

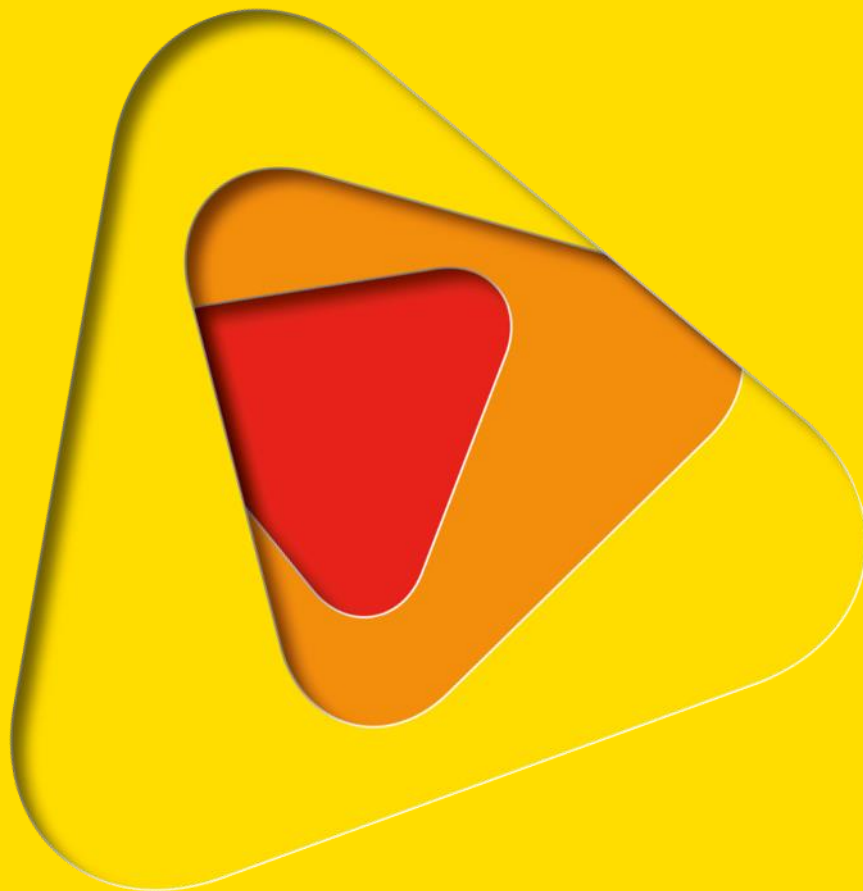


"WE'VE GOT TROUBLE GETTING AROUND BUT WE'RE STILL ALRIGHT": DISABILITY IDENTITIES AND THE IMPLICATIONS FOR BUSHFIRE PLANNING

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ABSTRACT

Physical disability and illness are significant risk factors in natural disasters. In the 2009 Victorian bushfires, of those who died, 24 per cent had chronic health conditions and 5 per cent had acute disabilities (VCOSS 2014). Globally, mortality rates for people with a physical disability are up to four times higher than the able-bodied population (UNISDR, 2013). In the Great East Japan Earthquake the estimated mortality rate for people with disabilities was double that for the abled population (2.06%) and this was even higher in the provinces along the coast and for people with hearing disabilities (Fuji, 2012).

A physical disability can impact on both planning and preparation for natural disasters like bushfires. McLennan, Elliott & Beatson (2010), in a survey of 584 households at risk of bushfire, found that of 74 people who identified living in a household with a disabled member, 39 planned to leave before a bushfire begins to threaten where they live. However, 7 planned to stay and defend, and 28 planned to wait and see. Wait and see is the most dangerous option. Most people who plan to wait and see have in mind that they will evacuate. However, there are very few safe options to leave once a fire comes. The greatest number of fatalities occur when people leave their property at the last minute (Handmer, O'Neill & Killalea, 2010).

Kimpton (2012) found that 45 of the 55 people in the Yarra region of Victoria who identified as disabled or frail did not have a bushfire plan. They were concerned about their ability to maintain their property as bushfire ready, however most saw the cost of relocation on a fixed income as more of a burden than fire risk. Rosenbaum, Goodman & Rhodes (2008), in their qualitative study with 9 households with a physical disability affected by the 2007 fires in the Grampians, Victoria, found that five had a verbal plan to leave early or stay and defend, and four households had no plan.

The lack of, and limited, bushfire planning is similar to that found in international research on natural hazards. This research finds that people with a disability may be unprepared with limited or partial plans (UNISDR, 2013; Pines et al., 2009; Bethel, Foreman & Burke, 2011; Hogaboom et al., 2013). There is also relatively limited preparation at institutional levels (Rooney & White, 2007). For example, Boon, Brown & Pagliano (2014) found that in a survey of 80 Australian schools, that less than one third included disability in their natural hazard planning.

Changing these fatality rates and improving planning and preparation requires engaging, educating and communicating effectively with people with a disability in relation to bushfires and other natural hazards. Previous research has explored the mediums and formats of emergency messages in relation to different disabilities (e.g. disaster communication for the Deaf Community: Calgaro & Dominey-Howes, 2013; disaster communication for blind people: Crandall, Benson & Myers, 2010). This type of research differentiates types of disability and their different impacts, such as hearing or sight impairment, mobility impairment, and cognitive impairment. It then identifies the most effective formats and forums for emergency communication, e.g. TTY for hearing impairment (Stork-Finlay, 2014). Previous research has also looked at the content of emergency messages for people with a disability. For example, in relation to bushfires, whilst the common message prior to the 2009 fires was to 'stay or go', concerns were raised about this as a message for vulnerable groups, particularly people who are disabled. The report recommended that this message should be changed to an emphasis on early relocation (VCOSS 2014).

Although this research has provided valuable insights and changes to emergency management communication, it does not explain why people with a disability may choose not to have a bushfire plan, or to develop a plan to stay and defend or to wait and see, both of which are highly risky. Research with people with a disability outside of emergency management considers the impacts of



disability extend further than access to communication. Disability profoundly disrupts one's sense of self and can lead to a loss of a meaningful identity (Bury, 1982; Charmaz 1983). People who experience a disability may struggle to develop a new coherent narrative of the self, particularly in relation to independence and work (Galvin 2005). Developing a positive, balanced self-identity in response to disability requires "knowing oneself, accepting oneself with one's limitations, not being ashamed of the limitations but simply seeing them as part of the reality one is in, and perhaps as a boundary one is challenged to expand" (Murugami, 2009). However, the greatest challenge to developing a sense of self is the way others view and respond to disability as 'tragic' and 'abnormal' (Galvin 2005). This language shapes how people see themselves, and the feelings of inadequacy and inferiority that can come with the onset of disability are internalised and deeply affect how people engage with the world (Galvin, 2003).

Making a bushfire plan is arguably a time of reflecting on (and potentially exposing) one's personal, social and environmental abilities and limitations. It is a situation that makes physical limitations highly salient, even where the person may have adapted to these successfully in their daily lives. It is also a situation where people may be more exposed to other's views about normality. This paper draws on work in the disability field on self-identity and disability, and proposes that bushfire planning is an activity which potentially exposes people to negative self and community identities as 'not able', 'useless' or 'a burden'. These negative identities may be particularly salient for men in rural settings, where they are valued for their physical control of the environment, their independence and emotional stoicism. These potentially negative identities that are available for people with a disability may explain why they may choose not to identify as disabled, or to identify themselves as at risk. This paper suggests that disability identities, both external to the person and internalised by them, is likely to be part of how they approach bushfire risk.

Using a thematic analysis of interviews with 27 households after the January 2014 South Australian bushfires, three disability identities were observed: denial, ambivalence and balanced. Most people rejected the label of 'disabled', many only later revealing through the interview that they were experiencing illness or impaired functioning. Others were ambivalent, simultaneously identifying the impacts of disability on their ability to plan and prepare their properties, but also developing plans and strategies which relied on full physical functioning. These negating and rejecting disability identities were reflected in the absence of a plan, or an untenable plan to stay and defend or wait and see. Nine households balanced disability and ability in ways that enabled them to make a fire plan that included early evacuation.

For those for whom bushfire decision-making is implicated in preserving a valued identity as able-bodied, independent and productive, providing information about disability and bushfire planning may simply not be sufficient. In fact, where it reinforces the assumption that the only option in identifying is disabled is to be seen as vulnerable and incapable, then it is likely to have the opposite effect. Rather, the research presented here suggests that it is important to promote alternative identities in relation to disability and bushfire planning. These may include: championing new ways of being heroic and capable; basing education and planning on the principle that disability may close down some options but opens up others. These new images may be ones which champion community connection as well as independence or which show different images of heroism, such as being a support person at evacuation points. Further, making disability assessments a normal part of a fire risk evaluation, i.e. something that everyone is doing, not just 'disabled people' is also a potentially important way to decrease the stigma of identifying as disabled.

The language of emergency services, both textual and visual, has an important role to play in creating new, positive and balanced identities that support people's bushfire survival.