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SOME OBSERVATIONS ON ORGANIZATIONAL PROBLEMS IN DISASTERS

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The Disaster Research Center, the only one of its kind in the world, was established at The Ohio State University in 1963. The Center is engaged in a variety of sociological research studies on the reactions of groups and organizations in community-wide emergencies, particularly natural disasters and civil disturbances. Since its inception, 122 different field studies have been carried out. Teams have gone to earthquakes (in Japan, Alaska, Chile, Yugoslavia, Iran, El Salvador and Greece), hurricanes (in Florida, Texas, Mississippi and Louisiana), floods (in Italy, Canada, Iowa, Montana, Texas, Alaska, Colorado, Virginia, California, Minnesota and the Dakotas), as well as tornadoes (in Arkansas, Indiana, Mississippi, Iowa and Kansas). Large explosions and fires toxic incidents, destructive seismic waves and major dam breaks have also been studied in Australia, Italy, Canada and different sections of the United States. Center personnel have examined civil disturbances in Cincinnati, Los Angeles, Detroit and Indianapolis as well as elsewhere and are conducting special studies of legal aspects of disasters, cross-cultural responses to catastrophes and diffuse emergencies such as water pollution.

The Center has 19 professionals on its staff plus supporting clerical and secretarial personnel. It is headed by Professors Russell R. Dynes and E. L. Quarantelli, both members of the Department of Sociology in the University.

Field research teams ranging in size from two to five researchers are prepared to leave for any community emergency on two-hours notice. Longer range research focused on emergency-induced community change is conducted as well as immediate on-the-spot studies. Alaska, New Orleans, Topeka and Indianapolis were restudied several years after major emergencies. In addition, sixteen cities around the country ranging from Brownsville, Texas and Buffalo, New York to Los Angeles, California and Miami, Florida are regularly monitored for community crises.

A laboratory equipped with audio and visual devices is the locale of a supplementary part of the research program. In this laboratory, simulated conditions are created to parallel real-life stress on social processes. This research has ranged from the study of the communication behavior of police dispatching units to an examination of cross-cultural interaction.

Together, the laboratory and the field operations are intended to provide basic knowledge about group behavior and social life as well as information which can be used to develop more effective plans for future emergencies. Besides collecting its own data, the Center also serves as a repository for documents and materials collected in previous research by other agencies and researchers. The Center's research library is open to all interested scholars and public and private agencies which cope with disaster problems. The Center has its own monograph series and also publishes a quarterly newsletter, Unscheduled Events, available upon request.

Support for the Center comes from diverse sources including the National Institute of Mental Health Center for Applied Social Problems, the U.S. Office of Civil Defense, the Department of the Interior, the Air Force Office of Scientific Research as well as other state and federal agencies, and from the University including the Mershon Social Science Program.

Today I want to talk about our studies on natural disasters, particularly on our findings from research sponsored by the Office of Civil Defense (O.C.D.). The Office of Civil Defense was one of our two earliest supporters and has contributed substantially to the Center's success. While OCD has had different interests at different times, we will today be making a general overall report, rather than talking about specific research projects.

The Role of Civil Defense in Disasters

At The Ohio State University Disaster Research Center, we have made more than 75 field studies of different community disasters. In these studies we have had the opportunity to see civil defense operations in a wide variety of contexts. One observation about civil defense stands out -- either civil defense is highly regarded, frequently consulted, and plays a major role in everything from minor crises to large-scale, community wide disasters, or civil defense is regarded in just the opposite way. In some communities it is very unfavorably viewed, seldom consulted in emergency planning and almost totally ignored when actual disasters occur. It is almost a dichotomy, either/or -- either civil defense is central to emergency responses or it plays no real part at all. Why? What accounts for the difference?

It is not the legal position of civil defense that makes it an important element or not important. Legally, practically everywhere in the United States, civil defense is supposed to play a major role at time of disaster, but whether it plays a key role or not is dependent on something other than its legal position. At times the law is blithly and totally ignored, at other times civil defense is far more central in an emergency response than the law either requires or demands.

Two factors at least seem to determine the acceptability and actual responsibility given to civil defense. One is what civil defense has contributed in prior disasters -- or more accurately, emergencies -- in the community. If civil defense has shown value in an earlier community crisis, other community agencies, officials and groups will turn to it in a new emergency. Geographic areas subject to predictable and regular disasters tend to have respected and viable civil defense groups. Their contributions and operations in past disasters gives them a powerful leverage in disaster planning and makes them listened to when a new emergency occurs.

There is, however, another way by which civil defense can establish and legitimatize itself in a community. This is to provide well thought out and overall disaster plans. But disaster planning requires knowledge and it requires knowledge of the problems that are actually likely to occur in a major emergency. But it is actually such knowledge that is normally in short supply in communities not subject regularly to disasters.

If you are interested in developing emergency planning, let me suggest some guidelines based on experience of what realistically are and are not problems in community disasters. Before getting into any details, let me indicate my starting point.

Disaster or Emergency Planning

It is that the efficiency and effectiveness of a community response to a disaster is dependent on the integration and coordination of the organizations in the area. This is not just simply paying lip service to the value placed on local autonomy of community organizations. It is a fact of life that the speed of recovery, the solving of problems and all aspects of a disaster are dependent on the response of the local community organizations. While much assistance and help may be brought in from outside the community, it is the local groups that will affect if and how such outside assistance is obtained and utilized. Only in very devastating disasters where the personnel of local organizations might be literally obliterated, would non-local groups become the key groups.

Now in disaster planning or emergency planning, where it is assumed local organizations will be the key units, there are three different aspects that have to be taken into account.

1. The victim population. What can disaster planning assume and not assume about the victims or the impacted population, the community residents or whatever you want to call the general populace that will be involved? As I shall indicate in just a little while, there are certain myths about the responses of people to disasters. These myths, if accepted as being true, can make a hash of disaster planning and good organizational response.

2. The community organizations themselves. What should disaster planning focus on -- and given the composition of this audience -- where might civil defense best fit in? As I shall discuss soon, different types of organizations respond in different ways to disasters and it is crucial to take such differences into account in planning.

3. Finally, while local community organizations are the keystone to emergency responses in American society, in any but the most minor of disasters, outside help and assistance of some kind will be needed. Local organizations, especially any coordinating group can only operate effectively if they know probable points of difficulty and frictions in the contact between local and non-local organizations.

Obviously, if I went into details on even just one of these aspects, I would take up all the rest of the day. I will have to be very selective in my remarks and hit on what I consider the most important points for disaster planning.

Let me restate again that my remarks are based on a large number of observations of different organizations in many disasters in different parts of the country. Each disaster has its unique aspects, but there are common elements and these are the only things upon which planning can be based. The things I will mention are those features that are most probable, those that typically can be seen in disaster after disaster. You might, on the base of an experience here or there, think of an exception to the patterns I shall depict. But exceptions should not blind one to typical and probable patterns. In planning one has to plan on the likelihood of probabilities, not the exceptional, the rare or the unusual instance.

Myths About Disaster Responses

I made reference to myths earlier when talking of how individuals, the victim population, react. Let me mention three of them and suggest some implications for organization response and disaster planning.

1. The "Panic" myth. This is one that is deeply entrenched in the thinking of many people and is constantly reinforced by journalists, mass media presentations and literary accounts. It is thought that groups and persons will engage in many irrational acts, make illogical decisions and show a strong anti-social disregard for others in the crisis situation. The "Panic" myth implies the general expectation of rather widespread chaos and pandemonium, at both the individual and group level. The scene is visualized in terms of hysteria, irrationality, dis-organization and disorder. If you think I have overdrawn the "Panic" myth, I assure you that I could strongly document it. Not only would it be easy to document the fact that the "Panic" image exists, but more important, that responsible officials often act as if it were a correct picture of what occurs in disasters. You can find situations where persons in positions of responsibility did not evacuate an area because they were afraid of setting off a wild, hysterical flight; further more, time, energy and resources are spent planning on how to prevent such reactions. The "Panic" myth not only exists but is often the basis for action.

This at times leads to cruel dilemmas for key officials and others who have to make important decisions during emergencies. For instance, an official may feel that if he issues an evacuation warning, he will generate a panic flight. On the other hand, the official may be haunted by the possibility that if no action is taken to get people to leave, these persons may become the victims of a threatening danger. Either way the decision is a difficult one if the "Panic" myth dominates official thinking.

However, available research evidence suggests that most anticipated "Panic" behaviors are not too likely. People seldom flee wildly. In fact, the opposite is more of a problem, that of getting people to leave their homes or neighborhoods, even when danger is visible. This was true for example in Hurricane Camille.

For reasons we can not detail here, people in general can be expected to react rather well, rather rationally and with astounding little disorder and disorganization. Actually in the face of direct threat, people more often than in normal times, are careful about their behavior and attempt to think through the consequences of their acts. Action is far less impulsive than in everyday life, for when people feel their lives, those of loved ones or their property is in danger, they become cautious and careful.

It is true that, during times of stress, isolated cases of erratic or seemingly illogical behavior can be found. However, the overall picture is one of remarkable rationality and order. In general, it can be said that most human beings act in quite controlled and adaptive ways

in the face of the new and extreme stresses which they face during a
large scale disaster. The atypical case, which is the delight of
newspapermen, should not be confused with the average response, which is,
primarily, what responsible organizational officials have to deal with
in emergencies.

2. The "looting" myth. This notion seems to be even more deeply ingrained
in the thinking of people and appears to be based on a Jekyll and Hyde
conception of human beings. If you don't watch them or in a confused
situation, human beings will break loose. Thus, it is believed looting
is widespread in disasters.

   The fact of the matter is just the opposite; looting is extremely
rare -- almost totally non-existent by residents of the area. Reports
of looting are widespread. However, actual arrest and report figures
show crime rates drop. Such rare looting as occurs tends to take place
after the immediate emergency period and it is undertaken by non-local
people. To put it bluntly, such evidence as there is suggests the minor
looting that ensues often takes place by non-local security forces
brought in mistakenly to prevent it. It is not accidental that this was
one of the major reports that came out of the Gulf coast after Hurricane
Camille.

   In most disasters, security measures are really very loose -- even
a day or two later it is remarkably easy to bypass security. Yet even
in situations of little or no security, there still is no looting. Most
of this is due to the development of a community consensus, which we
have discussed in detail elsewhere.

   I do not want to imply total disregard of security. Some is needed
if for no other reason than the symbolism involved; also, it is needed
in later stages of emergency period although use is mostly in traffic
control. The point I am making is the need to keep a balanced view on
this matter. There is a tendency to use resources and personnel on this
matter that could be better used on other tasks.

3. The "passivity" image or what I sometimes call the "Big Brother" image.
There is a widespread notion that disaster victims are passive and
docile, that they are devoid of initiative and that they have to have
everything done for them by others, especially by organized groups.
The picture basically is one of impotent individuals waiting almost
childishly for someone to take care of them. Hence, the label
"Big Brother," for the general expectation is that disaster victims are
apathetically dependent on "Big Brother" in the form of relief and
rehabilitation workers.

   Again, it might be felt that the picture is overdrawn. However,
once more, it would be easy to document the fact that this image guides
the thinking and planning of many disaster organizations and their
personnel. Time, money, manpower and other resources are directed
towards dealing with problems implied by the "Big Brother" image. For
instance, exhaustive efforts are frequently made to provide emergency
mass housing (which in this country is almost never used by disaster
victims), while other more crucial problems are largely ignored such as

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the need for a centralized clearing house of information regarding whereabouts and conditions of evacuated victims.

As in the instance of the "Panic" myth, the "Big Brother" image is also incorrect. However, in no sense is this to be taken as in any way questioning the absolute need for organizational activities in disasters or the fact that such groups carry out many crucial emergency tasks. Instead, what I am trying to indicate here is that the actual problems of organizations reside elsewhere than in what the "Big Brother" image implies. The major difficulties that organizations typically have in major catastrophes are in other areas, and planning should be directed in those directions. If efforts and resources are to be most effectively utilized, they have to be used in connection with actual and not mythical difficulties.

What do we at the DRC see as the real and major problem areas for organizations in disasters? As far as we can tell, they revolve around matters of communication, authority and coordination. This is not to say that there are problems in these areas alone. However, if the difficulties that arise in such matters were resolved, few organizations would have serious troubles in responding to community-wide emergencies.

Communications

First of all, let me discuss communication matters. In some rare instances, communication problems stem from equipment scarcity, emerge from damaged facilities or from other destruction of the physical means of communicating. However, in the vast number of cases, the problems are not in the mechanisms but in the process itself. That is, the physical means for communications will be present, but they will not be used in the most appropriate way or will not be employed at all. Thus, difficulties in communication are more often the result of social or group malfunctionings, rather than the consequence of engineering or technical breakdowns.

It is possible to see communication difficulties as existing in one of four different categories: (1) within individual organizations; (2) between organizations; (3) from organizations to the public; and (4) from the public to organizations.

First of all, organizations have to communicate internally; exchange of information has to go on among the members of the group. Normally, the communication system is geared to processing and exchanging a certain amount of information. However, in a disaster, you generally have an expansion of staff members of organizations. Double shifts may be employed or volunteers may be incorporated into the work force. The normal communication system often cannot take care of the additional load of information that has to be exchanged because of the added staff. In a sense, the extra demands upon the internal communication system will frequently exceed the capabilities available, with consequent retardation if not loss of information flow among staff members.

Normally, too, communications are supposed to go through certain channels.

In non-crisis situations, the lines of communication from the top to the bottom in the chain of command and from the bottom to the top, are relatively clear-cut, so that it is fairly obvious who is supposed to get what information as well as where and when the information is to be exchanged. However, during an emergency you may get two, three or even four occupants in the same position normally occupied by one person. Officials may also take over jobs they do not routinely undertake, or they may work at emergency positions in the organizational structure. Consequently, the normal channels of communication are usually not sufficient to insure that all relevant information will circulate to and from those persons in the group who should be informed of organizational activities.

Difficulties may develop along a second dimension, that of communication between organizations. The reason for potential problems here appears to be twofold. In normal, everyday, routine contact between organizations, much of the interaction proceeds on an informal basis. Officials will often be talking with known persons, if not friends. When a disaster occurs and there are changes in the organizational structure, the informal basis of communication may not suffice. Contacts may have to be established and maintained with unfamiliar individuals occupying official positions in other organizations.

Furthermore, community emergencies typically precipitate relationships between organizations not normally in contact with one another, so that groups have to forge new links with previously unrelated organizations and develop contacts they have not had before the disaster. This is difficult to do, particularly under the pressures of a disaster situation. Communications between organizations will frequently not proceed smoothly under such circumstances.

A third category in which problems may arise, is in communication from organization to the general public. One major source of difficulty here is that what is meaningful information to organizational personnel often may not mean much to people in general. This stems from the fact that an official group will frequently gather detailed information about what is going on, and obtain a general picture of the overall situation. On the basis of that information, the organization will issue some advice, some instruction to the general public which, however, will omit or ignore in the announcement the background and general picture known to group officials. For instance, an announcement will be made to people to leave a danger area. That will be the sum total of the statement: "evacuate X street or Y neighborhood." The officials issuing the statement may know quite well the limits of the endangered zones, and the degree of safety likely in different places, but none of this will appear in the announcement. Thus, the warned population is forced into the position of trying to ascertain which are and which are not the danger areas, and where it might be safe to evacuate. Too often organizations which are well informed about emergency events and possibilities will assume that their public statements will be as clear to everyone as they are to themselves.

The final category in which there may be difficulties is communication from the public to the different organizations. There seem to be several aspects to this. After a disaster, but in some situations even prior to its actual occurrence, people will bombard organizations with requests for aid and information. They will ask the more visible kinds of public groups what should be done, where certain things can be obtained, and so forth. A frequent result of this is that the organizational system for processing information will not function as it should.

The effect of the flood of telephone calls to police departments or hospitals during emergencies in a community is typical. The police or hospital switchboard becomes so overloaded with calls that all communication, in or out of the organization, is interminably delayed.

Organizations also find themselves often subject to all sorts of new kinds of requests in addition to being overloaded with requests for normal kinds of aid and information. Groups will be asked about things which they never or very infrequently are asked about. Few organizations are prepared to deal with non-routine questions: persons who man switchboards or complaint desks thus often find themselves unable to adapt to the new kind of questions.

Generally, problems in the area of communication are the most serious ones. If difficulties in this area are not solved, there is no great need to worry about other kinds of problems. Rapid and accurate communications are the core of any effective organizational response to emergencies; without communications other problems cannot be solved.

Authority

Somewhat more briefly now I want to discuss matters regarding lines of authority. This is the second major problem area for organizations operating in disaster situations. However, certain anticipated troubles along this line are rare.

There are seldom any difficulties in maintaining authority within established groups. In fact, I cannot think of a single case which could be used to illustrate a traditional organization's loss of formal control over its own personnel. This does not seem to occur, or if it does, it occurs in so minor a degree that it is of no practical consequence.

Neither are there many problems that arise from questions concerning which organizations have authority and responsibility for traditional tasks. For example, there is never any dispute or conflict over who fights fires, repairs telephones, or over other tasks of that kind. Such matters are traditional responsibilities of certain community groups.

However, problems of authority during disasters do occur with respect to two other matters. Often there are difficulties between organizations regarding which group is responsible for new tasks created by a disaster. For instance, who is responsible for and has authority with regard to search and rescue activities? This is frequently a problem of major magnitude in many community emergencies.

Also, authority problems sometimes arise between emergent groups and more traditional organizations with respect to old tasks. For instance, since security of an area is considered a traditional police function, few difficulties arise in developing a pass system in conjunction with such groups as the National Guard or Federal troops. However, it sometimes happens that police and a new city agency or perhaps even civil defense will not fully agree on a pass system. The traditional organization sees certain activities as its responsibility alone, and disputes will occur if new groups are thought to be attempting to take over an old task such as that of maintaining security within an area. Many of the difficulties surrounding pass systems (and they typically arise in disaster situations) revolve

around the issue of who has the authority, the traditional and established or-
ganizations or the emergent or newly created groups in the community?

While problems of authority are generally less serious in consequence than
problems in the communication area, they are often more difficult to solve. In
part, this is so because the question of organizational authority involves the
whole fabric of formal and informal power in a community. This is a delicate and
sensitive matter and full of pitfalls for anyone unsophisticated as to the structure
and functioning of groups. Therefore, it is not surprising that authority
problems are difficult to plan for, and equally hard to handle when they do arise
in emergency situations.

Coordination

I now want to make a very few remarks about the third major problem area
which the DRC has explored. I refer to problems having to do with coordination
and decision-making. There seems to be at least three different aspects of this
matter.

For one, organizations frequently have a great deal of difficulty in coordin-
ating the activities of their volunteers. Unless many preparations have been made
beforehand, innumerable difficulties arise as to what, where and how volunteers
are to be used. Furthermore, most groups find it difficult to mesh the work of
volunteers with the regular tasks of their usual labor force.

It is not even easy to plan for volunteers. Whatever planning is undertaken,
it can rarely fully prepare for the quantity and quality of volunteers that
appear. In other words, it is very difficult to anticipate how many and what
kinds of people will volunteer their services to organizations during a community
emergency.

Coordination between organizations working on common but new tasks is also
difficult. Even groups that are used to working together, such as police and fire
departments, may have problems when they try to integrate their activities in a
novel task, such as search and rescue. While policemen and firemen may be used to
looking through a building or two, in the instance of a major disaster, having to
search whole neighborhoods, poses new problems of coordination and decision-making
between the two organizations even though they have worked together before.

Finally, I want to note that there are problems arising from matters having
to do with overall coordination and decision-making. This is not only an important
matter, but is probably the most difficult problem to handle. It is an area in
which there almost inevitably there are some difficulties.

Some of the problem stems from the fact that in the typical disaster, at
least four different types of groups get involved. But their very involvement
creates coordination problems. In some cases, difficulties in coordinating every
group helping in the emergency can be more of a problem than the actual disaster
itself.

What are the groups that get involved? They are:

1. The regular community emergency groups. They include such organizations

as the police and fire departments, hospitals, utilities, etc. In general, they stick to their traditional or regular tasks, and if they do that, they have relatively few problems.

2. Standby emergency groups. They are illustrated by such groups as the Red Cross and the Salvation Army. These are organizations that in normal times have certain non-disaster tasks that are carried out by a small core of professional staff personnel. At the time of a disaster, however, these groups not only expand tremendously through the taking on of volunteers, but they undertake new, emergency tasks or functions that are often quite different from their regular, daily, non-disaster tasks.

3. Voluntary associations such as service clubs, contractors, Boy Scouts and similar groups. They have no everyday emergency structures, tasks or responsibilities. But during an emergency they tend to take on in a very selective fashion, new structures and new tasks in connection with the disaster.

4. Coordinating groups. The activities during a disaster of a number of the three just mentioned groups, agencies and organizations creates the need for coordination of their activities. The consequences is the appearance -- by plan in some cases, by accident in most instances -- of a coordinating group. This emergent group attempts to bring about overall coordination in the various community responses to the disaster.

Since civil defense -- by design or by accident -- frequently plays some role in coordination of this nature, we want now to consider more specifically the operation of civil defense in major community emergencies. At the local community level, we may ask what is civil defense, what is its perceived role in disasters, and what are some of its problems? These and related matters will be discussed in the paper to be presented by Prof. Dynes.