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People in a pandemic: Rethinking the role of ‘Community’ in community resilience practices

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ABSTRACT

How has the idea of community featured in attempts to build resilience to emergencies? The paper explores this question by presenting evidence from interviews with emergency responders across the world in the midst of the early and uncertain phases of the Covid-19 pandemic. Although reflecting different contexts, we discern two ways in which the notion of community featured in authorities’ narrations of their efforts to respond to the pandemic. Firstly, we demonstrate how community was deployed as a discursive mechanism that offered a particular framing of the vulnerabilities the pandemic instigated. Departing from accounts that reduce people’s identities to demographic categories, the deployment of community stressed that the pandemic’s effects should be understood by the different, yet coexistent, vulnerabilities it brought to the surface for people. Such renditions of vulnerability paved the way for styles of governance that prioritised adapting to the pandemic’s uncertain and indeterminate unfolding in the absence of prepared plans. Secondly, addressing a register of collective social life between individuals and the state, an emphasis on community engendered the decentralised arrangement of emergency governance with which resilience has become synonymous. Here, community proved pivotal in temporarily expanding resources to deal with an emergency whose effects threatened to exceed governments’ pre-existing capabilities. We substantiate this claim through examining how allusions to community worked to enrol non-state based efforts at response into a broader public security apparatus. Enveloped within the broader politics of emergency resilience, community shaped how the pandemic’s effects were understood whilst also ensuring adequate provisions for its governance.

1. Introduction

Amid recent efforts to develop ‘resilience’ in the face of emergencies, new lines of inquiry have arisen concerning the mobilisation of the idea of community in governing practices (Mulligan et al, 2016, Zebrowski, 2015). Evidencing the political resonance with which the term is now loaded, community has proven pivotal for engendering the spatial redistribution of governmental responsibilities promoted across resilience discourses. An emphasis on community, for example, has figured as crucial in attempts to enhance resilience by affording an array of dispersed local and national actors more agency in making decisions about how emergencies should and could be governed (Collier and Lakoff, 2008a, 2015, Grove et al., 2020, Lentzos and Rose, 2009, Smirnova et al, 2021). The prominence of community in these debates, furthermore, has accompanied a new operational dynamic for emergency governance when conceived through resilience. Reflecting shifts in how we imagine the events that will shape our shared future, issues around community have arisen where those governing have moved from concentrating on the enactment of prescribed plans during emergencies to focusing more on building the capability to adapt as emergencies develop indeterminately on the ground (Chandler, 2014; Grove, 2018; Wakefield, 2020).

In this paper, we contribute to debates that consider the relationship between community and resilience through exploring the meaning that the idea of community has taken in attempts to build resilience in the midst of Covid-19. Empirically, the paper presents evidence from 65 interviews with people working in emergency response capacities across the world. The context of these interviews is important to bear in mind. The interviews took place between May 2020 and July 2020; a moment in which, across many countries, Covid-19 was having consequences

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throughout different areas of collective life but there was abundant uncertainty about how the pandemic would develop. The interviews thus reflect on the initial adjustments those responding to the pandemic made when encountering Covid-19 in its early, unpredictable stages. Other than remarking on the uncertainty that characterised the pandemic at this moment, it is also important to note the spatial context of the research. Taking place with people across the globe, the reflections interviewees offered were grounded in the specific and unique situations to which they are local and operate within. Many of the examples that interviewees elaborate in this paper depict these local circumstances.

Nevertheless, our research discerned points of convergence across these interviews. We outline two such commonalities below. Firstly, we show how community appeared as a discursive mechanism that framed the pandemic in a specific way. In contrast to its articulation through reductionist demographic categories, discourses of community afford new articulations of people’s vulnerability that enable those governing to adapt to the uncertainty of the pandemic in its real-time unfolding. Secondly, the idea of community came to be used to address a register of vulnerabilities associated with the broader realities of climate change (Cutler, 2016, Gaillard, 2010, Grove et al, 2021). But alongside its ramifications for vulnerability, this ontological shift in resilience discourses towards seeing the indeterminacy and uncertainty that characterises emergencies has led to the inauguration of new forms of operational dynamic being inscribed into the governing practices. Rather than seeking to identify risks and intervene in anticipation of their occurrence (O’Grady, 2015, DeLeo, 2017), those governing increasingly aim to develop the capacity to adapt to the unfolding of emergencies as they take place (Grove, 2014; Kapucu, 2012; O’Grady, 2018, Paton, 2006). In acknowledgement of the uncertainty that characterises the development of emergencies, resilience discourses emphasise how those governing need to ensure the capability to continuously adjust their operation and decision making as events unfold in real-time. This focus on adaptation, further still, has paved the way for advocates of resilience to accentuate the possibilities for societal transformation that incubate in the aftermath of emergencies. Rather than being conceived solely as an aberration from a linear path of ‘progress’, emergencies might be understood through resilience to present new trajectories for development. This, supposedly ‘transformative’ form of resilience, remobilises emergencies as opportunities, for instance, to integrate new anticipatory and planning measures into emergency governance (UNDRR, 2015) or redevelop infrastructure (Béné et al., 2012; Ensor et al., 2018; Frerks et al., 2011).

The weight thrown behind adaptation in resilience has both overlapped with, and been facilitated by, the development of new institutional arrangements that have come to underpin emergency governance. The popularisation of resilience has coincided with the gradual dissolving of command and control arrangements (Grove, 2018). Under command and control, centralised agencies, often operating remotely, coordinate the response to emergencies. Replacing command and control, decentralised governmental arrangements, characterised by co-ordination across various agencies and actors distributed disparately through space and acting within localities, have risen to prominence (Amoore, 2009, Collier and Lakoff, 2008b, Graham, 2010) and hurricanes (Leong et al., 2007) to flooding (Ajbabde et al, 2013, Pelling, 2012) and the various catastrophes associated with the broader realities of climate change (Cutler, 2016, Gaillard, 2010, Grove et al, 2021).

But alongside its ramifications for vulnerability, this ontological shift in resilience discourses towards seeing the indeterminacy and uncertainty that characterises emergencies has led to the inauguration of new forms of operational dynamic being inscribed into the governing practices. Rather than seeking to identify risks and intervene in anticipation of their occurrence (O’Grady, 2015, DeLeo, 2017), those governing increasingly aim to develop the capacity to adapt to the unfolding of emergencies as they take place (Grove, 2014; Kapucu, 2012; O’Grady, 2018, Paton, 2006). In acknowledgement of the uncertainty that characterises the development of emergencies, resilience discourses emphasise how those governing need to ensure the capability to continuously adjust their operation and decision making as events unfold in real-time. This focus on adaptation, further still, has paved the way for advocates of resilience to accentuate the possibilities for societal transformation that incubate in the aftermath of emergencies. Rather than being conceived solely as an aberration from a linear path of ‘progress’, emergencies might be understood through resilience to present new trajectories for development. This, supposedly ‘transformative’ form of resilience, remobilises emergencies as opportunities, for instance, to integrate new anticipatory and planning measures into emergency governance (UNDRR, 2015) or redevelop infrastructure (Béné et al., 2012; Ensor et al., 2018; Frerks et al., 2011).

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As crucial tenets within a broader resilience agenda that has changed the politics of emergency governance, we are interested in the ramifications adaptation and decentralised governmental arrangements bear for thinking about the mobilisation of the idea of community within resilience practices attendant to emergencies. The notion of community of course possesses profound weight in political landscapes beyond resilience. Noted across prominent literature, community accounts for the shared interests, sensibilities, characteristics and obligations that inevitably undergird collective, public life (Nancy, J-L. and Barrau, 2015; Rancière, 1999). Communities are said to be both enlivened and beset by the tensions between individual and collective interests. Thus, communities are not static but active and performative instantiations of communal life where interests are continually negotiated and contested (Rancière and Corcoran, 2010). Community might exist on different

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1 We are referring primarily to a strand within the extensive body of resilience literature which can be attributed to forms of ‘non-linear thinking’ in resilience governance and resilience in general.
The role of communities within resilience practices more specifically has also been explored extensively. Bringing the case of the siege of Leningrad into juxtaposition with New Orleans in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, DeVerteuil et al (2021) argue that the responses to these events reflect the possibility for co-constitutive resilience practices produced through the synchronisation of ‘top-down’ government action and the ‘bottom-up’ improvisations made by local communities. These forms of synthesis (See Cox et al, 2022) between different groups that resilience opens up as a possibility is elaborated also in David Godschalk’s (2003) theorisation of urban resilience as grounded in the development and consolidation of multiple connections between different communities of practice and expertise that exist in cities. For Freitag et al (2014), creating such networks would pave the way for what they call ‘whole community resilience’ (2014, 324) that seeks to integrate non-state based, local perspectives on that which is valuable to communities into emergency preparedness. Much work has also stressed how the participation of local communities should be central to the plans designed to recover places in the wake of large emergencies (Campagnella, 2006, Vale, 2005). Nevertheless, scholars have questioned time and again the extent to which this promotion of community ‘agency’ translates into practice for emergency planning, response and recovery (Jon, 2019, Grove et al, 2020, Wakefield, 2019).

We contribute to these debates by critically inquiring further into the meaning that the notion of community takes when it is mobilised within resilience practices. One especially central line of inquiry for us is work that conceives of community as a version of collective social life that allows governing practices to be enacted across different scales. For Nikolas Rose, community thus accounts for ‘a territory between the authority of the state, the free and amoral exchange of the market and the liberty of the autonomous “rights bearing” individual subject’ (Rose, 1999: 167). Community not only addresses this domain but also makes it something that, in Rose’s work with Peter Miller, can be ‘made technical’ (2008, 89); becoming a ‘sector whose vectors and forces could be mobilised, enrolled, deployed in novel programmes and techniques which operate through the instrumentalization of personal allegiances and active responsibilities’ (2008, 90). Rose and Miller’s commentary opens up to consider how the notion of community addresses a register of collective life that exists between the state, in its form at least as a centralised entity, and the domain of the sovereign individual. In so doing, the invocation of community can operate to enrol groups of people, regardless of their awareness or agreement, within the goals of a broader governmental apparatus.

Alongside organising governmental practice at this register of social life, the significance of the notion of community for resilience also rests in its mobilisation as a discursive mechanism. This focus on discourse opens up to inquiry the way in which particular language enters into the vocabulary of those governing and the effects its invocation bears. Following Claudia Aradau, the effects of discourse within security practices should be considered in terms of how it acts ‘to constitute both that which is to be secured and the threat’ (2010, 492) to be governed. Discourses thus frame emergencies with a particular reading of their impacts. But in so doing, discourse additionally works to justify the actions taken in the name of governance, whilst by implication also shaping the way that people are made subject to governing practices (See also Butler, 2009). Research that probes the way in which discourses take precedence in security and governance are varied, having addressed issues related to urban security (Hook and Vordojak, 2002), emergency legislation (Neal, 2006), counter-terrorism (Amoore and De Goede, 2008) and the fraught power relations between organisations involved in emergency response (Hanreider and Kreuder-Sonnen, 2014).

In this paper, we look to build on these literatures to extend understanding of the meaning and significance afforded the notion of community as it is rendered operable in resilience programmes developed amidst emergencies. To do so, we explore the role that the notion of community has taken in attempts to cultivate resilience in the face of Covid-19. In what follows we engage with evidence generated from interviews to make two broader conceptual contributions. Firstly, exploring its operation as a discursive mechanism, we inquire as to how the notion of community introduces new ways of thinking about the vulnerabilities that the pandemic instigated for people inhabiting the same local spaces. Alongside affording a specific reading of the vulnerabilities that surfaced with Covid-19, we probe how, as a discursive mechanism, community has become integral to ensuring that those governing can develop the adaptive capacities needed to attend to the indeterminate and unpredictable effects that the pandemic has borne and were not prepared for. Secondly, we explore how, because of the register of collective social life it allows those governing to address, community plays a fundamental role in ensuring coordination across formal, state-led, responses to emergencies and informal practices that have developed in sites not overseen by the state. In so doing, community was operationalised as a means to consolidate the decentralised governmental arrangements with which resilience has become synonymous and to enrol non-state actors within a broader public security apparatus. Overall, we unpack how the mobilisation of community has become central to the political ramifications that resilience inaugurates because it introduces new conceptualisations of vulnerability, new operational dynamics and new domains of social life into the practices by which emergencies are governed.

3. Methodology

3.1. Data collection

We collected the evidence presented in this paper as part of a research project that investigates different forms of response to and recovery from Covid-19 emerging across the world. Conducted on video call as ‘socially distant’ data collection (Lobe et al., 2020), the research involved semi-structured interviews carried out in English between May and July 2020 with interviewees based in 16 countries across five continents. Each interview lasted between 25 and 80 minutes. Overall, there was approximately 40 hours of recordings. Interviewees were invited to participate owing to their country-specific and internationally recognised expertise in the field of international, regional and local emergency governance. The sample included people working in local and national government, volunteer groups and members of civil society organisations with years of experience.

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2 In so doing, we take up the mantle of other research that critically inquires into the significance afforded to the notion of community in resilience practices (See for instance Mulligan, 2016, Titz et al. 2018).

3 Although not necessarily focusing specifically on the importance of community as a political concept itself, resilience literature of late resonates deeply with Rose’s work, turning to explore, for instance, the envelopment of previously ignored indigenous knowledges into emergency governance logics but also how community has figured as a means to distribute responsibility in emergencies to groups and individuals who may or may not have the necessary resources to take it on (Jerez Columbé and Morrissey, 2020; Zebrowski and Sage, 2017).

4 The five continents included were Asia, Australasia, Europe, North America and South America. The sixteen countries were Argentina, Brazil, Canada, Chile, China, Colombia, Denmark, Germany, Korea, India, Malaysia, Singapore, Spain, Sweden, United Kingdom, United States of America.
The substantial body of evidence collected through this research contains reflections on various issues concerning attempts to govern Covid-19. But the material presented for the purposes and focus of this paper is based on insights concerning resilience, communities, interviewee’s thoughts on communities, how communities were being mobilised within resilience practices and how Covid-19’s occurrence has instigated reappraisals concerning the future of community resilience (Teti et al., 2020).

3.2. Data analysis

Considering its scale and the breadth of its scope, the research project collected evidence deriving from often radically different contexts. Life in the countries in which interviewees were carried out is characterised by nuanced, often polarising, social, economic, political and cultural genealogies, conditions and circumstances. As such, Covid-19 has affected these countries in highly asymmetric ways. Whilst cognisant of these important local contexts, the task for the research, as far as the aims of this paper are concerned, was to identify and explore points of convergence in the way that interviewees discussed communities and resilience. To do so, we used a mapping method (Axelrod, 1976) that sought to outline different aspects of an interviewee’s response and visualise these responses in relation to the development of a broader narrative that the interviews collectively generated (Eden, 2004; Shaw et al., 2019, 2017). This mapping approach comprised five stages. We first discussed, and came to a consensus concerning, how to label and order the different points that interviewees made in relation to communities and resilience, ultimately deciding to number each response and afford a brief summary of what each interviewee said. Secondly, we allocated ourselves either 22 or 21 interviews and began labelling the different issues that arose where communities and resilience were discussed by interviewees before drawing lines of relation between these issues (See Fig. 1 for example). Thirdly, we exchanged maps and interviews to validate or recalibrate the mapping that we had each done. In the fourth stage, we collaborated to develop a composite map of all responses related to communities and resilience. We drew lines of relation between those frequent commonalities that arose across interviews (See Fig. 1 for extract of this map). This composite map, fifthly, served as a foundation for further exploration. We discerned two broad themes that interviewees elaborated upon at length and in various ways in relation to communities and resilience. On the one hand, interviewees discussed community as an idea that enabled coordination between formal, state-led response efforts and informal, non-state based modes of response. With these two broad themes identified, we re-listened to all the interviews to validate our mapping analysis and identify quotations that would serve to exemplify our analysis. In the next section, we present empirical material from semi-structured interviews to expand understanding of the meaning that community takes within resilience practices.

4. Findings: People in a pandemic

In the three sub-sections that follow, we aim to do three things. Firstly, we draw on interview responses to offer more context to the particular moment between May and July 2020 in which the interviews took place. Reflecting this specific moment in the pandemic, the evidence affords insight into how interviewees conceived of the effects of COVID-19 and the challenges it presented in a way that resonates with the ontological framing of emergencies through resilience as indeterminate and uncertain. Faced with an event that threatened to overwhelm existing government capacity and in the absence of comprehensive plans, those governing stressed the need to decentralise response and continually adapting to the situation as it unfolded. We then move secondly to demonstrate how, by emphasising the coexistence of heterogeneous vulnerabilities within local spaces, the idea of community operated as a discursive mechanism that aided adaptation to the unforeseeable development of the pandemic. Thirdly, we present evidence that shows how the notion of community invokes a version of social life that enabled de-centralised coordination across formal, state-
Based and informal, non-state based, actors in governing COVID-19.

4.1. Covid-19 through ontologies of Resilience

Illuminating contextual aspects of the situation that the pandemic had created in the spring and summer of 2020, the interviews initially revealed how authorities across the world conceived Covid-19 through the ontological parameters of indeterminacy and uncertainty that, as we demonstrated in the literature review, has been associated with the emergence of resilience. During our mapping, we collected these allusions to uncertainty within a broader category that collated all of the ‘uncertainty around the pandemic’. Many interviewees discussed, for example, how such uncertainty was created owing to the inability, at this point in 2020, of tracing the spread and growth of the virus. One interviewee described how ‘we don’t know where people have been, what they eat, whom they have met’ so they could not estimate the consequences of the virus’ circulation. Similarly, another interviewee evoked the situation by expressing how people ‘cannot take a step without thinking ‘gosh, what is the danger? What is the risk?’ without knowing the answer. The situation was one, as another interviewee summarised, where ‘we don’t know if people have Covid or not, we don’t have the right equipment for immunisation, we don’t know how to detect Covid precisely and if we don’t know how to detect we don’t know who or who is not contaminating’. Owing to a lack of preparedness, when the pandemic initially became widespread in 2020 its circulation was characterised by a radical uncertainty that exceeded prediction through the risk calculi that has traditionally underpinned governmental decision-making (Amoore, 2013).

This sense of uncertainty that was so crucial to the context of the pandemic at this moment, however, was accompanied by a sense of its indeterminacy as well. Alongside citing how a lack of preparedness resulted in uncertainty about the virus’ contagion, in other words, the interviews intimated that those governing thought that the pandemic’s effects could surpass the resources that were at that moment available for their control. Such indeterminacy surfaced especially where interviewees discussed the pandemic’s impact in terms of its reverberation through various sectors. Gathered under a category in the map that addressed the ‘impacts of the pandemic’, one interviewee encouraged those responsible for governing across the world to ‘think beyond the response phase to see the real impacts of economics, mental health, livelihoods, the wider society and so on’. Such a sentiment was replicated in another interviewee’s response, who elaborated that what COVID-19 shows us and teaches us is there is no border…this virus is reaching every country and having the same consequences across different parts of society’. Here, Covid-19’s impacts were described by their simultaneous and uncontrollable cascade through distinct but interconnected domains of life.

These perceptions of the pandemic have fundamentally shaped the actions that those governing have deployed to mitigate its effects. Cascading in an uncertain fashion across different spaces simultaneously and exceeding available resources, interviewees asserted that governance could not take place from a centralised position with decisions diffusing through society. Reflecting the forms of governance inaugurated with the turn to resilience outlined in the literature review, they emphasised instead the need to prioritise operating across local spaces to adapt to new circumstances as they arose. We collected much of the data relating to adaptation and decentralisation within a category of the map labelled as the ‘flexible approaches to governance’ implemented owing to the pandemic. As one interviewee stated, ‘uncertainties around the development of the event (has) meant response was characterised by continual adjustment’ (our brackets) in terms of resources required and courses of action deployed. Exemplifying adaptation and decentralisation in an alternate way, another interviewee working for a public authority described a specific example in which the desire to maintain continued circulation of people and things whilst ensuring social distancing was a major issue that underpinned the adjustments governments made to public space. Echoing scenes that continue to be found throughout the world, they continued to show how they ‘planned for 35 km of new bicycle lines and allowed restaurants to arrange open air seating areas in the existing parking slots’. In so doing, public institutions worked with the private hospitality sector to ensure that restaurants could continue to open for business whilst assimilating to the new measures enacted to attend to the pandemic. In collaboration with the state, non-state actors dispersed across local sites were afforded agency and able to make adjustments that accommodate for the pandemic’s unforeseen effects.

Bringing to life those debates around resilience elaborated in the literature review, the interviews first characterised the context of the pandemic in its early phases. Owing to a lack of preparedness and concerns over the adequacy of available resources, this was a context beset by uncertainty around the virus’ contagion, indeterminacy regarding the pandemic’s cascade and the need to develop ways to adapt to its unfolding across de-centralised sites. Within this context, interviewees elaborated on how the idea of community came to matter within the resilience programmes assembled as Covid-19 took hold. Below, we outline two prominent ways in which communities were discussed across interviews.

4.2. Adapting to the heterogeneous vulnerabilities of communities

First, then, we explore the use of community as a discursive mechanism that offers a specific framing of vulnerabilities that Covid-19 brought to the surface for people. This understanding of vulnerability via community, we argue, facilitates those governing to adapt to the uncertain development of the pandemic. As discussed in the literature review, investigations that explore security and governance discourses have proven crucial in developing our conceptualisation of how emergencies are fathomed and imagined. It might be, for instance, that certain risks are amplified (See Lupton, 1999) or particular effects are emphasised through the language that those governing draw upon to make sense of emergencies (Simon and De Goede, 2015). But further still, discourse also works to shape and justify the steps governments take to intervene amidst such events too (Butler, 2009).

At the same time, however, certain literature encourages us additionally to explore how such discourses change, how such changes alter the ways in which emergencies are imagined and the ramifications these changes have for the politics of emergency governance. In their work on what they call the ‘referent object’ (2008, 266) of security, Michael Dillon and Luis Lobo-Guerrero bring attention to such shifts. For the authors, the concept of referent object opens up to inquiry the epistemological processes whereby certain regimes of knowledge are enrolled into practices of governance, with the consequence of generating particular modes of ‘political subjectivity’ (2008: 267). But the authors argue that such ways of knowing are historically contingent. The referent object for governance hinges, for the authors, on an ‘evolving economy of power relations’ (2008: 267). Thus, new ways of knowing emergencies and their effects on people surface in tandem with the development of new practices of governance. In addition, the authors argue that the way that referent objects arise is influenced too by conditions in excess of governmental control, following ‘transformations in the changing order of (living things)’ (2008: 267) beyond the dominion of the state. In other words, the authors’ reflections on the notion of referent object allow us to consider how processes occurring beyond the control of the state influence the practices of knowledge production through which emergencies are imagined and different sectors of life are framed for governance.

Extending Lobo-Guerrero and Dillon’s work, we argue that the notion of community has risen to prominence as a means by which to govern people through resilience practices that, owing to a lack of preparedness, understand emergencies as both indeterminate and uncertain and advocate for adaptation as the principle means by which emergencies should be governed. In our research, we saw community
being deployed discursively in this way where interviewees discussed the vulnerabilities generated by the pandemic. In our mapping, we collated much of the interviewees’ discussion of vulnerability within a category labelled ‘vulnerable people and service provision’. When considered through the lens of community, vulnerability takes on a different meaning than that usually afforded in literature on emergen-

‘unemployment’ of domestic violence affected by Covid-19 comprise ‘elderly people who need support with the vulnerabilities generated by the pandemic. In our mapping, we elaborated on how they had developed care facilities for ‘new situations’ communities have been affected by the pandemic and how they have been affected, one interviewee detailed that:

‘There is a range of people. I mean it depends from which point of view. There is the economic impact, there is the social impact and the rate of people unemployed is rising. The elderly have specific needs and at the same time there are also (school) pupils, because pupils were taken out of class in February and you cannot take them back into the class until September without any kind of support in the meantime. Over the summer we are trying to design activities in the green areas and cinema where they can get some educational programme, some summer school. Also because there will be limitations for travel during the summer for tourism. Having support for the people who will stay in the city over the summer is essential… Somehow everyone has been affected’

This nuanced understanding of vulnerability as addressing the heterogeneous but co-existent needs of people was echoed by other interviewees’ responses. One interviewee elaborated how they offer a lot of services addressed at the most vulnerable in our communities’. These services, they continued, have ‘to do with care policies for the elderly but they have also to do with gender and… the lack of schools…and having too people who are working at home with children’, describing vulnerability overall as ‘very complicated’ and ‘something that we all experience’. Elaborating on what they labelled ‘the immediate needs of communities’, another interviewee described how the communities affected by Covid-19 comprise ‘elderly people who need support with food’ simultaneous to ‘people with mental health problems that have become more fragile’ owing to the pandemic. But in addition, they also elaborated on how they had developed care facilities for ‘new situations of domestic violence’ whilst also starting to see needs instigated by ‘unemployment’ and ‘the decrease of income in families’ that the pandemic had brought about.

For those responding to COVID-19, then, the difference that the notion of community emphasises opens up to recognition the diversity of vulnerabilities instigated when the pandemic started to become widespread. But chimming with the perceived indeterminacy of the pandemic and the consequent need for adaptation, community was also deployed by those governing to make sense of how their understanding of different people’s vulnerabilities might necessarily shift over time as new and unforeseeable problems instigated by the pandemic arose. Frequently, acknowledgement of the emergence of newly perceived vulnerabilities arose in response to shortcomings that appeared once Covid-19 mitigation measures were implemented. We classified many of the responses attesting to this under the category of ‘challenges to governance’ in our mapping. One interviewee detailed for instance how, in the first months of the pandemic, they ‘were struggling to accommodate for the different kinds of need that arose for different kinds of people within our communities’. They gave the example of how, with social distancing, much of the mental health support offered in many countries had to transition from face-to-face to online provision. Regarding this shift, the interviewee described how ‘there are specific population segments within communities who are not accessing or are not able to access the new forms of service delivery’ owing to different levels of awareness of the change and/or a lack of access to digital resources. The recognition of diverse vulnerabilities once measures had been implemented arose in other cases too. Nine social housing apartment blocks, inhabited by a substantial group of people who had recently migrated to the country in question, were closed and heavily policed owing to an outbreak of the virus. As a consequence, one of the interviewees described how:

‘For the five days (of the closure) two major supermarket chains were supplying food, but they did not have halal meat and only on the fifth day, which was the last day of their lockdown there was access for them to halal meat. They were given a bunch of food that they did not request, food that was decided by the supermarkets to be essential. So it was almost a whole week when they were provided meat that they could not eat because of their religion (our brackets)’

Mapped under the category of establishing ‘support for vulnerable people’, another interviewee again exemplified this focus on adaptation when they explained that a concern with ‘community safety’ had resulted in ‘screening procedures’ that sought to ensure that infected people could not enter public spaces. These procedures were developed in an attempt to maintain what they described as ‘business continuity’ by allowing people to congregate on ‘transport… in shopping malls and cinemas, for instance’. The interviewee continued to describe how different areas within the city would be subject to different levels of screening according to perceived levels of infection in that specific area. So in ‘highly infected areas screening is 100%’ whilst in ‘low risk areas it (screening) is 40%’ (our brackets). In areas understood as low risk, new spaces would be allowed to re-open but only if ‘everybody was screened’. The interviewee went on to explain how, on very short notice, screening procedures would have to be modified according to perceived changes in levels of infection within communities. Much of the time these (screening) procedures might not be increased in time’, heightening the perceived possibility that people infected with Covid-19 would be able to enter public spaces and spread the virus.

In this section, we have demonstrated how the notion of community has been mobilised as a discursive mechanism. As discussed in the literature review, community encapsulates the differences in interests and ways of life that might exist within localities. Applied to this case, the emphasis on difference implicit within the discourse of community reshapes how those governing understand the vulnerabilities instigated amidst emergencies. Rather than comprehended solely via its uneven distribution across reductionist demographic categories, community opens up to consideration how heterogeneous vulnerabilities might co-exist within the same space. But as the pandemic has continued to unfold, however, the mobilisation of community by those governing has taken on a different kind of significance too; proving crucial for identifying and tracing the emergence of unforeseen vulnerabilities. In so doing, the notion of community has helped to guide the steps taken by authorities to adapt to the indeterminate and uncertain development of the pandemic from one moment to the next. Resilience, of which adaptation is indicative, arose as necessary because of the absence of adequate preparedness developed in anticipation of an event such as Covid-19.

4.3. Community in crises: mediating between ‘informal’ and ‘formal’ approaches

We move in this section to show how the idea of community features
as pivotal in attempts to configure governing practices across decentralised actors: a formation of governance with which resilience has become synonymous. Specifically, community allows those governing to coordinate the efforts of state and non-state actors taking steps to attend to the effects the pandemic has had for different localities. The role of non-state actors in governance owing to the emphasis in resilience practices on decentralisation has been commented on frequently, with critiques bringing attention to its coincidence with a neo-liberal political-economic emphasis on the minimisation of public provisions and the so-called ‘responsibilisation’ (King, Crossley and Smith, 2021: 1) of individuals regardless of their relative resources (Evans and Reid, 2014, Lentzos and Rose, 2017, Wakefield, 2019). Whilst such debates are central to our understanding of how the rearrangement of agency for governance is situated within broader political-economic conditions, our interest in this paper more concerns how community, owing to the version of collective life it addresses and invokes, facilitates the forms of decentralisation resilience advocates in the first place. Invoking the idea of community thus renders possible decentralisation and acts to engender the political ramifications of resilience by redistributing responsibility for emergency governance. To be specific, community was deployed specifically to temporarily expand the resources available in attending to an emergency that threatened to otherwise exceed the capabilities that governments had already developed.

As Rose and Miller were shown to comment earlier, community is said to address a register of collective life between the rights-bearing sovereign individual and the state. This domain, the authors continue to argue, is susceptible to mobilisation and enrolment into governmental regimes. Extending this line of inquiry, we show in this section how the notion of community is conscripted into resilience practices by bringing together what might be referred to as formal and informal approaches to emergency governance. On the one hand, we use ‘formal’ to address emergency governance practices that are legally sanctioned and economically subsidised by governments across the world. On the other, ‘informal’ approaches are not directly bankrolled by government and are reliant instead on locally configured non-state groups that have developed over time. Premised on decentralised approaches to the governance of emergencies, both formal and informal practices are evident in resilience programmes established to attend to the effects of Covid-19. In many ways, the interviews revealed how the idea of community acts as an interlocutor that enables coordination between state and non-state actors. In so doing, community has proven critical to the decentralised expansion of a security apparatus that arises amidst emergencies whilst also ensuring emergencies do not exceed the capacities arranged to attend to them.

One example of ‘informal’ responses to the pandemic deriving from our interviews, and contained in our mapping under ‘ways in which volunteers are helping’, included where a telephone service, that had proven to be effective previously during summer heatwaves, was reactivated as a form of support for the elderly during Covid-19.

‘Regarding the elderly, this is not something new, but it is something that we are very proud of... we have a ‘tele-assistance system’, which is quite strong and works very well. It works on a regular basis. To keep contact with the elderly, to keep track of them, of their needs, but also regarding for instance the situation of a heatwave or a heat emergency we activate a protocol. The service gets intensified and they [the volunteers] call more often (our brackets)’

We mapped an alternate example of informal responses to the pandemic under the label of ‘ideas coming from communities’ for volunteering. Here, the interviewee elaborated on the organisation and deployment of donations across a city where restrictions on people’s mobility had been imposed. In this situation, ‘people who are suffering in our communities put in their windows or on their balconies signs saying we need support’. And in turn, ‘local industries, business and entrepreneurs and other social organisations’ gathered together ‘to create a donation programme to support people in our communities’.

Such informal approaches contrast with similar projects crafted in the name of community resilience that had already received government support. This includes instances in which existing community programmes have been repurposed for attending to the myriad effects of the virus. Again mapped under the label of ‘ideas coming from communities’, one example would be community-based repair shops that started before COVID-19. As one interviewee described:

‘We have a “repair café” where people can come and get their stuff repaired instead of going out and buying some new stuff. That sort of a circular economy project, but the focus is also on getting people involved who are perhaps sitting at home, feeling depressed, feeling lonely and getting them out of the house. That’s the people who are actually helping at the “repair café”’.

In a different context, another interviewee described an additional formalised community programme:

‘We also have another project at one of our... facilities where we have equipment for instance for nursing homes. Before when something was broken, let’s say a bed was broken or a roller was broken, it would just be thrown out. Now we have those...retired guys who are fixing it... Because not alone considering the climate issue, we are throwing out way less, like a third of the equipment that we were throwing out before. These guys are former handyman... and they were sitting at home retired and now they are out and about chatting with people... Just to say that the whole issue of mental health is one that we incorporated in our community resilience thinking for years now, so when the crisis hit it was just normal for us to think about how can we create activities that might actually help in this situation’

Despite the proliferation of both approaches, coordinating informal, ‘bottom-up’ initiatives with government service provision has proven challenging in different ways. We mapped many of the problems that interviewees raised under ‘governance challenges’ that emerged during the early stages of the pandemic. Encapsulating issues that interviewees raised around coordination, one interviewee gave an example of how government protocol stopped donations from volunteer, informal organisations being delivered. They described how: ‘the response from the community was like we want to help those people, we want to give them food, we want to give them medication, but then the government said that we are not accepting any donations from anywhere, which is different from what has been already put in place’. Despite concerns that their resources may be overwhelmed, the potential effects that informal approaches might have on reducing the impact of Covid-19 were thus rebuffed by the appendages of the state officially accountable for responding to the pandemic. In another example, an interviewee described how previous experiences had suggested to them that informal responses to Covid-19 would not stand the test of time. As a result, such informal responses were deemed ‘unreliable’ by those operating in formal or official capacities. ‘Normally’ they explained ‘private companies, banks or civil organisations they have... tried to support people in their communities and normally what happens in the short term (is) that works very well but when you need long term support you see that those things start to fall’. The interviewee thus drew on their experience to question the sustainability of responses that have arisen informally without the support of government, echoing a concern raised in previous research (Harris et al., 2017).

These responses reflect a broader concern that early response to Covid-19 was underpinned by a tension between formal and informal efforts whilst asserting scepticism concerning the capacity of informal efforts to remain efficacious in the long term (See also Sou, 2021). However, and owing to the pandemic’s potential to overwhelm those resources governments’ had at the existing disposal, these informal practices proved essential to developing adequate response to the pandemic. Our interviews revealed different ways that authorities drew...
upon the idea of community to deal with issues of synchronising informal and formal approaches. In our mapping, we categorised many of these responses as demonstrating the development of ‘flexible approaches’ to governance and ‘maintaining the enthusiasm’ of volunteers. In some places, voluntary efforts arising informally within communities have been coordinated with government approaches through training and accreditation. One interviewee working for a civil protection agency, for example, described how they had created what they call ‘community training programmes’ that afford people with accreditation for the specialist skills necessary for specific parts of emergency response. According to the interviewee, officials in this country have tailored standards created at the European Union level and deliver training via collaboration between three different entities. Volunteer service centres offered advice to would-be volunteers about the legislative framework of volunteering and the sectors in need of volunteer support. Large volunteer organisations offered their own specific training courses that specialised in their area of expertise. Lastly, civil protection agencies also offered training in services that require official certification such as first aid.

These forms of training and accreditation were followed by the mass registration of people responding to the pandemic ‘at the community level’. Once registered these people can be called upon to assist with the challenges Covid-19 has thrown up very quickly. The interviewee continued, stating that: ‘we have for sure 1 million of registered volunteers that can be potentially activated in case of a crisis. In this crisis (Covid-19) we made a very strong use of this component’ (our brackets).

To continue with the same interviewee’s response:

‘We used [volunteers] a lot in making health checks at the airports and sea ports for example. We used them in what we call the “COVID Centres”, the quarantine centres. We used them to assist the populations in need… In this case it was also easier to find volunteers willing to work because most of them were home due to lockdown… So, we have a strong system for volunteers in place and it was extremely useful during this crisis’

In another context, a different interviewee elaborated upon how connections between formal and informal approaches were forged less through training and more through establishing procedural frameworks for informal groups to comply with. ‘The Community Resilience Framework’, as it is called, orients informal groups to align their actions with various principles when attending to the pandemic. These principles include taking steps to plan and prepare for the myriad, diverse effects that Covid-19 might have through undertaking impact risk assessments. According to the interviewee, groups should also ensure that plans are shaped by incorporating different voices within the community, which will lead to courses of action that reflect a commitment to the belief that ‘all members of the community are equal and diversity is valued’. In turn, too, informal responses will be more likely to ‘meet the needs of the community’ in its variety. At the same time, groups should follow guidance of the framework to ‘manage its finances and meet its budgets under changing conditions’ whilst also helping these groups ‘to reduce climate impacts through adaptation and mitigation efforts and increase resource efficiencies’.

Different interviewees also spoke of resilience programmes that enhanced coordination between formal and informal responses by establishing collaborative partnerships between state and non-state actors in localities. We categorised many of these responses under ‘enhancing social capacities’ of volunteers. ‘Community resilience’ was premised for these interviewees less on alignment with practical principles or training and more through the generation of lines of relation between state and non-state actors to create what was frequently referred to as a ‘network’. According to one of our interviewees, for instance, a ‘Volunteer Reception Centre’ had been set up that brings informal volunteer groups together with government to provide various forms of support within local spaces, from ‘providing emergency food’ and ‘controlling social distancing’ to ‘delivering supplies and offering essential transport’ and ‘making homemade facemasks for healthcare workers’. Reflecting on what they called ‘community resilience’, a different interviewee discussed a new project they had designed called ‘social superblocks’ which involves identifying groups undertaking specific tasks and bringing them into contact with one another to develop a more comprehensive mode of response that contains less gaps in provision than might happen if such groups were disconnected. Part of a broader ‘urban transformation of the city to reduce transmission of Covid-19 and increase space for citizens, the social superblocks are based on networks and proximity between volunteer groups and government authorities to enhance volunteers and identify gaps in provision so that services might not be available to some people are given and developed by the community’. These groups, the interviewee continued, were formed ‘to account for the fact that care should be based on co-responsibility and should be shared across the whole community’. The idea of community opened up the possibly of identifying different dispersed sites of response and establishing practical lines of relationship between them, thus enabling the orchestration of a de-centralised network of efforts that serve to mitigate the pandemic’s cascading effects. In so doing, community becomes enrolled into broader resilience practices that have risen to prominence to address increased anxiety over the ability of emergencies to overwhelm the resources that governments have already arranged.

5. Conclusions

During 2020, authorities throughout the world rapidly assembled practices to attend to a pandemic whose effects were understood to cascade across different sectors of society in a way that was indeterminate and could not be accurately predicted. Of course these modes of governance emerged from, and indeed sought to address, socio-economic and political genealogies, conditions and circumstances that differentiate one country from another. However, in this paper our concern has been with identifying and exploring commonalities across these contexts. Such commonalities appear in abundance where attention turns to how different countries have sought to develop resilience in the face of Covid-19 by attempting to ensure coordination between dispersed sites of governance that prioritise adapting to the pandemic’s uncertain unfolding.

We have extended debates related to resilience by elaborating on the meaning that the notion of community has been endowed with when enrolled into broader attempts to develop resilience amidst emergencies. Our argument comprised two trajectories. We have demonstrated, firstly, that community operates as a discursive mechanism. Here, the invocation of community serves as a lens through which to understand the vulnerabilities that the pandemic has instigated for people. Rather than solely understood via its uneven distribution encased within reductionist demographic categories, vulnerabilities appear through the discourse of community as heterogeneous but also co-existent. Expressed through the discourse of community, and its emphasis on diversity within localities, different people experience different forms of vulnerability simultaneously to one another as emergencies unfold. But discourses shape and justify the steps those governing take to intervene in emergencies too. And to this end we have shown additionally, then, how the articulation of vulnerability as heterogeneous and coexistent paves the way for forms of governance that prioritise developing the capacity to adapt to the unforeseen impacts for which governments have not adequately prepared.

Alongside its enrolment as a discursive mechanism, an emphasis on community also enables the enactment of resilience on a particular scale too. As Rose and Miller were shown to argue earlier, community
addresses a rendition of collective life that mediates between individual sovereignty on one hand and the activity of the state on the other. Conscripted into governing regimes that exist within political-economic conditions that have previously been associated with the minimisation of public resources and the capacity of emergencies to overwhelm such resources, community allows those governing to orchestrate decentralised actors in the name of establishing resilience amidst Covid-19. In particular, an emphasis on community is crucial to coordinating formal and informal practices that have developed to mitigate the effects of the pandemic. As documented above, community plays this role in the form of community training and accreditation, ensuring compliance with community resilience frameworks and the compilation of networks in the name of community resilience. In so doing, community has figured as crucial in expanding resources for responding to a pandemic that, considering its lack of investment in recent years, would have otherwise exceeded the capabilities of many governments.

The arguments presented in this paper establish lines of inquiry for future research that probes modes of governance designed to attend to emergencies. In particular, the paper shows how the enrolment of particular ideas like community and the meaning afforded to them is conditioned by a variety of factors. These factors might include the forms of governance, such as resilience, that take hegemonic precedence at particular historic junctures. But these conditions might also be taken to refer to the, often indeterminant, material unfolding of the emergency itself. The meaning bestowed on ideas like community, overall, is historically contingent. Future inquiry thus needs to pay attention to how the meaning of terms like community changes over time, the conditions in which such changes take place and the new political ramifications that such changes might bear. For example, investigations might be directed towards subsequent iterations of community that surface and formal practices of governance, whose knowledges end up shaping governmental practices, whose needs are met through these practices and, simultaneously, whose are not.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Nathaniel O’Grady: Conceptualization. Duncan Shaw: Conceptualization. Szymon Parzniewski: .

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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