

Rebuilding Beyond Bricks: The Environmental Psychological Foundations of Community Healing After the Lytton Creek Fire

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Abstract : In a time characterized by escalating climate change impacts, communities globally face extreme events with deep-reaching tangible and intangible consequences. At the intersection of these phenomena lies the profound impact on the cultural and emotional connections that individuals forge with their environments. This study casts a spotlight on the Lytton Creek Fire of 2021, showcasing it as an exemplar of both the visible destruction brought by such events and the more covert yet deeply impactful disturbances to place attachment (PA). Defined as the emotional and cognitive bond individuals form with their surroundings, PA is critical in comprehending how such catastrophic events reshape cultural identity and the bond with the land. Against the stark backdrop of the Lytton Creek Fire's devastation, the research seeks to unpack the multilayered dynamics of PA amidst the tangible wreckage and the intangible repercussions such as emotional distress and disrupted cultural landscapes. Delving deeper, it examines how affected populations renegotiate their affiliations with these drastically altered environments, grappling with both the tangible loss of their homes and the intangible challenges to solace, identity, and community cohesion. This exploration is instrumental in the broader climate change narrative, as it offers crucial insights into how these personal-place relationships can influence and shape climate adaptation and recovery strategies. Departing from traditional data collection methodologies, this study adopts an interpretive phenomenological approach enriched by hermeneutic insights and places the experiences of the Lytton community and its co-researchers at its core. Instead of conventional interviews, innovative methods like walking audio sessions and photo elicitation are employed. These techniques allow participants to immerse themselves back into the environment, reviving and voicing their memories and emotions in real-time. Walking audio captures reflections on spatial narratives after the trauma, whereas photo voices encapsulate the intangible emotions, presenting a visual representation of place-based experiences. Key findings emphasize the indispensability of addressing both the tangible and intangible traumas in community recovery efforts post-disaster. The profound changes to the cultural landscape and the subsequent shifts in PA underscore the need for holistic, culturally attuned, and emotionally insightful adaptation strategies. These strategies, rooted in the lived experiences and testimonies of the affected individuals, promise more resonant and effective recovery efforts. The research further contributes to climate change discourse, highlighting the intertwined pathways of tangible reconstruction and the essentiality of emotional and cultural rejuvenation. Furthermore, the use of participatory methodologies in this inquiry challenges traditional research paradigms, pointing to potential evolutionary shifts in qualitative research norms. Ultimately, this study underscores the need for a more integrative approach in addressing the aftermath of environmental disasters, ensuring that both physical and emotional rebuilding are given equal emphasis.

Keywords : place attachment, community recovery, disaster response, sensory responses, intangible traumas, visual methodologies

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