

Adaptive approaches to disaster response and recovery viewed through a psychosocial lens: Sydney Siege Case Study

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Abstract

On 15–16 December 2014, a gunman held hostage 18 people at the Lindt café located at Martin Place in Sydney. The siege ended with three people (including the gunman) dead and three other hostages and a police officer injured.

This paper reviews the literature of collective trauma and grief, and considers the events of the siege and the city's collective response within this psychosocial lens. The paper also presents the actions undertaken by emergency management sector to adapt existing arrangements to a unique event. The role of boundary spanners is discussed in the context of enabling agencies to rapidly adapt plans and arrangements to suit the event, under extensive media and public scrutiny.

The city's reaction to the event is discussed in light of theoretical and international experiences, with the key observation being that this reaction aligns with previous experiences of mass public mourning.

The importance of uniformed volunteers in Australia's emergency management sector is highlighted in their role as representatives of the community who were simultaneously able to be tasked and coordinated within the emergency management framework.

Finally, recommendations are made regarding the development of guidelines for managing mass public mourning.

Keywords: psychosocial, public grief, collaboration, Sydney siege, memorials, volunteers, adaptation

Introduction

On 15–16 December 2014, a lone gunman held hostage ten customers and eight employees of the Lindt chocolate café located at Martin Place in Sydney. After a 16-hour standoff, the siege ended with three people (including the gunmen) dead and three other hostages and a police officer injured.

The NSW State Emergency Recovery Controller (SERCON) was activated along with the NSW Recovery Plan and Arrangements. The NSW Recovery Plan, although based on an all hazards approach, is predominantly applied to recovery operations for natural disasters. The Ministry for Police and Emergency Services (MPES), as the lead recovery agency, was cognisant that the Martin Place Siege would test their adaptability. The arrangements demonstrated their flexibility and were effectively applied in this situation.

This event was a shock to the psyche of the Sydney CBD, New South Wales and Australian community. For some it hit upon unspoken fears, for others it forced them to reflect on their own traumatic experiences. Coming to terms with any emergency or disaster can be challenging for those both directly and indirectly impacted. Human initiated events, such as this, often cause higher rates of negative outcomes for those impacted, directly and indirectly, because they shatter fundamental beliefs about vulnerability and human nature (Norris et.al 2002). This may be reflected in the mass public mourning and the exponential growth of the floral tributes in Martin Place.

The community response to this event was significant with people leaving thousands of tributes (8 tonnes in total); gifts, cards, shrines and an approximated 100,000 bouquets of flowers. Managing recovery from this event required collaboration by a number of agencies, and communication amongst agencies to the families of the victims as well as survivors and to the broader community. It required the adaptation of existing recovery structures and highlighted the need for a guide to managing spontaneous public memorials.

Agencies who do not traditionally work with one another were brought together to quickly plan and implement strategies. This was against a backdrop of intense media interest and public scrutiny of political leaders from the Commonwealth, NSW State and local government. The interests and investments of large and small business, the psychosocial wellbeing of CBD-based workers and the ongoing criminal investigation all had to be managed.

Although the barriers have been taken down and flower memorial removed the recovery process has not ended. There are still many hurdles to overcome such as the development of a public memorial and the first anniversary.

The management of these milestones in a respectful way will impact on how this event is viewed by the public in coming years. In this sense the tributes were framed early on as an expression of mourning, protest and, most importantly, as a conversation between the public and the hostages and their families, the gunman and government. The removal of tributes became a form of reply to that conversation and needed to respect the public sentiment and the wishes of hostages and victims' families both in terms of timing within that conversation and how it was conducted.

This paper firstly reviews the literature on collective trauma and public expression of grief, placing the Sydney siege in the context of the literature and recent international experiences in spontaneous expressions of grief. It then explores how existing recovery arrangements and agency competencies were adapted to new circumstances and successfully applied to manage challenging and complex issues. Lessons are drawn from the experiences and recommendations made to ensure the learnings from this experience are not lost.

Collective trauma and spontaneous expression of grief

When crisis events, such as natural disasters or terror incidents, occur at the community level there is a collective experience of distress, shock and grief (Gortner & Pennebaker, 2003). These events shatter people's fundamental sense of safety, order and security leaving people feeling threatened and vulnerable (Eyre, 2007). Following the Sydney siege, a visitor to the flower tribute told the media:

"I'm feeling bloody scared. It's awful, that someone would perpetrate that, just over there"
(Michael Marzano quoted in Sydney siege: Amazing scenes as Sydneysiders empty florists to fill Martin Place with flowers, The Daily Telegraph online, 17 December 2014).

Disruption to worldview, the assumptions people have about lives and communities that make up their reality, occur most significantly following situations that are "unexpected, traumatic and horrific"(Sullender, 2010). People's psychological and faith-based assumptions about their lives can be shattered and many people experience a crisis of meaning or purpose (Sullender, 2010).

The widespread media coverage of disaster events and growth of social media, which gives viewers access to 'real' people affected, widens the reach of these distressing events (Richardson, 2010). In doing so the media allows vicarious participation in these events which can result in trauma (Sullender, 2010). Significant media attention, such as the rolling 24 hour coverage on all major commercial channels during the Sydney Siege, reinforces a sense of national tragedy. By extension, high profile media coverage reinforces socially appropriate forms of communal expression of grief (Eyre, 1999).

Rituals, such as funerals, provide a way for social groups and communities to regain social balance and morale after a crisis. Post death rituals provide a safe space for the expression of individual and communal grief and can be an important therapeutic step in the grieving process (Rosenblatt, 1997). Spontaneous expression of loss, sorrow, grief and disbelief in the form of informal, temporary memorials, such as the one in Martin Place, often begin within hours of the public having knowledge of the disaster (Eyre, 1999). People feel the need to share their sorrow and acknowledge loss, even if they are not directly impacted by the event. Another prominent example of this was the spontaneous floral tributes that occurred after the sudden death of Princess Diana in 1997. This expression can be a healthy opportunity for expressing shock, anger, disbelief, grief, and other emotions associated with disaster. A lack of, or barriers to, collective expression can hinder recovery and successful grieving following death. Post disaster rituals such as spontaneous expressions of grief, commemorative and memorial activities can assist in re-establish feelings of control, social solidarity and belonging after collective crisis (Eyre, 1999).

The spontaneous expression of grief after disasters is predictable post disaster behaviour (Eyre, 1999). As such, large scale spontaneous tributes and shrines are not uncommon after crisis events like the Sydney siege. In fact, they are seen as the rule rather than the exception following events that cause sudden and tragic death (Eyre, 2007). Following the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995 approximately 50,000 mementos were left along the 'Memory Fence' surrounding the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building (Doss, 2002), over 50 million bouquets of flowers were laid outside Buckingham Palace and Princess Diana's London residence after her death in 1997 (Brennen, 2008), more than 200,000 items were collected after the 1999 Columbine High School massacre (Graham, 2013) and more recently after the 2012 Sandy Hook massacre over 60,000 teddy bears were left at, or mailed to, the town of Newton (Pruden, 2014). The approximately 100,000 bouquets of flowers left at Martin Place following the siege were not unusual.

In the days after the siege thousands of people travelled to Martin Place to pay their respects. Spontaneous expression of grief is not always connected directly to the physical site as can be seen in the location of memorials in response to the death of Princess Diana. After the Columbine High School massacre approximately 125,000 people visited the spontaneous memorial. For many, the site of death and tragedy becomes symbolic and holy (Jorgensen-Earp & Lanzilotti, 1998). Jorgensen-Earp and Lanzilotti (1998) liken the site of public tragedy to the deathbed where traditionally people could share the last moments of a loved one's life. When death is sudden and tragic, being near, or at, the site of death can be "transformative" for survivors (Jorgensen-Earp & Lanzilotti, 1998, p160). This ritual behaviour, the giving of tributes, visiting the site and the development of memorials, serve important psychological and social functions (Eyre, 1999) and contributes to the "final story of the tragedy" (Jorgensen-Earp & Lanzilotti, 1998, p160).

Establishing the event as part of the community's narrative or psyche is an important part of the healing process (Richardson, 2010). Two weeks after the 2013 Boston Marathon bombing the city had begun to think about how to preserve and archive the items from the spontaneous memorial at Copley Square (Graham, 2013). This becomes the key issue in managing spontaneous memorials, how to handle and what to do with, the mass of objects and organic matter. These items carry strong emotions. As a curator for the New England Museum Association said after the Boston Marathon bombing in 2013:

"That sneaker was a sneaker a minute ago, but when a person places that sneaker on that pole, it's infused with meaning and emotion."(Graham, 2013).

Each item or bouquet of flowers represents an individual, or group of individuals, who experienced emotion strong enough to motivate them to share their response publicly. The psychosocial implications of removing these cared for and emotion laden items are significant. Poor or disrespectful handling of the tributes can cause further distress to survivors, their families and the broader community. This was a leading consideration in the management of the tributes in Martin Place.

The general public is usually understanding of the need to remove spontaneous memorials as they can engulf public meeting spaces, thoroughfares and high traffic areas. The way in which items are removed can be controversial and needs to be well thought through and planned.

Collaboration and Adaptation

The NSW Recovery Plan and Arrangements are written from an all hazards perspective, and therefore are intended to apply to person-made disasters and emergencies. However, these arrangements have previously only been used to address natural disasters. The Martin Place siege required a coordinated multi-agency approach to recovery in an unprecedented context. Whilst the governance framework existed, many of the agencies who were ultimately involved in coordinating recovery had never engaged with the arrangements before.

The SERCON directed the formation of the Government Coordination Committee, with representatives from a variety of government agencies and the City of Sydney (Council). Through key contacts on the Committee, a broader range of agencies and NGOs were engaged to support recovery activities, such as providing volunteer resources and Chaplains. The Coordination Committee provided a focal point for engaging stakeholders for critical decision making. Its purpose was to:

- Identify needs of the victims and families, the community and small business
- Provide a forum for information exchange between all agencies
- Coordinate activities between agencies to address emerging needs
- Ensure public communications were consistent and coordinated.

In this context, the officers in the statutory roles of the SERCON and Deputy SERCON became boundary spanners (Kapucu, 2006). They were able to use their legislated roles to communicate authority and personal connections with peers to rapidly engage broader support. Their first activities were to identify which agencies needed to participate in recovery coordination and reach out to their executive. Through this process arrangements that had previously functioned following natural disasters were adapted to new circumstances. However, the fundamental governance and legislative structure remained constant.

For NGOs used to applying their skills and knowledge to respond to natural disasters this event challenged the applicability of their skills to a diversity of scenarios. A number of arrangements usually reserved for natural disasters were activated. While the siege was still active, Red Cross, Marine Rescue and State Emergency Services volunteers responded to enquiries from the general public at the Public Information and Inquiry Centre (PIIC) located

in the Police Local Area Command building in Surry Hills. Volunteers in this Centre answered over 1700 phone calls in less than 24 hours.

In the days after the siege Red Cross volunteers were in Martin Place using their psychological first aid training to support members of the public visiting the spontaneous memorial and leaving their own tributes. Red Cross volunteers usually employ these skills in evacuation and recovery centres, through outreach into impacted communities and at community events in response to natural disasters, such as the Victorian or Blue Mountains bushfires. In addition to Red Cross volunteers the Disaster Recovery Chaplains services also had volunteers in Martin Place. In each of the above NGOs adapted their existing skills to employ them in unchartered territory.

Removal of floral tribute and management of cards and messages

Laying flowers and tributes at Martin Place served an essential part of the grieving process. Similarly, viewing the flowers allowed visitors to consider the event and the community's response. Whilst this process continued, funerals were held for the two hostages killed during the siege. The family of one hostage indicated they wanted to lay the funeral flowers at Martin Place, in recognition of and participation in the public grieving.

At the same time the tributes also drew criticism and concern. The presence of extensive memorials meant that Martin Place was evolving into a destination rather than a shrine. This had implications for issues such as crowd control as well as positive and negative impacts for businesses and the community.

Small businesses in the Martin Place area, many of which are snack bars and cafes, expressed frustration that the tributes and queues of people waiting to write in the condolence books were interfering with foot traffic to their doors. The staff of nearby businesses were also adversely affected by the sadness and emotions associated with the tributes. Small business reported that many of their staff needed to take leave as a result of what had happened and this was challenging for their operations.

Those businesses still closed during the immediate mourning period were also concerned that, if further protracted, the tributes shrine and visitation would interfere with "getting back to normal". These concerns were raised informally as business owners were

concerned that they would be perceived as lacking in empathy by returning to usual operations too soon.

Navigating these issues, for which there were no ready solutions, was a constant challenge for agencies involved. Other questions at the time for which there were no discrete answers included; how long will the public grieving continue?; how long should it continue?; and how long before the flowers and edible tributes completely decay?

These questions were balanced against other concerns, such as the approaching Christmas holidays, the Boxing Day sales, and then New Year's Eve celebrations when tens of thousands of people would be coming to the Sydney CBD. Access to public space, safety, and whether the ongoing visual reminder of the Siege would be beneficial to the grieving process were concerns. Ultimately, the unavoidable issue that arose was the weather forecasts for summer storms.

Feedback from the hostages and their families made it clear that preserving the messages and cards was more important than the duration of the display in Martin Place. They felt, along with general public sentiment, that these cards were a direct conversation between the public and themselves. With that guidance from key stakeholders, and considering the upcoming major public events in the CBD, the Government Coordination Committee commenced planning for the appropriate removal of the flowers and tributes.

The City of Sydney was a key stakeholder in planning the activity, as the agency with responsibility for managing public space in the CBD. Planning for the removal of the flowers and tributes was simultaneously an exercise in logistics and coordination and public event management. The Committee understood that the process was akin to a public ceremony and would receive extensive media attention. It was far removed from the standard process to cleaning public spaces and was conducted under the watchful eye of the public and media.

Research and communication with authorities in London and Boston informed the planning process. This awareness of context, combined with the guiding principles, shaped how the agencies involved managed the event. The Commissioners for the Rural Fire Service and State Emergency Service, and Executive Director of Red Cross in NSW, were contacted by the NSW Government and requested to provide volunteers to remove the flowers and tributes.

Volunteers have a unique and significant role in emergency management in Australia. They are members of the community who give their time to support and protect their community. The high esteem in which they are held by the community also translates to trust and appreciation of their efforts. This places them in a unique position of being a workforce that can be effectively coordinated, tasked and managed by government authorities, yet belonging to and being part of the larger community. They are not disembodied government workers. This dual nature made it appropriate to engage volunteers to remove the tributes.

For Red Cross, the organisation's expertise in the psychosocial impacts of disasters and keen awareness of the need for respectful management of the floral tributes allowed them to transfer existing skills into the role of assisting in the movement and removal of the spontaneous tributes.

The logistics of assembly, briefing, food, water and amenities were coordinated through the NSW Small Business Commission. The Commission was a member of the Government Coordination Committee and offered its offices as the staging point for the event. One hundred volunteers from Red Cross, Rural Fire Service and State Emergency Services spent three hours picking up flowers and carefully placing them into boxes to be taken away. The City of Sydney provided unmarked vehicles to remove the flowers, intentionally to visually distance the activity from standard waste collection. This activity was closely watched by the public and filmed live by numerous TV stations:

"I was worried the floral tribute removal process would look like a council clean up. But it is so gentle and respectful with SES and other volunteers in full uniform slowly picking up each bunch and removing cards ... There's no ripping, no chucking, no throwing. Each bunch placed in a box, cards in separate bags. It was actually very moving to watch ..." (Larry Emdur, The Morning Show, Seven Network).

Press releases and public statements from the Premier were coordinated with the removal to ensure the public understood why the flowers had to be removed and what was going to be done with them after removal. It was essential to communicate that the flowers were not going to landfill and they would be treated with respect. This communication linked into longer term questions about permanent memorials. The Committee was unable to answer those questions in the immediate two weeks after the siege, and nor was it appropriate to do so as this process will require extensive consideration and consultation.

Ultimately, over 8 tonnes of flowers were clean mulched by the City of Sydney and placed in storage to compost for eventual placement at the site of a memorial. The collected

cards and messages were held in storage and consultation undertaken with the State Library regarding preservation, digitisation and curation for display. The vast majority of the over 100,000 floral bunches had a card or message attached. Prior to digitising the cards, it was necessary to sort through them and separate them into themes to enable future curation of a digital memorial. Once again, recovery agencies turned to volunteers and NGOs for assistance in this process. Red Cross and Anglicare provided over 300 hours of service to read and sort the cards. Due to the emotional nature of this process they were supported by the presence of Disaster Recovery Chaplains and Red Cross volunteers accessed debrief support from the Australian Psychological Service.

Conclusion: Findings & Recommendations

The issue for Sydney in the future will be how to permanently remember this event. There is public expectation that a permanent memorial of some kind will be installed at Martin Place or at another location in the Sydney CBD. The complex and profound emotions created by disaster events means that most permanent memorial processes will be difficult and potentially controversial (Nicolls, 2006). Everyone will have different views, opinions and desires.

Successful memorial processes, in which all stakeholders are heard, must be consultative. The stakeholders will be broad and varied. The location, design and purpose of the memorial have to be agreed upon by the community affected.

Unfortunately this was not the first event of its kind and will not be the last. It is worthwhile noting that no guide exists to advise on the management of public memorials. Had it not been for the knowledge and experience of those engaged in coordinating the recovery from this event and the removal of the tributes from Martin Place its outcome could have been very different and significantly negative in its impacts on the families of the victims, the survivors and the community as a whole.

A crucial factor in the successful response to this event, as it is with any, was the partnership between government, community and non-government agencies. This partnership facilitated the development of an inclusive picture of the event and evolving community sentiment and “on the ground” issues. The rapid adaptation of existing plans, arrangements and agency competencies enabled the Government and NGOs to manage the public grieving

process in a respectful and compassionate way, while maintaining the City's safety and security.

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