

*The Phoenix of Natural Disasters: Community Resilience*, by Kathryn Gow (Editor), Douglas Paton (Editor). Nova Science Publishers (May 2008).

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The title of this book, *The Phoenix of Natural Disasters: Community Resilience* is aptly chosen. “The Phoenix is a mythical bird that never dies; the phoenix flies far ahead to the front, always scanning the landscape and distant space. It represents our capacity for vision, for collecting sensory information about our environment and the events unfolding within it.” (source: The Feng Shui Handbook, feng shui Master Lam Kam Chuen.) There are Chinese, Japanese, Russian, Egyptian, and Native American counterparts of the phoenix. All of these birds are identified with the sun and depicted as rising from the ashes – living again. This is the essence of a community after a natural disaster – they live again.

*The Phoenix of Natural Disasters: Community Resilience* is edited by Kathryn Gow and Douglas Paton who have done an excellent job of creating a relatively seamless transition between chapters with different authors. The content is organized well with the first chapter providing an excellent overview of what is to come and each chapter including an abstract clarifying the focus of the chapter.

This book rejects the victim theory of disaster and embraces the development of resilient or adaptive capacities in the event of a natural disaster. In order for this to occur, the authors purport the need to define *what* resilience is and more importantly, *how* it can be developed not only in individuals but in communities. Further, they suggest that because a disaster affects all levels of society, resilience must be conceptualized and operationalized in a comprehensive, inter-related, systematic way. The aim of the text is to present topics that provide a broad overview of the issues that societies must address in the event of the unthinkable - a major disaster in a community. The contents include extensive research and practical experience of contributors from a variety of relevant disciplines and backgrounds. As a result, the book is of interest to a diverse audience including emergency management organizations, rescue agencies, the armed forces, researchers, academic institutions, medical, psychology, counseling and pastoral centers, and the media.

The book is organized into three parts. Part 1 outlines an overarching set of principles that provide insights into the scope and applicability of the resilience concept as a framework that can facilitate planning and policy making in societies at high risk of experiencing a large-scale hazard event. With the framework in place, Part 2 focuses on those responsible for enacting plans and policies when

disaster strikes. Finally, Part 3 examines the implications for the citizen and communities. In the final chapter, the editors provide conclusions which apply the learning about resilience and coping across service organizations, communities and individuals.

In Part 1 theories and frameworks of resilience are introduced. Chapter 2 outlines a model that integrates individual, community, and societal perspectives. This provides the underpinnings on which to develop societal resilience and identify core issues at each level. In chapter 3 the author proposes a theory about the connection between preparation, intervention, and rehabilitation. Chapter 4 offers a psychological perspective on environmental hazards and disasters and frames how to facilitate psychological and social well-being for the individual and the community. The final chapter in Part 1, Chapter 5, offers a debate on the difficulties in measuring psychological outcomes of natural disasters.

Understanding the implications of performing in a response role provides the context for the content of Part 2 which examines some of the disaster response field workers. Each chapter in Part 2 targets a specific population: paramedics, journalists, Emergency Service Volunteers and the military. These populations are discussed within the content of real disasters (i.e. Banda Ache) and include groups such as The Royal Australian Navy who risk their lives to rescue people in violent storms, floods, and tsunamis. Chapter 8, which discusses the volunteer role, is comprehensive, discussing the value of these citizens as a disaster requires resources that exceed those of any normal community function. The authors explore volunteer burnout and what keeps volunteers going – important factors in supporting volunteer satisfaction, training content, and retention. The fact that normal community functions may be unavailable for awhile after a disaster suggests that societal resilience will be a function of the level of self-reliance and determination of community members and their leaders. This chapter is especially helpful for those responsible for training, organizing, and supporting volunteers.

Part 3, Community Responses, reports on research into the human aftermath of natural disasters from a community perspective of people who are immediately affected and through the identification of the core characteristics that influence a community's ability to face the challenges of a disaster. In Chapter 10, cultural issues are addressed through insight into the new concept of Volunteerism in Japan. It would have been easy to ignore the importance of culture in the understanding of resilience, but the editors thoughtfully made sure it was addressed, not only in this chapter but in the contributions in this section. The important aspect of defining and understanding resilience through a cultural lens cannot be minimized. Chapter 11 provides insights into the demographic characteristics of resilience by telling stories of how both indigenous and non-indigenous women in the north of Queensland in Australia remain resilient in the face of their experience of reoccurring annual seasonal flooding rains that cut

them off from provisions and other people. Chapter 12 provides various systemic models of resilience that have been developed in Israel since the 1980s. These models may provide blueprints for some readers responsible for future community disaster response. Chapter 13 discusses how research on preparation can facilitate resilience and recovery in a continually reoccurring natural hazard such as bushfires and drought. In memory of the victims of the 2004 Southeast Asian tsunami, the authors of Chapter 14 pay tribute to the survivors of this disaster. They discuss how impacted Thai residents were able to rise from the devastation and adapt to and cope with and experience a sense of psychological and social growth from their experience. These authors also discussed the unique challenges of researching resilience in cultural and cross-cultural contexts.

The contents of this book identify core issues in resilience that provide substance for planners and policy makers to utilize in their own communities. The final Chapter 15 summarizes and presents a compilation of the competencies and capabilities that individuals, organizations and communities need in order to face natural disasters. One of the strengths of this book is that these capabilities are empirically based and grounded in real world experiences. The descriptions of disaster situations provided by the various authors provide the reader with concrete examples and a vision of how to implement these core resilience competencies in their own communities.

Unlike some other books with chapters authored by different and diverse individuals, in *The Phoenix of Natural Disaster: Community Resilience* the editors provided a clear template such that there is a consistent thread throughout the book and integration of the ideas presented. It is easy on the reader. The reader could choose to review the first chapter, select topic chapters relevant to his/her interest, conclude with the final chapter summary and declare the book helpful and valuable to their particular needs. This reviewer does not recommend this approach, as each chapter contribution is valuable and is inter-related to the concept of resilient individuals and communities. The book serves as a basic primer on community resilience.

The phoenix imagery suggests that one of the reasons the phoenix rises from the ashes and lives again is that it has the capacity for vision. Communities have the capacity, through research and experience, to look ahead, anticipate and prepare for what may come in the future. *The Phoenix of Natural Disasters: Community Resilience* provides us with some of that vision and suggests the importance of future research in this area. This book is recommended for anyone interested in the broad concept of community resilience.