and positivity:**

**Professor X:** Charles Xavier is the head of an organisation of the mutants in the X-Men films. Despite him having the disability of him being in a wheel chair is portrayed as both charming, ruthless, a key figure that speaks outwards against injustice and discrimination, as well as being very intelligent. The fact that such a powerful figure in these series of films, not only helps to fight against the stereotypes of people with disabilities as being 'incapable' but also the disability helps to signify the characters intelligence as well as his power.

**John Watson (SHERLOCK):** At the beginning of the first series of Sherlock, the detectives companion, Jon Watson, comes back from his disturbing war troubles from Afghanistan with the war wound of being shot in the leg, making it very hard for him to walk, as well as him having to use a cane to move around. Yet despite the fact that John starts of with a disability, John steadily learns to overcome that disability as he begins to help others as well as solving crimes and seeking justice with his detective friend Sherlock.



# QUESTIONS?

