

**“Who Knows What Comes Tomorrow?” A Case Study of Disaster Resilience in Boulder
County, Colorado**

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Introduction

Resilience is a prominent organizing concept for disaster researchers. Key dimensions of resilience include absorptive capacity, adaptation, and transformation; that is, resilience involves resisting the disruptive effects of disasters, effectively coping with these effects, and moving on to recovery in a manner that encompasses positive adaptation or transformation to mitigate against future harms. In this study, I explore resilience approaches within a network of organizations involved in disaster recovery in Boulder County, Colorado.

In the U.S. and abroad, disaster risk reduction policies and initiatives have made use of the concept of resilience. In addition to the U.S. federal government, the non-governmental sector has become engaged in resilience research as well. For instance, the U.S. National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine and the Community and Regional Resilience Institute have both emphasized resilience conceptualization, measurement, and enhancement. The Rockefeller Foundation has also launched a series of resilience initiatives, the best known of which is the 100 Resilient Cities program.

Research Context and Questions

Considering this trend towards “resilience thinking,” there is a need for more research that evaluates programs explicitly designed to build disaster resilience. Given this research gap, I investigated government efforts conducted under the rubric of disaster resilience in Colorado from the spring of 2016 to the fall of 2017. The state of Colorado’s resilience efforts began after a series of devastating disasters, including major flooding that occurred in 2013. These floods resulted in 10 deaths, directly affected 28,000 households, and caused 3.9 billion dollars in damages. Boulder County bore the brunt of the damage presented by the 2013 floods, and

subsequently, the county was given a large amount of funding for resilience projects, making the landscape of “resilience work” very pronounced. For example, the City of Boulder was named one of the Rockefeller 100 Resilient Cities, and as a consequence, hired a chief resilience officer to implement a city-wide resilience strategy. The City of Longmont was also awarded a resilience planning grant called “Resiliencia Para Todos/Resilience for All,” to address the vulnerabilities of “Spanish speakers” in Boulder County. In this case study, I use qualitative data on these and other resilience efforts to address the following questions: how does social context influence how individuals working in disaster planning, recovery, emergency management, and social services came to conceive what being resilient *is*, and how it is accomplished? How do individuals construct *who* needs to be resilient?

Data and Findings

Drawing from 19 in-depth interviews, participant observation, and analysis of resilience assessments, strategies and framework documents, I illustrate how resilience represented a strategic and pragmatic solution to uncertainty for local actors, and I demonstrate how resilience approaches were consistent with wider governance trends of devolution and increasing reliance on government partnerships with the civil and private sector. Finally, I argue that the tools available to address risk and inequality within a resilience framework are constrained by both structural and cultural elements of the institutional environment.

