Social Resilience Among The Rubble : How Communities Construct New Identities After Disasters

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Abstract

Disasters disrupt not only physical infrastructure but also social relations, collective identities, and community meaning systems. While disaster studies have extensively examined risk management, emergency response, and physical recovery, the social processes through which communities reconstruct identity and meaning in post-disaster contexts remain underexplored. This study examines social resilience as an interpretative and identity-based process through which communities actively reconstruct their social worlds after disasters. Using a qualitative sociological–interpretative approach, the research draws on in-depth interviews, participant observation, and analysis of community narratives involving disaster-affected communities. The findings demonstrate that social resilience is not a static capacity but a negotiated process shaped through collective narratives, solidarity practices, and symbolic actions. Communities redefine "who we are" by transforming experiences of loss into shared meanings that strengthen social bonds and collective agency. Furthermore, the construction of post-disaster identity occurs within unequal power relations, where community narratives often contest external representations imposed by state actors, humanitarian organizations, and media. In this sense, social resilience functions not only as adaptation but also as symbolic resistance against passive victimhood labels. The study contributes to disaster resilience scholarship by reframing resilience as a dynamic process of identity construction and meaning-making, offering a deeper understanding of post-disaster recovery beyond technical and material dimensions.

Keywords: Community Resilience; Disaster Recovery; Identity Construction; Social Capital; Social Resilience

1. Introduction

Natural and non-natural disasters are disruptive events that not only damage physical infrastructure but also unsettle social structures, community relations, and the collective identities of affected societies. In post-disaster situations, the loss of housing, livelihoods, and long-standing social networks is often accompanied by a crisis of meaning concerning who the community is and how its members should continue life together. However, although disasters are frequently represented as moments of total destruction, numerous field studies demonstrate that the post-disaster phase also constitutes a space in which forms of social resilience emerge, grounded in collective practices, solidarity, and the reconstruction of shared identities (Ntontis et al., 2018). Accordingly, post-disaster recovery cannot be understood solely as an effort to rebuild what has been materially lost, but rather as a social process involving the production of meaning, the negotiation of relationships, and the formation of new identities.

In many disaster narratives, affected communities are often positioned as passive victims awaiting intervention from the state, humanitarian organizations, or other external actors. Such representations tend to obscure the capacity of communities to act collectively and to develop survival strategies based on their own social and cultural resources. Few et al. (2023) show that dominant post-

disaster narratives frequently fail to reflect the lived experiences of affected communities and instead reproduce power relations that position communities as objects of recovery rather than as active subjects. In reality, numerous studies indicate that in crisis situations, communities often develop new forms of solidarity, emergent identities, and social practices that enable them to collectively navigate post-disaster uncertainty.

Academically, disaster studies and community resilience research have developed significantly, yet they remain largely dominated by approaches that emphasize risk management, emergency response, and physical and economic recovery. Koliou et al. (2020) note that community resilience is often operationalized through structural indicators such as infrastructure capacity, access to resources, and institutional preparedness. While important, this approach tends to reduce resilience to a measurable technical capacity, thereby neglecting the symbolic, cultural, and identity dimensions that play a central role in long-term recovery processes. As a result, analytical attention to how communities interpret disaster experiences and reconstruct a sense of togetherness often remains insufficient.

Within the social resilience literature, resilience is frequently understood as a community's adaptive capacity to return to its pre-disaster condition following disruption. This perspective has increasingly been questioned, as it assumes that pre-disaster conditions represent an ideal state to be restored. Monteil et al. (2020) demonstrate that post-disaster recovery processes are often transformative rather than restorative, as disasters fundamentally alter social structures, power relations, and community identities. In this context, social resilience relates not only to the capacity to endure, but also to the ability of communities to construct new social orders and identities that are more attuned to post-disaster realities.

The practical urgency of this perspective becomes evident when post-disaster rehabilitation and reconstruction policies fail to account for the social dynamics and identity processes of affected communities. Technocratic and top-down recovery approaches risk overlooking the meanings, values, and narratives that operate at the community level. Krüger and Albris (2020) show that interventions insensitive to local social dynamics may generate new tensions, weaken internal solidarity, and even hinder recovery processes themselves. Consequently, understanding how communities construct meaning and identity after disasters is crucial for designing sustainable recovery policies rooted in the social realities of affected populations.

A critical review of previous studies indicates that although the concept of social resilience has been widely discussed, most research continues to focus on the quantitative measurement of adaptive capacity or social capital. Hall et al. (2023) emphasize that such approaches often fail to capture subjective experiences, collective emotions, and identity negotiation processes experienced by post-disaster communities. Meanwhile, research on social identity in disaster contexts suggests that disasters can trigger the emergence of new collective identities that serve as foundations for solidarity and collective action (Ntontis et al., 2020). However, these studies remain relatively disconnected from mainstream social resilience literature and have yet to be integrated into a comprehensive analytical framework.

Based on these conditions, this study identifies a research gap in the limited number of qualitative studies that explicitly analyze how disaster-affected communities build social resilience through interpretative identity construction processes. Existing literature has not sufficiently explored how collective narratives, symbols, and social practices are employed by communities to redefine themselves after disasters, nor how these processes interact with power relations and external representations. Yet, understanding these dynamics is essential to explain why some communities are able to recover socially, while others experience prolonged social fragmentation.

The novelty of this study lies in its sociological and interpretative analysis of social resilience as a process of identity construction rather than merely an adaptive capacity. By focusing on post-disaster narratives, symbols, and social practices, this research seeks to expand the understanding of social resilience as a dynamic, negotiated, and meaning-laden process. The objective of this study is to analyze how disaster-affected communities construct social resilience through the formation of new identities and to uncover the dynamics of meaning and social practices that shape post-disaster recovery processes.

2. Method, Data, and Analysis

This study adopts a qualitative approach grounded in a sociological and interpretative perspective to understand social resilience as a process of post-disaster identity construction. This approach is chosen because the research objective does not focus on quantitatively measuring adaptive capacity, but rather on interpreting meanings, narratives, and social practices developed by disaster-affected communities. Accordingly, post-disaster social reality is positioned as an intersubjectively constructed outcome shaped through social interaction, symbols, and collective experiences, as emphasized in interpretative qualitative research traditions.

The research context includes communities affected by both natural and non-natural disasters, with a focus on post-disaster recovery experiences at the community level. Research participants were selected purposively to represent diverse social perspectives, including community leaders, affected residents, local volunteers, and other social actors involved in recovery processes. Data were collected through in-depth interviews to explore subjective narratives and lived post-disaster experiences, participant observation of social practices and collective activities, and document analysis of community narratives such as local archives, community media, and collective stories that emerged during recovery.

Data analysis was conducted using a thematic and interpretative approach that emphasized the interpretation of symbolic meanings and social narratives emerging from field data. The analytical process involved thematic coding, the identification of meaning patterns, and the reconstruction of post-disaster community identity formation processes. Data credibility was ensured through source and method triangulation, member checking to confirm the alignment between interpretations and participants' experiences, and researcher reflexivity to acknowledge positionality and subjectivity in the interpretative process. This approach enabled an in-depth and contextual understanding of how social resilience is constructed as a social and cultural process in post-disaster settings.

3. Results and Discussion

Social Resilience as a Process of Meaning Construction in Post-Disaster Contexts

The analysis indicates that social resilience in post-disaster contexts cannot be understood as a static capacity or an attribute possessed by communities prior to disaster occurrence, but rather as a social process that is continuously negotiated through collective meaning construction. Disasters function as disruptive events that destabilize existing meaning frameworks, compelling communities to reinterpret experiences of loss, uncertainty, and profound change in everyday life. Under these conditions, resilience emerges not merely from material resource availability, but from the community's ability to construct shared narratives that assign new meanings to disaster experiences and to their collective position within them (Quinn et al., 2020).

Collective narratives play a central role in this meaning construction process. Disaster-affected communities do not simply recount disasters as tragic events, but also as shared experiences that shape togetherness and emergent collective identities. Ntontis et al. (2018) demonstrate that in post-disaster situations, emergent social identities are often formed through narratives of "we" that emphasize shared experience, interdependence, and solidarity. Such narratives enable communities to interpret suffering not as collective failure, but as a condition to be confronted together, thereby strengthening social bonds among community members.

Furthermore, post-disaster meaning construction is neither singular nor homogeneous, but rather the outcome of social negotiation involving diverse experiences and social positions within the community. Few et al. (2023) show that differences in social class, gender, age, and access to resources influence how individuals and groups interpret disaster and recovery. Nevertheless, through social interaction and collective practices, these differences are often negotiated within shared narratives that emphasize collective community interests. This process illustrates that social resilience is not merely an individual response to crisis, but the product of social dialogue that shapes shared understandings of post-disaster reality.

Solidarity practices serve as a primary medium through which collective meanings are constructed. Acts of mutual assistance, resource sharing, and collective labor function not only as practical survival strategies, but also as symbols of togetherness and collective commitment. Castro Correa et al. (2020) show that post-disaster transformations of social capital often occur through intensified solidarity practices that subsequently form the basis for new social relationships. Through these practices, communities construct meanings that position them not merely as victims, but as active agents capable of organizing and acting collectively in response to crisis.

In addition, post-disaster meaning construction is shaped by symbolic and cultural dimensions embedded within communities. Religious rituals, collective commemorations, and local symbols are frequently used to interpret disasters and situate them within socially acceptable meaning frameworks. Lalani et al. (2021) demonstrate that spiritual and cultural dimensions play a significant role in building community psychosocial resilience by providing symbolic languages through which suffering and future hope can be understood. In this context, social resilience is not only functional but also existential, as it relates to the community's efforts to preserve meaning in life after disaster.

Nevertheless, the analysis also reveals that post-disaster meaning construction processes are not free from tension. Dominant collective narratives may obscure the experiences of certain groups or marginalize dissenting voices. Krüger and Albris (2020) emphasize that resilience is often used normatively to demand that communities "recover" without acknowledging internal conflicts and structural inequalities. Therefore, social resilience must be understood as a dynamic and contested process rather than an idealized condition devoid of conflict.

Overall, this subsection demonstrates that post-disaster social resilience is a complex and multilayered process of meaning construction. Communities build resilience through collective narratives, solidarity practices, and cultural symbols that enable them to reinterpret disaster experiences collectively. Accordingly, social resilience cannot be reduced to a technically measurable adaptive capacity, but must be understood as an interpretative social process that forms the foundation for post-disaster community recovery and transformation.

Reconstruction of Collective Identity through Social Practices and Community Solidarity
The analysis shows that post-disaster community identity is not restorative in the sense of returning to pre-disaster conditions, but rather transformative and reconstructed through social practices and collective solidarity. Disasters function as moments of identity disruption that fracture established narratives of "who we are" as a community, while simultaneously creating opportunities for redefining identity in ways more adaptive to new realities. Farny and Dentoni (2025) show that in post-disaster contexts, community identities are often reconstructed through interactions between experiences of loss, survival needs, and collective aspirations to build futures that differ from pre-disaster conditions.

Everyday social practices constitute the primary arena in which this identity reconstruction unfolds. Activities such as collective house rebuilding, communal kitchens, collective aid management, and the formation of self-help groups serve not only instrumental purposes but also symbolic functions. Through these practices, communities construct narratives of themselves as groups capable of collective action, interdependence, and shared recovery. Partelow (2020) demonstrates that post-disaster social practices often strengthen community ownership and deepen collective identities that may previously have been loose or fragmented.

Solidarity plays a crucial role as a binding mechanism in the reconstruction of community identity. Solidarity is expressed not only through material assistance, but also through emotional support, recognition of shared suffering, and participation in collective action. Ntontis et al. (2020) emphasize that post-disaster solidarity contributes to the emergence of social identities that transcend pre-disaster social divisions. These identities are frequently rooted in shared crisis experiences, forming a more inclusive and robust sense of "we" than previously existed. Moreover, post-disaster identity reconstruction also involves symbolic and cultural dimensions. Collective rituals, disaster commemorations, and the use of local symbols function as means through which new identities are articulated and community continuity is affirmed amid change. Lalani et al. (2021) show that symbolic and spiritual practices help communities negotiate loss and hope, integrating traumatic experiences into

broader collective identity narratives. In this sense, post-disaster identity concerns not only social continuity but also the preservation of dignity and meaning within the community.

However, identity reconstruction processes are neither homogeneous nor free from tension. Monteil et al. (2020) demonstrate that solidarity practices and collective narratives may produce dominant identities that do not equally represent all community members. Certain groups, such as women, older adults, or other marginalized populations, may experience symbolic exclusion if new identity narratives focus disproportionately on particular figures or groups. Therefore, post-disaster identity reconstruction must be understood as a dynamic and sometimes conflictual process of social negotiation. To clarify the process of collective identity reconstruction through social practices and community solidarity, a synthesis of the findings of this study is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Collective Identity Reconstruction through Post-Disaster Social Practices

Dimension	Pre-Disaster Condition	Post-Disaster Transformation
Community identity	Fragmented or loosely connected	Emergent and solidarity-based
Social practices	Routine-based daily interactions	Collective action and mutual aid
Solidarity	Limited to close social ties	Expanded and inclusive solidarity
Symbolic meaning	Taken-for-granted community symbols	Re-signified symbols of survival and unity
Sense of belonging	Individual or subgroup-oriented	Strong collective "we" identity

The table indicates that post-disaster community identity reconstruction is characterized by a shift from fragmented identities toward a collective identity built through solidarity practices and collective action. This newly constructed identity not only reflects adaptation to post-disaster conditions, but also functions as a social and symbolic resource that strengthens community resilience in a sustained manner. Overall, this subsection underscores that the reconstruction of collective identity constitutes the core of post-disaster social resilience processes. Through social practices and community solidarity, affected populations not only rebuild their social lives but also redefine who they are as a community. This reconstructed collective identity becomes a crucial foundation for more inclusive and meaningful social recovery.

Negotiating Power, Narratives, and Representation in Post-Disaster Recovery Processes

The analysis shows that the construction of social resilience and collective identity in post-disaster contexts does not take place within a neutral social space, but is shaped through complex power relations between affected communities and external actors such as the state, humanitarian agencies, non-governmental organizations, and the media. In this context, post-disaster recovery becomes not only an arena of material and social reconstruction, but also a site of narrative contestation over who has the authority to define disaster experiences, recovery needs, and post-disaster community identities. Lam (2023) demonstrates that asymmetric power relations often constrain communities' ability to express their own meanings and aspirations within recovery processes.

Official narratives produced by external actors tend to represent affected communities as vulnerable and passive groups in need of technical assistance. While such representations are often intended to mobilize resources, they risk reducing the complexity of post-disaster social experiences. Few et al. (2023) show that standardized recovery narratives frequently overlook differences in local experiences and needs, thereby reinforcing the positioning of communities as objects of intervention. As a result, post-disaster community identities are framed externally rather than constructed through the communities' own reflexive processes. In this situation, social resilience also functions as a form of symbolic resistance against the labeling of communities as passive victims. Communities often develop

counter-narratives that emphasize their capacity to act, endure, and transform collectively. Rai (2025) shows that post-disaster lived-experience narratives can serve as a means for communities to reclaim agency and define themselves as subjects of recovery rather than merely recipients of aid. These counter-narratives form a critical component of identity construction, enabling communities to assert dignity and social autonomy amid external interventions.

Power negotiations also emerge in everyday recovery practices, particularly in aid management and reconstruction planning. Krüger and Albris (2020) show that the concept of resilience is often used normatively by institutional actors to justify shifting recovery responsibilities onto communities without providing adequate structural support. In this context, resilience can shift from an emancipatory concept into an instrument of control that demands communities remain "resilient" under conditions of constraint. This tension illustrates that social resilience is not always inherently positive, but can become a site of contested meanings and interests.

Moreover, mass media play a significant role in shaping representations of post-disaster communities. Visual and narrative depictions of destruction and suffering often dominate media coverage, while practices of solidarity and identity reconstruction receive far less attention. Lundin and Soulard (2025) show that selective media representations influence how communities are perceived by the public and stakeholders, as well as how communities perceive themselves. In response, some communities produce alternative narratives through local media or cultural practices to counterbalance external representations they perceive as unjust.

These processes of narrative and power negotiation demonstrate that post-disaster social resilience is not merely a matter of adaptation, but also a symbolic struggle to define community identity and future trajectories. Cvetković (2023) emphasizes that community social identity shapes how communities interact with external actors and access recovery resources. Identities constructed through collective narratives and solidarity enable communities to strengthen their bargaining position within recovery processes, even when power relations remain asymmetrical. Overall, this subsection affirms that the construction of post-disaster social resilience cannot be separated from dynamics of power, narratives, and representation. Community identities are shaped through ongoing negotiations between internal lived experiences and external interpretive frameworks that are often hegemonic. By understanding social resilience as a process that includes symbolic resistance and struggles over meaning, this study broadens the understanding of post-disaster recovery as a complex socio-political arena rather than merely a technical or administrative process.

4. Conclusion, Limitations, and Suggestions

Conclusion

This study concludes that post-disaster social resilience is not merely an adaptive or technical capacity of communities to recover, but a dynamic and meaning-oriented social process shaped through shared narratives, solidarity practices, and the reconstruction of collective identity. The findings demonstrate that resilience is produced through everyday social interactions and mutual aid practices that enable communities to reinterpret disaster experiences and transform their collective self-understanding. Post-disaster recovery thus functions not only as a restorative process but also as a transformative one, redefining social relations and community positioning within broader social structures.

Moreover, this study finds that social resilience is constructed within unequal power relations involving external actors such as the state, humanitarian organizations, and the media. In this context, resilience becomes a space of negotiation and symbolic resistance, where communities challenge dominant victimizing narratives and reclaim agency over the interpretation of their disaster experiences. These findings contribute to social resilience scholarship by emphasizing that post-disaster recovery is inherently socio-political, involving struggles over meaning, representation, and identity rather than solely technical reconstruction processes.

Limitation and suggestions

This study is limited by its qualitative and interpretative research design, which prioritizes in-depth contextual understanding over broad generalizability, and by its focus on specific post-disaster social settings that may not fully represent different community structures or disaster types. The reliance on narrative-based data also

implies potential subjectivity in interpretation. In light of these limitations, future research is encouraged to adopt comparative and mixed-method approaches across diverse communities and disaster contexts to further examine variations in identity construction, meaning-making processes, and social resilience dynamics. Additionally, theoretical frameworks of social resilience should more explicitly incorporate identity, collective narratives, and symbolic practices, while post-disaster recovery policies are recommended to be designed in more participatory and culturally grounded ways by recognizing community narratives and local practices as strategic social resources.

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