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Disaster Resilience as Communication Practice: Remembering and Forgetting Lessons From
Past Disasters Through Practices that Prepare for the Next One

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KEYWORDS: resilience, practice, disaster preparedness, emergency management

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Abstract

Communities learn important lessons about their vulnerabilities from disasters. A crucial aspect of resilience is how communities apply past lessons to prepare for future events. We use a practice lens to examine how communities *remember* and *forget* lessons through everyday communication that implements preparedness policies and projects. We analyze two cases of disaster preparedness in one community. The first site, a local Office of Emergency Management, adapted national policies to the community while also keeping local disaster lessons in mind (i.e., remembering lessons). The second site represented an intractable conflict between the US Forest Service and a community group that inhibited implementation of a large-scale project intended to reduce community wildfire risk (i.e., forgetting lessons). We frame resilience as a communicative accomplishment and apply practice methods to ‘zoom in’ on communication micropractices, and ‘zoom out’ on trans-local communication practices. The findings highlight how communities remember and forget local lessons in everyday activities.

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Introduction

Theorizing about disaster resilience broadly focuses on an ability to bounce back after a disruption, with different disciplines attending to various facets of the phenomenon (Buzzanell & Houston, 2018). For instance, community disaster scholars theorize that resilience pertains to a community's capacity to acquire and mobilize resources in the midst of changing circumstances (Norris et al., 2008). Communication scholars theorize that resilience is an ongoing process in which deliberate communicative choices facilitate adaptability to a new normal (Buzzanell, 2010). Further, crisis communication scholarship theorizes that resilience involves strategic moments for organizational learning and improvement (Ulmer, Seeger, & Sellnow, 2007). Each of these bodies of research shares a forward-looking conceptualization for resilience, focusing on ways that social systems respond to disruptions and attempt to minimize adverse impacts. Scholarship often frames disasters as opportunities for communities to learn and reflect on vulnerabilities to prepare for future risks. Therefore, a crucial aspect of resilience is how communities pull lessons learned from past disasters into efforts to prepare for future events. Despite this need, disaster resilience literature has paid little attention to community efforts to apply past lessons in preparation for future events—remembering lessons learned is an essential aspect of resilience that extends beyond initial response and recovery.

To explore attempts to apply previous lessons to future resilience efforts, this study uses practice theory to advance a view of resilience as grounded in everyday communication. Practice theory focuses on interconnected activities that create shared, embodied understandings that organize and maintain social life (Schatzki, Knorr Cetina, & Von Savigny, 2001). We propose that resilience is a process constituted through everyday communication and action, particularly practices that make lessons from past adverse events relevant in present preparation-focused

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activity. Practices are embodied activities that create and rely on practical knowledge and understandings and involve interrelationship among humans' doings and sayings and the role of objects in their accomplishment (Feldman & Orlikowski, 2011). Toward that end, communication scholars can draw from practice theory to depict how unfolding talk and action constitute knowledge (Cooren, Kuhn, Cornelissen, & Clark, 2011). A practice approach responds to the call from the *Journal of Applied Communication Research* 2018 special forum on resilience to explore multiple levels of resilience (e.g., national, organizational, community; Buzzanell & Houston, 2018). A focus on practice in empirical research can shed light on how disaster preparation activities conducted by community-, organization-, and national-level social systems intersect, and in their interrelationship, constitute resilience meanings and actions.

This study proceeds as follows. First, we review conceptualizations of disaster resilience from the national, community, and organizational levels, before introducing a view of resilience as communicative practice. Next, we present two empirical cases that examine how levels of resilience intersect in communication practices that have the potential to both remember and forget lessons from past disasters. A focus on resilience practice as occurring where levels intersect requires a shift in analytical focus that entails looking at communication practices occurring at the intersections between and across resilience levels. To that end, we draw from Nicolini's (2009) approach of methodological eclecticism to 'zoom in' and 'zoom out' on communication practices. In doing so, we trace practices, networks of practices, and interacting discourses of resilience that transcend the local context of resilience work to include community, organizational, and national resilience.

The central contribution of this study is that it connects research across levels of resilience by examining ways that inter-organizationally performed practices enact past disaster

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landscapes to materialize, or make tangible, potential hazards that could arise during future disasters. Houston and Buzzanell (2018) have called for scholars to engage with resilience using multilevel analysis. We address this identified gap and examine everyday communication using a practice approach to examine how organizational and community interactions both facilitate and obstruct resilience efforts.

Intersecting Levels in Disaster Resilience Literature

Conceptual definitions for resilience often focus on two of its significant facets. The first facet pertains to the timing of a *resilience process* or *state* relative to a disruption. Scholars have considered resilience variously as a return to a previous ‘normal’ state (Holling, 1973), an ongoing effort to adapt to changes (Buzzanell, 2010), and as anticipatory efforts to pre-plan for future events (Ulmer et al., 2007). The second facet pertains to the defining aspects of the social system experiencing and responding to disruptions. In particular, 2018’s *Journal of Applied Communication Research* forum advanced five ‘levels’ of resilience research based on the size and character of the social systems under analysis: interpersonal, family, organizational, community, and national (Buzzanell & Houston, 2018). Each social system has its own body of theory and research to which scholars tailor their analysis of resilience. The present study proposes that social systems learn lessons about disasters and how to prepare for them through coordinated actions that take place at the intersection of resilience levels—specifically, community, organizational, and national levels. This study’s focus on *disaster* resilience implicates multiple timelines and social systems in resilience theorizing. Toward that end, this study attends to both conceptualizations of resilience, and moments during disaster *preparation* when levels or social systems intersect to ‘remember’ and ‘forget’ lessons from past disasters.

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Specifically, we examine communication at the intersections among the national, organizational, and community levels.

National Resilience

While the majority of disaster resilience literature focuses on organizational or community resilience, the most sweeping level of resilience scholarship examines the nation as a social system. This work focuses on narrative constructions that make sense of national disruptions. Narratives impact local community understandings of resilience and related policies. For instance, Bean (2018) argues that national resilience involves the rhetorical construction of who belongs in ‘the nation’ and how the nation ought to move forward to cultivate resilience. Studies of national resilience tend to focus on resilience as a rhetorical tool in the construction of public sensemaking (e.g., Paliewicz, 2017; Veil, Sellnow, & Heald, 2011). Resilience has also recently become a plank of US federal disaster response and counterterrorism policy (Bean, Keränen, & Durfy, 2011). Shifts toward resilience-as-policy create ripples for communities and organizations because resilience doctrine emphasizes the inevitable and surprising nature of crises. As a consequence, national resilience policy puts the onus on communities to depend on local resources—rather than a national response—if a disaster occurs.

While not explored explicitly under national-level resilience, this work has the potential to highlight the role of response and recovery policies in codifying lessons learned from disasters. Existing work conceptualizes resilience as a sensemaking tool following a national tragedy. The erosion of preparedness and response activities at the US national level (Aradau, 2014) makes it all the more important to expand this work to consider how written policies play a role in resilience intersections among nation, community, and organization.

Community-Organization Intersection

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The locus of disaster resilience research is often at the community level because the impact of disasters is holistic and widespread. However, community responses also necessarily consist of organizational and interorganizational responses. Despite this, both areas of research have tended to overlook the relationship between organizations and community resilience. Community resilience is defined as a collective activity used by the community to adapt to new circumstances after a disruption (Houston, 2018). Houston et al. (2015) argue that strategic communication impacts the ability of the community to make sense of a disaster and bounce back from it. Organizations and institutions play an essential role in the construction of this communication environment, leading Spialek et al. (2016) to suggest that organizations should form strong cross-sector partnerships to help community member sensemaking and recovery. Further, journalism-based case studies of resilience have suggested that communities should foster robust relationships with the media pre-disaster (Veil & Ojeda, 2010) and that local leaders and social institutions can play a prominent role in recovery (Wicke & Silver, 2009). This research highlights the importance of the organization-community relationship in fostering resilience by considering the importance of community members' perceptions. As such, lessons learned from disasters might lead to promoting resilience by providing opportunities for citizen participation and employing clear communication to relay salient messages about community crises (Houston et al., 2015). Ideally, community resilience efforts should lead not to a return to the pre-crisis state but to an ability to 'bounce forward' to adapt to the new reality after the event (Houston, 2015).

In contrast to community resilience literature, studies on interorganizational resilience efforts conceptualize the process as a collaboration among organizations to acquire and allocate resources (Doerfel, Chewning, & Lai, 2013). Acknowledging the complexity of large-scale

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incidents, researchers have focused attention on explaining how interagency networks structure their disaster responses (Jahn & Johansson, 2018), and have used network analysis to demonstrate how communities build capacity through successful partnerships (Kapucu, Arslan, & Collins, 2010). Carlson (2018) argues that resilience is both reactive and proactive, and that shared concern about preventing and anticipating disaster events can join organizational stakeholders together in preparedness activities. This focus on preplanning highlights that one potential blindspot of resilience research is that, in addition to the need to ‘bounce back’ after a crisis, research might also look at ways prevention and mitigation activities *carry forward* lessons from past disasters into future preparedness activities.

A related branch of research on community interorganizational responses to disruptions examines how resilience is accomplished through adaptive capacities, or networks of dynamic resources that are linked together during community disaster response (Norris et al., 2008). Adaptive capacity focuses on the processes by which communities responsively mobilize *resources* throughout an incident (Norris et al., 2008). In effect, an *adaptive* response to a crisis is one that monitors and attends to the robustness, redundancy, and accessibility of a given resource, while *capacity* refers to a community’s ability to ensure that resources remain available and accessible as circumstances change. Overall, this research acknowledges that relationships among organizations and the affected community build potential for resilience. Interorganizational networks can increase the community capacity to respond to disruptions by creating redundancy of resources (Gillespie & Murty, 1994). Studying the interorganizational nature of resilience demonstrates that the distinction between organizational and community resilience is not discrete, and that resilience is enacted in the communication occurring where levels intersect.

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In addition to research examining inter-organizational resilience efforts, there also is a body of work exploring intra-organizational resilience. One strand of this research attends to big-picture impacts crises have on organizations writ large. For example, drawing on an organizational rhetoric view, Ulmer et al. (2007) encourage organizations to reframe crises, not merely as moments for image restoration, but also as openings for strategic organizational renewal and improvement. Much of this work, while focusing on organizational-level impacts of crises, also produces recommendations targeted at individual leaders who act on behalf of the organization (e.g., Ulmer et al., 2007). A second strand of intra-organizational resilience scholarship attends to member responses to disruptions. For instance, organizational members remain resilient when they adapt to disruptions to their work circumstances—due to changes in leadership, or job loss (Buzzanell & Turner, 2003). Therefore, organization-level lessons learned from disasters center on strategic communicative choices that allow entire organizations to renew their image, and enable members to reframe their circumstances in the face of unexpected changes.

While existing resilience research urges us to consider disruptions as opportunities for improvement, more research could examine processes by which communities, organizations, and national policies interact to pull lessons from disasters forward beyond the immediate response period. Practice theory transcends the examination of a single level of resilience to understand how these levels interact to produce resilience meanings in everyday communication. Toward that end, the next section applies a practice lens to reframe resilience efforts as comprised of ongoing communication and action that link post-disaster lessons to pre-planning activities.

Toward a View of Resilience as Practice

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A practice approach is useful for bringing attention to ways that organizations and community members communicate to ‘pull forward’ and perpetuate disaster lessons by repeatedly ‘materializing’ disasters using a variety of mediatory communication resources (Nicolini, 2009). Moreover, practice theory creates an opportunity to examine the interplay of the multiple ‘levels’ of resilience. The practice turn in organization studies and organizational communication explains focuses attention on work as accomplished by everyday actions (Feldman & Orlikowski, 2011; Nicolini, 2009). Applying a practice lens can transcend notions of resilience that center on past or future framings, and can instead attend to ways that practices pull resilience lessons from previous disasters into ongoing activities that plan for the future. A practice approach also shows how patterns of interaction taking place where ‘levels’ of resilience—nation, community, organization—intersect shapes resilience meanings. As such, a practice approach helps to inform what should (or should not) be done in preparation for future disasters.

Practice theory considers that relations among actors (e.g., humans, objects, spaces) are mutually constitutive through everyday talk and action. A practice approach considers that everyday communication processes produce the appearance that organizations are seemingly fixed entities (Feldman & Orlikowski, 2011). Practice approaches transcend focus on individuals as the source of meaning creation, instead foregrounding that normative rules and understandings create social order by establishing relationships among actors (Schatzki et al., 2001). Through foregrounding the relational nature of agency and structure—and that neither should be studied independently of the other—communication scholars can draw from practice theory to depict how talk, gestures, appearances, behaviors, and texts constitute organizational knowledge and values (Cooren et al., 2011). In general, related scholarship focuses on concrete bodily actions,

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practical knowledge (e.g., understanding how to follow a rule), and how objects (things) are used in particular contexts (e.g., to conduct a ritual). Thus, practices are inherently communicative accomplishments because they are created and maintained through communication and simultaneously express organizational commitments and attitudes (Gherardi, 2009).

Applied to resilience scholarship, a practice lens can shed light on how multiple actors—as they relate to each other in everyday communication—constitute resilience meanings and make resilience work possible for communities. This theoretical lens can show how practices function as ways of ‘remembering’ resilience lessons. When organization members perform practices, they orient to shared practical understandings of their social order (Schatzki et al., 2001), and in doing so, participate in a social form of learning (Corradi, Gherardi, & Verzelloni, 2010). Ongoing practical performances, then, institutionalize and sustain relationships among the actors performing them (Nicolini, 2009). Attending to practice also foregrounds how organizational and community members ‘bounce back’ from disasters through their everyday talk and actions, and it highlights that resilience is a *learned* social accomplishment.

Overall, a practice lens can help address the temporal, translocal, and material nature of resilience in new ways. In doing so, it provides an important contribution to disaster resilience literature because it helps explain how practices are sites in which communities and organizations make sense of national policies and previous disasters, create community improvements, and prepare for future events. This leads to our first research question:

RQ1: How do resilience ‘levels’ intersect in communication practices that ‘remember’ lessons from previous disasters?

Just as practices might keep alive lessons from previous disasters, ongoing patterns of communication and action have similar potential to overlook or ‘forget’ previous lessons

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(Buzzanell & Houston, 2018). Organizational routines are prime sites for remembering and forgetting disaster lessons because their everyday enactments create ongoing opportunities for change (Feldman, 2000). Each iteration of a routine or other communicative practice might produce new ideas and actions; however, it just as easily might perpetuate shortcomings and errors. Moreover, lessons might be forgotten from institutional memory between disaster events due to personnel turnover, organizational reconfigurations, and other changes. Toward that end, Barbour and Gill (2014) suggest that organizational members can avoid errors through continuously monitoring and adapting safety practices to ensure they are compatible with safety goals. These studies demonstrate that practices can be both functional and dysfunctional: practices provide opportunities to ‘bounce forward’ but also can perpetuate inadequate or destructive patterns of action (Buzzanell & Houston, 2018). Therefore, our second research question is:

RQ2: How do resilience ‘levels’ intersect in communication practices that ‘forget’ lessons from previous disasters?

Zooming In and Out on Resilience Practices

To create empirical research that foregrounds practices, Nicolini (2009) proposes ‘zooming in’ and ‘zooming out’ on ongoing patterns of action to understand both detailed accomplishments of practice and the role that ‘translocal’ phenomena play in local activity. Zooming in and out on practice entails using methodological eclecticism to select multiple angles for observing where structure and agency meet while taking care not to privilege either. To zoom in, Nicolini suggests observing daily sayings and doings of organizational members, for example, by using ethnomethodology, and observing how some learning processes become privileged as more legitimate than others. To zoom out, Nicolini (2009) suggests ‘following the

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practice' to understand how practices are linked together, focusing on how practices are translated in different contexts, and using historical methods to understand the emergence and stabilization of networks of practices.

A community's emergency response planning and mitigation is a relevant context for observing resilience as a complex set of interrelated practices that are both local and translocal. Toward that end, this study presents two cases from Foothills County (a pseudonym), a populous region in the Western United States. The county encompasses several small cities and suburbs, along with expansive mountain and grassland areas. Challenges to resilience in this county include various natural disasters—particularly floods and wildfires. Case 1 explores a practice approach in an Office of Emergency Management, highlighting how the US national agenda for resilience impacts local organizing and disaster preparedness and links to everyday practices that keep lessons learned from previous disasters in the foreground of community emergency preparedness activities. Case 2 follows an intractable conflict between the US Forest Service and an organized group of community residents who oppose a large-scale USFS plan to remove trees in a populated, symbolically meaningful area to protect residents from catastrophic, possibly deadly wildfires (see Table 1).

--Table 1 about here--

Case 1: Remembering National and Organizational Resilience in Community Emergency Management

The Office of Emergency Management¹ (OEM) in Foothills County coordinates interactions among several city and county organizations. OEMs tend to operate at the county level, developing emergency response plans, and coordinating with stakeholders to prepare for

¹ This organizational name, along with the county name, all other organizational names, and participant names, are pseudonyms.

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emergencies. OEMs typically focus on emergency pre-planning, response, and recovery. While these activities fit with general understandings about resilience found in the literature, OEMs have recently adopted a notion of resilience defined by the US Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). OEMs rely on FEMA to provide federal disaster assistance funds if their local community faces a costly and destructive emergency. To receive this funding, they must comply with FEMA policies. FEMA has recently labeled local ‘resilience’ as a top priority, leading offices around the country to contend with resilience meaning as a new and distinctive mission. As a result, the OEM is a fitting site to observe how national FEMA policy and local OEM enactment constitute resilience meaning. Thus, Case 1 examines OEM practices by which national- and organization- levels intersect in communication practices to ‘remember’ lessons from previous disasters and contribute to building a resilient community.

Methods

Case 1 ‘zooms in’ on practice through conducting ethnographic observation at Foothills OEM. These data contributed to building understandings of participant sensemaking about the meaning of resilience, supplementing these understandings with observation of practices that participants felt accomplished resilience (Tracy, 2013). The first author observed OEM trainings, meetings, and emergency exercises. Observation focused on practices that facilitated participant understandings of emergency management within the county. This OEM study took place over two years (2016-2018) and resulted in 182 hours of ethnographic observation (resulting in 193 pages of single-spaced, typed field notes). Additionally, 30 semistructured interviews took place with OEM participants (7 women and 23 men), including county sheriff’s officers, firefighters, police officers, nonprofit members, and the county health and human services department. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed.

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Analysis procedures. Data analysis took place in NVIVO, a qualitative data analysis software, by using iterative analysis to move between open-level descriptive codes and existing theory (Tracy, 2013). Specifically, Case 1 focused on challenges to collaboration in emergency management. Throughout observation, ‘resilience’ emerged as a pronounced theme of participants' discussions—observed in OEM monthly meetings and in follow-up interviews. ‘Resilience’ became a sensitizing concept as participants spoke about the topic with increasing frequency throughout the observation, and tied their changing priorities to the changing FEMA priorities. Given this emerging finding, the first author engaged in theoretical sampling (Charmaz, 2014). After the first round of coding, the first author returned to the field to collect more resilience-related materials, including FEMA strategic plans.

To ‘zoom out’ on connections among resilience practices, the first author used textual analysis to understand how various practices were connected and interdependent with each other (Nicolini, 2009); this involved examining how documents enabled and coordinated local resilience practices. The document dataset included locally-created texts (including four exercise scenarios and three templates for local emergency response) and FEMA documents (the two most recent Strategic Plan documents and three federal course training manuals) downloaded from the FEMA’s website. To ‘zoom in,’ the first author focused on practices of training and local accountability, paying close analytical attention to how practices implied shared understandings and concerns (Nicolini, 2009). Such practices included FEMA-sponsored trainings, talk about previous disasters in trainings and meetings, and talk about changes in OEM’s work in response to previous memorable disasters.

Case 1 Findings

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The first research question asked: *how do resilience 'levels' intersect in practices that 'remember' lessons from previous disasters?* The answer to this research question focused on intersections between organizational (Foothills OEM) and national levels (FEMA). Zooming in and out on local practices revealed that national frameworks of resilience (as a policy priority) impacted local meanings of resilience. In everyday practices, members of OEM both perpetuated lessons from previous local disasters and accommodated the changing meaning of resilience at the US national level.

Zooming out: National and local resilience. The national-level meaning of 'resilience' as a FEMA policy impacted how the OEM coordinated daily activities that members considered contributors to community resilience. FEMA's Strategic Plan (henceforth FSP) is a document produced every four years that guides the US national response to disasters while also communicating FEMA priorities to local offices of emergency management. Zooming out on resilience practice can include analysis of how *the global* influences *the local* (Nicolini, 2009). Zooming out to focus on global meaning highlights that resilience meanings can and do change. By examining changes in national discourses of resilience, we can understand how the OEM's local resilience practices were enabled and constrained by national meanings of resilience.

Analysis of FSPs demonstrated that FEMA's understanding of 'resilience' had shifted. Overall, between the 2014 FSP and the 2018 FSP, resilience meaning moved from being a federal and state responsibility to being a local and individual responsibility (Fugate, 2014; Long, 2018). In particular, in the 2014 FSP, FEMA tied resilience to a 'whole community' approach to disaster response (Fugate, 2014). The 2014 FSP called for the organization to create 'survivor-centric' disaster recovery services, coordinate national and local responses, build national capabilities for disaster response, and make investments in mitigation and rebuilding

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efforts (Fugate, 2014, p. ii). This ‘whole community’ approach called for collaboration between national, community, and organizational levels to create shared resilience. The 2014 FSP positioned FEMA as a key supporter of local communities after large-scale disasters that could provide services to facilitate community resilience.

Conversely, the 2018 FSP broadly removed FEMA from the concept of ‘resilience,’ focusing instead on the need for communities to create strong local social ties to use in disaster recovery (Long, 2018). The 2018 FSP encouraged a ‘culture of preparedness’ that cast more responsibility on individuals to consider their role in disaster response. As the 2018 FSP said, ‘we need to help individuals and families understand their personal roles in preparing for disasters and taking action – they are our true first responders’ (Long, 2018, p. 3). OEM members accounted for this change in priorities by also noting the national context surrounding the 2018 FSP—the plan was released shortly after the 2017 US Atlantic hurricane season, which participants noted as historically destructive and costly (fieldnote, September 2017). While the 2018 FSP acknowledged FEMA’s role in federal disaster assistance programs, it specified that resilience work should fall to communities more frequently as catastrophic disasters escalated. With the release of this FSP, the OEM emphasized in meetings the importance of collaborating with more local partners, and Foothills county created a new chief resilience officer position (fieldnote, May 2018). As a result, the 2018 FSP tied resilience to prepared communities and individuals that could act quickly in response to disasters. Zooming out on FEMA’s shift toward placing responsibility for disaster ‘resilience’ on local areas sets the broader context for exploring how Foothills OEM developed local communication and other practices for ‘remembering’ resilience lessons (discussed next).

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Zooming in: Local socialization and remembering resilience lessons. Nicolini (2009) suggests that zooming in on practices helps scholars recognize that practices are fundamentally social. A focus on practices (communication and otherwise) draws attention to patterns of action and how they achieve durability among social groups. One way to zoom in is to observe how organization members socialize novices about how to successfully perform practices. In particular, new OEM members participated in numerous training sessions. These sessions taught novices not only how to use federal emergency management systems, but also included commentary on how the OEM tailored their use of these systems to meet local needs. In other words, OEM members perpetuated ‘rememberings’ from previous interactions with FEMA in training sessions. Ethnographic observation of training sessions created the opportunity to zoom in on the logic behind local OEM practices that adapted national resilience priorities and emergency management systems.

Training sessions instructed OEM members about how to accommodate national priorities and make sense of changing resilience practices. Notably, participants in training frequently shared their perception that FEMA’s changing language around resilience indicated FEMA’s changing values. OEM members claimed that, as disasters became more costly in the US, FEMA was no longer able to assist in as many disaster responses contributing to the new emphasis on community resilience (fieldnote, September 2018). OEM members often compared FEMA framing of resilience to ‘an insurance company.’ They noted that FEMA did not want to provide the maximum federal relief funds available, and, as a result, Foothills OEM would have to become more self-reliant (interview, September 2018). As Jacqueline, a county employee who worked with OEM, said, ‘I think they’re trying to save money. There’s not enough money, with as many disasters as are happening, to cover everything’ (interview, July 2018). John, an OEM

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staff member, defined resilience as ‘don’t expect help right away, you need to be self-sufficient’ (interview, October 2018). These lessons also drew on local experience—during the 2013 flooding in the county, members recounted, FEMA was challenging to work with, and the county learned that they had to be self-starting in response and recovery efforts (fieldnote, April 2018). During trainings, stories about the flood and FEMA’s role in it foregrounded that resilience in the future would require self-sufficiency, as FEMA could not respond to every community disaster.

OEM participants also engaged in local practices that indicated their accommodation of this new resilience policy of self-sufficiency. For example, OEM had four full-time staff members (all other participants worked elsewhere and tended to participate in OEM activities once or twice a month). While these staff members all had official roles, they also came together to participate in ‘unofficial’ activities not included in their job description. As Michael, the Deputy Director of OEM, stated, one practice the OEM staff participated in was clearing ‘debris dams.’ During the historic levels of flooding that occurred in the county in 2013, many creeks overflowed, causing debris and water to rush down canyons, and destroying many homes and roads (fieldnote, May 2018). By monitoring the debris dams, OEM member practices communicated a commitment to self-sufficiency as supported by the 2018 FSP.

To prevent flooding, Michael and the rest of the OEM staff described the practice of getting into a car once a month and driving up into the canyons to look for fallen logs and other debris piling up in the creeks. They would then map these areas and send local firefighters to clear the debris. Michael noted that this practice was not strictly the job of OEM, stating:

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But if that debris dam causes flooding, if you do ever get flash flooding, that debris dam will cause a really big problem...so we get ahead of it. That's one thing where no one else is doing it, so we'll do it (interview, October 2018).

This physical practice enacted FEMA's new meaning for 'resilience' centered on 'self-sufficiency' by showing how the change in FEMA policy led to concrete changes in OEM members' local activities. OEM staff enacted their landscape in ways that recognized lessons learned from previous disasters—in this case, the 2013 flood. In doing so, they also communicatively connected their daily practices to broader networks of practices that emphasized the changing nature of resilience meaning at the national level.

In sum, because FEMA shifted disaster responsibility from national and state availability in 2014 to community and individual self-sufficiency in 2018, the Foothills OEM recognized the need to 'remember' lessons from previous disasters, namely the 2013 flood. Members' everyday practices marked changes their understanding of resilience, explained the relationship between national ideas of resilience and local organizational decisions, and created routines of remembering lessons from past local disasters. These practices oriented to both a changing relationship to national resilience and previous understandings of challenges to local resilience.

Case 2: Practices of Forgetting in Community and Organizational Resilience

Case 2 illustrates how the intersection between an organization (the US Forest Service) and a community ('Lodgepole') resulted in forgetting lessons about catastrophic wildfires and what should be done to prepare communities for them. The case focuses on an intractable conflict centered on a USFS vegetation treatment plan called Fuels II (pseudonym) that proposed removing trees on nearly 4000 acres of federal land through thinning and clearcutting timber stands adjacent to a somewhat densely populated area. The Lodgepole community was

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particularly vulnerable to wildfire, and the purpose of Fuels II was to reduce community wildfire risk in this wildland urban interface (WUI)—a multi-use area where public and private land intermix (Ascher, Wilson, & Toman, 2013). An organized group of Lodgepole residents referred to here as ‘Opposition Group’ resisted the USFS implementation of Fuels II for several years through voicing objection at numerous public meetings, claiming that altering the landscape would diminish the aesthetics and other ‘social values’ of it.

Methods

Data for Case 2 included observation and documentation from 21 public meetings taking place over three years. The first data source encompassed detailed field notes and other documentation (e.g., meeting summaries, PowerPoint slides) from 21 public meetings regarding Fuels II. This data comprised over 100 pages of single-spaced documents and fieldnotes in addition to five multi-slide PowerPoint presentations. The second source of data was the complete set of letters ($N = 374$) written to the USFS from community members during the formal ‘public comment period’ at the early stages of the Fuels II project.

Analysis procedures. As with Case 1, the second author iteratively analyzed data, working back and forth between a practice-based analytical lens (Nicolini, 2009) and emerging concepts and themes (Tracy, 2013). The first step of analysis involved narrowing focus to residents’ frequent references to the ‘social values’ of the landscapes slated for treatment. In particular, Opposition Group’s emphasis on preserving the landscape’s ‘social values’ *competed with* efforts to enhance community resilience through implementing Fuels II. On that basis, the first ten meetings were of interest because talk of ‘social values’ *versus* resilience (via Fuels II) was most prevalent in these early meetings.

--Table 2 about here--

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The second step of the analysis was to zoom-out to follow associations between practices (Nicolini, 2009) by identifying which practices were focal in the Fuels II case. Practices of interest included 1) the formal USFS *public comment process* by which the land management agency sought feedback about the proposed project, and 2) Opposition Group's organized resistance to Fuels II at public meetings. With the two broad, intersecting practices in mind, the second author tracked across three years of meetings how the Opposition Group made a case for their main priority—protecting the 'social values' (e.g., aesthetics, recreational uses) of the area through rejecting the USFS treatment plan. Analysis noted how the USFS responded to 'social values' concerns and tracked how the Opposition Group adapted their argument against Fuels II based on the USFS responses over time. Similarly, the second author zoomed-in on the ongoing practice of the conflict by examining specific interaction episodes at public meetings between the USFS and the Opposition Group. Participants often mentioned the contested materiality and meanings of the local fire-scarred landscape in the meetings (Nicolini, 2009), which indicated that parties anchored their understandings of wildfire risks and appropriate responses in their personal connections with the space.

Case 2 Findings

The second research question asked: *How do resilience 'levels' intersect in practices that 'forget' lessons from previous disasters?* The answer to this research question focused on intersections between organizational (the US Forest Service) and community levels (namely Opposition Group). Overall, the USFS intention for the Fuels II project was to implement large-scale preventative measures (i.e., removing trees) in response to two compounding wildfire risk factors—growing human habitation in WUI areas, and increased prevalence of massive, catastrophic wildfires in the region. The Fuels II plan embodied how the USFS institutionally

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‘remembered’ past wildfire disasters and how it prepared for future ones. The ongoing conflict of stalling the Fuels II project—through emotionally-charged communicative exchanges at public meetings—hindered the agency’s ability to carry the lessons from previous wildfires forward in ways that could benefit local communities in the near future. The first section of these findings addresses how community group opposition promoted stasis over preparedness and hindered previous lessons from being carried forward. The second section of the findings focuses on a specific local wildfire, and how the physical fire scar anchored residents’ conflicting understandings of wildfire risks and appropriate responses.

Zooming out: Intersecting organizational and community group practices. Preparing WUI communities for wildfire protection is a large-scale, long-term endeavor. In the present case, the US Forest Service had a mandate to perform land management activities to protect the WUI by removing trees on public land. The first practice relevant to this analysis was the USFS formal ‘public comment’ process for managing public input regarding federal land treatment projects. This process involved a mix of public outreach and education activities (e.g., meetings, open houses, field trips), a public comment period (residents submitted written letters to the USFS online), a USFS official response to comments (via public document), and release of the final treatment plan. All of these activities took place in the early stages of Fuels II planning (see Table 2 for timeline). The second practice of interest was the Opposition Group’s organized opposition to Fuels II. Opposition Group members (approximately 120 residents from one neighborhood near Lodgepole) submitted comment letters and attended meetings and field trips, loudly arguing that thinned and clearcut areas ruined the forest aesthetic, diminished recreational opportunities and overall quality of life, and negatively impacted their property values. This group’s opposition constituted the second practice because representatives from this group

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participated in every public meeting, typically to voice opposition to USFS land management activities, rather than to find areas for consensus or compromise.

Looking across the meetings and USFS formal comment period since 2015, opposition residents have called to maintain the status quo of the landscape (i.e., minimize or eliminate planned changes) to protect the ‘social values’ tied to it. For example, at a USFS information session held on January 11, 2016 (Meeting 1, January 2016, Table 2), opposition residents critiqued the Fuels II plan for failing to consider the ‘social components’ of the areas slated for treatment. Around that same time, a handful of the $N = 374$ submitted public comments directly discussed the ‘social values’ of the area ($n = 17$), making the case to preserve the landscape as-is rather than removing trees. Public comments argued that Fuels II should place ‘more importance on scenic and social values, wildlife habitat, as well as preserving future old-growth [timber].’ Another commenter (December 2016) elaborated on *social values* as follows:

On the destruction of social values, the project is within the ‘Wildland Urban Interface’ or ‘WUI.’ But the ‘urban’ quality continues to be ignored, i.e., the impact on the human population living in this wildland and/or using it for recreation, rest, revitalization, etc.... [Fuels II] destroys the beauty and recreational value of those lands...[and]...shows a stunning lack of attention to human life and well-being.

While a small proportion of public comment letters mentioned ‘social values,’ the term gathered momentum as meetings unfolded over time. The most striking emphasis on social values came at the mid-point of a 4-hour mediated objector resolution meeting (Meeting 4, February 2017). After spending two hours facilitating a conversation between Opposition Group members (and other publics opposed to Fuels II) and USFS representatives, the mediator summarized residents’ stated priorities. She wrote on a whiteboard residents’ requested changes to the Fuels II plan

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(e.g., reducing the number of acres treated, retaining older trees). After completing the list, she asked, ‘does this list capture the changes people want to see?’ The reply was a resounding ‘NO!’ called out in unison from most of the 30+ attendees. A male attendee yelled out, ‘That’s the minutiae—it’s not the real issue!’ There were several vocalizations around the room supporting his statement. Through the ensuing conversation, it became clear that the social values were the ‘real issue,’ and even the residents’ proposed changes to Fuels II (i.e., ‘the minutiae’) would not be enough to maintain their desired status quo of the landscape.

The crux of the intractability appeared to lie in how the USFS responded to Opposition Group’s ‘social values’ concerns early in the formal comment process, which set the stage for future dysfunctional communication between parties. During the first four meetings, USFS representatives countered mentions of social values by justifying that Fuels II was ecologically sound according to various scientific sources and made strategic sense from a wildland firefighting vantage point. For instance, in Meeting 3 (December 2016), USFS representatives, when pressed about the scientific basis of the project, reassured residents that they were indeed taking the appropriate scientific studies into account in justifying fuel treatments. Further, in Meeting 4 (February 2017), USFS representatives sought to identify specific changes they could make to the Fuels II plan. Invoking land management best practices and ecological and wildfire science-based justifications for Fuels II fit the genre of the USFS’ formal public comment process, and in effect, carried previous local wildfire lessons forward in planned preventative actions. However, the comment process did not provide openings in which publics could discuss ‘social values’ in a way that legitimated these symbolic concerns. The more the USFS failed to address social values concerns, the more motivated Opposition Group members were to resist USFS efforts to move Fuels II toward implementation. The next section illustrates how the

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Opposition Group's preference to maintain the status quo resulted in actively 'forgetting' lessons from a recent, local wildfire that posed a significant threat to the Lodgepole community.

Zooming in: Divergent understandings of a wildfire landscape. Zooming in on practice involved focusing attention on ways that one physical landscape played a role in community members remembering and forgetting a previous disaster through ways they invoked that landscape in public meetings. In this case, the particular landscape—the area burned in the Springs Fire—housed divergent meanings parties invoked to support their line of argument to support or oppose Fuels II. For instance, in Meeting 2 (October 2016), interagency wildland firefighters and other local responders advanced a wildfire safety preparedness argument, explaining that their successful suppression of the Springs Fire, which threatened the Lodgepole community amid this ongoing conflict, was due to existing fuel treatment areas. Following that logic, they argued, Fuels II would create a similar strategic advantage for future catastrophic fires. Thus, to firefighters and responders, the Springs Fire was evidence of fuel treatments similar to Fuels II working correctly. Invoking the fire scar in this way allowed them to 'remember' the impacts and risks of the previous event by invoking how the landscape itself was physical evidence of the treatments' efficacy.

Opposition Group residents did not share with Fuels II supporters the same symbolism of the fire scar. Instead, those in opposition advanced a counter-argument supported by evidence from geographically distant places. In Meeting 6 (October 2017), an Opposition Group resident argued that fuel treatments in a distant state (and much different fuel type) served as evidence that fuel treatments like Fuels II would not work to prevent catastrophic fires. He argued:

... one of my fears is that a lot of people are totally for [Fuels II], and I think they think that those [fuel treatments] are gonna make it safe. But we see what happened in

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California—they [had extensive fuel treatments] thinking their town wouldn't burn down.

But you know what? Santa Rosa burned anyway.

The 2017 Santa Rosa, California fire, which took place more than 1000 miles away, came up in several meetings as an argument against Fuels II, as Opposition Group residents claimed that Santa Rosa fuel treatments were ineffective at preventing the devastating wildfire. Opposition residents' analogous thinking was that fuel treatments near Lodgepole would be equally ineffective. These plausible—but not necessarily accurate—conflations between geographic areas and forest fuel types seemed to exacerbate misconceptions about how wildfires burned in the local forest. Most importantly, when residents made such claims, they did so to justify both their mistrust in land managers and their opposition to the USFS altering the landscape. The previously quoted resident directly countered the firefighters' fire safety argument saying that cutting trees would be futile in stopping a massive fire, thus implying that the USFS should maintain the status quo.

In sum, the USFS Fuels II project was designed as a large-scale vegetation treatment to reduce trees in an inhabited area vulnerable to catastrophic wildfire. However, Opposition Group members objected to the treatment because they feared removing trees would diminish the 'social values' of the area. The Springs Fire came dangerously close to destroying the Lodgepole community during the ongoing conflict between Opposition Group and the USFS (Table 2). Despite this, residents who already opposed Fuels II willfully 'forgot' local disaster lessons by refusing to see the Springs Fire as a relevant reason for their broader community to conduct the wildfire preparation activities proposed in Fuels II. The tendency for Opposition Group members to invoke distant locations to make their argument for maintaining the status quo stood in contrast to Fuels II supporters who looked to their local landscape to 'remember' the Springs

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Fire and use it as a reason for their community to undertake large-scale land management activities to prevent wildfire destruction.

Discussion and Recommendations for Practice

This study proposed that a central concern for disaster resilience research is considering how communities draw lessons from previous disasters into activities that prepare for future events. A practice lens contributes to our efforts to theorize resilience because it directs attention to the ephemeral nature of disaster lessons. That is, a practice lens embraces that institutional memory about past events is only as good as the everyday actions that enact those lessons. As such, it invites us to examine the situated, socio-material, and mutually co-constitutive interactions that construct remembering and forgetting. Drawing from practice theory, we conceptualized that ‘remembering’ and ‘forgetting’ occurred through everyday patterns of communication and action taking place between inter-organizational actors involved in community disaster response and preparedness. The two cases showed different efforts within the same county to carry lessons from past disasters—a flood and a wildfire—into projects that prepare for future community safety. Thus, the present study brings attention to communication and actions in which resilience ‘levels’ intersect (Buzzanell & Houston, 2018).

First, through *zooming out* on historical developments across time, we see how institutional memory codified in policies (Case 1) and normative projects (Case 2) is remembered or forgotten through efforts to implement it. Organizational, community, and national resilience are interwoven, especially as natural disasters can impact all three ‘levels’ of potential resilience work. A practice approach makes salient the meaningful connections across ‘levels’ of resilience, reframing resilience as a discursive accomplishment occurring through networks of trans-local practices. Specifically, *zooming out* to detect networks of trans-local

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practices involves taking a historical look at trends that have emerged over time, an endeavor that is possible from conducting multi-year research projects. In this study, *national* and *organizational* levels intersected in ways the OEM adapted national policies into local activities. For practitioners, then, a practice-approach to resilience indicates the advantages of formalizing largely emergent disaster response networks and recognizing that resilience work will necessarily cross these levels. Additionally, practitioners can activate and remember these networks by, for example, conducting simulation exercises that allow people to put the network into motion.

In Case 2, the *organizational* project (Fuels II) incited *community* resistance. The physical fire scar symbolized different meanings about fire risk depending on whether a resident supported or opposed Fuels II. Notably, however, its meaning was shaped mainly by lines of argument about fire risk that community members had been advancing throughout the multi-year conflict. A key finding was that the USFS public comment process did not lend the same legitimacy to ‘social values’ concerns as it did to science- and firefighting-related concerns, leading to conflict. This finding suggests that meaningful landscapes in disaster-prone WUI areas might require a revision to land management agencies’ public comment processes that accounts for the symbolic importance of certain multi-use landscapes.

Second, through *zooming in* on everyday communication episodes, a practice approach to resilience directs attention to ways meanings are created and perpetuated in daily talk and activity and accentuates that resilience is an ongoing accomplishment. As such, zooming in on practices shows how everyday patterns of interaction have the potential to be productive, inadequate, or destructive to community attempts to bounce back from disasters. This study illustrated a positive practice that involved pulling past flood lessons forward to support

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prevention and mitigation goals. OEM's clearing of debris dams carried lessons from previous flooding forward in time, while also adopting FEMA's latest push for communities to be more self-reliant. Case 1 demonstrated that those engaged in resilience work were already using practices that responded to previous lessons learned. Practitioners, then, can take this lesson a step further by generating reflexivity about how previous events inform current practices. This does not need to be limited to reflection immediately after a disaster (e.g., recommendations within an after-action report). Instead, practitioners can become reflexive about current routines and deliberately revise them with past lessons in mind.

Conversely, Case 2 showed how practices can create patterns of forgetting related to past disasters. While previous studies have emphasized that moments of crisis present opportunities to create a new and improved normal state, attempts to restore the community to a level of normalcy can also impede moments of transformation (Buzzanell & Houston, 2018). Here, a practice approach highlighted communicative episodes of intractability and could inform efforts to reassess communication patterns to create tractability and facilitate learning (Feldman & Orlikowski, 2011). For instance, given Opposition Group members' personal investment in their WUI community and landscape, land management agencies might create formal avenues for community involvement. One idea might involve incorporating multi-party monitoring into the early stages of implementation of land treatment projects like Fuels II. Multiparty monitoring could bring together interested residents, representatives from land management agencies, and a neutral party to facilitate the communication of stakeholders' priorities, aiming to build consensus early on while avoiding escalating conflict.

Third, these cases show the large-scale, inter-organizational nature of resilience work, particularly disaster preparedness, and as such, they underscore the importance of trusting

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relationships. A practice lens explores how trust among various actors is accomplished in everyday talk and action (Norris et al., 2008). In Case 1, cynicism toward FEMA potentially could have hindered resilience efforts, as mistrust could make it difficult for local emergency managers to work with national teams during times of crisis. In Case 2, the predominant focus of public meetings was to help residents understand the USFS scientific justifications for Fuels II, but the process largely overlooked the validity and credibility of Opposition Group's 'social values' concerns. The Opposition Group's lack of trust in the USFS resulted in delaying a wildfire preparedness project in ways that might have increased the community's vulnerability to wildfire. Therefore, local practices that enact national resilience doctrine (Case 1) or negotiate organizational and community priorities (Case 2) create opportunities for developing (or possibly eroding) trust in the interorganizational connections comprising a community's efforts at disaster response, recovery, and preparedness. With a shifting focus toward 'resilience' as a local and individual responsibility, both cases pointed to the importance of involving residents in disaster preparedness. Toward that end, the OEM and USFS might consider cultivating networks of neighborhood residents to act as community leaders or influencers who can serve as informational resources for their neighbors regarding disaster preparation and response. This approach could facilitate community efforts to disseminate accurate information about risks and best practices for 'resilience' among residents.

Conclusion

These two cases demonstrate the potential use of a practice-based approach to resilience. Resilience exists, not in singular or linear attempts to bounce back after disasters, but discursively, in networks of communicative processes and other practices that join national, community, and organizational levels of meaning. Reframing resilience as created in practice

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presents opportunities to understand more and less impactful practices by recasting some resilience efforts as useful methods for ‘remembering’ lessons from previous disasters and exploring ways communities, perhaps inadvertently, ‘forget’ these lessons. Resilience does not reside simply in recovery or in preplanning; instead, it unfolds over time as local practices orient to trans-local meanings and previous understandings. Reframing resilience as practice allows scholars to examine how lessons are pulled forward in time to prepare for future disasters. These lessons transcend individual levels of resilience research and exist instead in the relationship among the multiple actors who must be involved in complex disaster response.

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