Cultural Diversity: Communities Have Many Faces

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Years ago the United States was called a melting pot. People came to this country from all over the world, and tried to become "Americans." In this quest, they often forfeited the language and customs of the land of their birth. Today the United States is a salad bowl. People come here to participate in the culture and economic milieu, but they most often strive to maintain the language and traditions of their home country within the family group.

Previously, most immigrants to the United States were young men seeking their fortunes, or their young brides, joining them after some years of planning and saving. Adapting to the new land was possible because they were young, and highly motivated to become a part of this vibrant new country. Today many of the new residents of the United States are fleeing oppression in their home countries. Today's immigrant may be a child or a senior citizen, as well as an adult in the working years. For some of the older people, adapting to a new language and new customs is too difficult. They make a community among themselves for support, and may never develop a working knowledge of written English. They often possess only a limited spoken vocabulary.

Previously, most immigrants to the United States came from countries in Europe. These cultures of origin had many similarities to the "American culture" that was developing in the United States. Language groups generally shared Germanic, Slavic or Romance roots. Most all of the immigrants used the Roman alphabet, and were accustomed to phonetic written languages. Since English has many words from these European roots, and shared the phonetic alphabet approach to writing, immigrants could learn spoken English based on common words from their birth language, and could learn to read using a dictionary. Today people come from cultures with languages using entirely different alphabets, including symbolic representations. The result is that many immigrants today have a greater challenge learning to read and speak English because the alphabet and word roots are radically different.

Years ago most immigrants came from countries with religious practice based on the Judeo-Christian traditions. Cultural norms related to personal behavior and community interaction tended to be similar among the immigrant groups. The religious backgrounds of the immigrants of the 1980's and 1990's has included every religion and cultural tradition in the world. The cultural norms of their birth cultures may preclude the interaction of some members of the culture with strangers, in some cases leading to isolation. Behavior that is unremarkable to an American may be offensive or shocking to a new resident.

This is the cultural diversity in Orange County in the 1990's. This profile can be extended to the whole State of California, and to most of the rest of the United States. For those of us whose professional activities depend on communication with groups of people, recognition of the impact of language and cultural factors can be critical to the success of our programs

In addition to the diversity of cultures in our state, there are also other "minority" groups for whom special planning may be needed. Older people have special needs. Physically limited people of all ages will have different considerations in lifestyle and access issues. Some Americans are illiterate, or have only limited reading ability, either through learning disabilities, or through lack of effective educational opportunities. A successful public outreach program must take into account the development of methods of reaching out to the whole constituency in order to effectively convey the earthquake education message.

Psychological trauma suffered at an earlier time will effect the ability of the individual to withstand a new trauma. Researchers have described an "echo effect"[1] which causes people to react to the current crisis by reverting to the experiences of an earlier trauma. For example, someone who has experienced an earthquake earlier will react more strongly to a subsequent earthquake, especially if the first experience carried with it severe consequences or personal loss. Someone who has lived through a war at an earlier time in life will react more strongly to any subsequent disaster.

Some groups of immigrants are in the United States today specifically because of some tragedy in their birth country. Many Americans who were born in Southeast Asia have personal memories of the wars in Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam. Should they experience an earthquake, for example, the previous traumatic event will influence their psychological response to the new stimulus. Many people who have recently arrived from Central America have similar memories of wars in Nicaragua and El Salvador. The people from Nicaragua may also have experienced the earthquake there in the 1970's. People from Mexico may have experienced the Mexico City earthquake.[2] All of these people may have a much stronger psychological response to a new trauma than will their neighbors who have not suffered a previous traumatic event.

For example, a business in my community suffered a significant disruption of production because most of the workers refused to reenter the building following a minor quake on the Newport Inglewood Fault. These ladies did not speak much English, and as a result, there was a communication problem between the supervisor and the workers. When a bilingual employee was able to assist, it was discovered that many of the ladies had previously experienced an earthquake while in a Central American country. Because this country did not have strict building codes, they expected that the buildings they were currently working in would surely fall down in the first after shock. This type of issue could well be addressed in a new employee briefing so that employees could be reassured that California seismic codes make it unlikely that buildings will collapse. Recognizing such a potential problem in advance can prevent some of the psychological trauma to the workers after an earthquake, and can benefit the company by getting work started faster again.

An effective emergency management program requires a realistic evaluation of the community that the program will serve. Are there groups of non-English speaking citizens in the community? Are there people with physical disabilities, learning disabilities, lack of literacy, young children? Each of these groups needs to be considered in developing public education materials. The California State Department of Education Language Census Report can provide information on the number of languages spoken in the homes of the children in the local school districts. This is a good guide in selecting which languages, other than English, should be included in the public education program.

The Governor's Office of Emergency Services (OES) has provided basic earthquake preparedness information in the following languages commonly spoken in California homes: Spanish, Korean, Mandarin, Vietnamese, Lao, Cambodian and Hmong. Local ethnic associations may be willing to provide the translation of this set of fliers into other languages that are important in the community. For example, in Irvine, a group is translating a flier into Japanese, a language not currently available through OES. It is very important to have the translation undertaken by someone who speaks the desired language idiomatically Some comical results have developed from translations by persons who speak a language only on a scholarly level, or through a phrase book.

In addition to providing preparedness information in several languages, the emergency plan should include a resource list of translators, preferably people who are birth speakers of the language other than English. These people will be a critical resource in the medical aid center, the Emergency Operations Center, and the Public Information Office staff. If a building must be posted as dangerous, and the occupants are unable to read English, it would be helpful to have a birth speaker of the other language accompany the building official, and leave a written

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[1] "Predicting the Range of Adjustment to Earthquake Trauma in Santa Cruz," by Francis R Abueg, Ph D , Terrence M. Keane, Ph.D., Jessica Wolfe, Ph D , Rock Pfotenhauer, and Robert Agrella, Ph.D., a paper presented to the International Society for Traumatic Stress Studies, New Orleans, 1990

[2] "The Mexico City Earthquake Disaster," by Corinne L. Dufka in School Casework: The Journal of Contemporary Social Work (March 1988) notes how previous loss, trauma and psychological difficulties contributed to the responses of individuals after this earthquake.

message in the occupants' language on the official posted notice. After the Loma Prieta quake, people entered unsafe buildings, and others refused to enter perfectly safe buildings because of their inability to understand the instructions posted on the building. In addition to relying on color-coding signs, major languages spoken in the community might be included on life safety signage.

Seniors, children, those with physical and learning disabilities, and those unable to read English must also be considered in developing a program. Seniors can be addressed through special publications that are distributed both at general public events, and at special senior events such as health fairs, and at senior centers and clubs. Children can be reached through comic books and puzzle books. The simple picture book approach can also be used on fliers for adults that include crucial life-safety issues. For example, Irvine commissioned a flier on gas meter safety issues that uses cartooning extensively. A flier on nonstructural hazard mitigation uses illustrations to show how to accomplish the necessary tasks. Adults with limited reading ability will appreciate the simple format of a comic book, like those created by Hanna Barbarra, featuring Yogi Bear. These books convey a serious message about earthquake preparedness through attractive graphics and few words. Earthquake preparedness materials for the disabled are available from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and from OES. There is an excellent film called "Silent Quake"[3] with captions that can be a resource for hearing and non-hearing audiences. Develop a volunteer group like the Guardian Angels for the Handicapped that will work with citizens with physical limitations both before and after a disaster.

Finally, it is important to be sensitive to economic issues within a community. Analyze the socio-economic balance in the community before launching any program that includes a significant amount of self-help or citizen financial participation. For example, in a community with lower income renters it may not be effective to hand out fliers on "how to strap your water heater." In such a community it would be more effective to contact the landlords regarding having the water heaters strapped with two belts of plumbers tape. The $5 cost of materials might mean a missed meal to a family on limited income, while it would be a small outlay in a more affluent community. Similarly, before launching a program of emergency supplies collections at the schools, consider whether the families can afford to donate several dollars worth of goods that may never be used. A family of limited means with several children may find that the financial burden of providing a backpack of food for each child is prohibitively expensive. It might be better to contact the major industries in the community and see if they would donate the basic necessities of water and first aid to the schools. Coca Cola Company donated the emergency supplies to the schools of Southgate, California.

The United Nations Office of Disaster Assistance in New York and the Pan American Health Organization in Washington, D.C. are sources of educational materials in languages other than English. The ethnic associations within the community may be able to provide translation services for fliers. Cartoon artists (including students from the junior colleges) are a good resource for interpreting life safety information into simple formats. These and other resources are available to assist the emergency management professional in reaching out to the entire community.

Orange County, California, the United States ... today we live in a salad bowl, not a melting pot. The spice and color of our multi-cultural nation adds excitement to our lives. We need to continue to be sensitive to the responsibility to provide community education services to everyone, to make emergency preparedness information accessible to all the citizens of our diverse communities.

[3] Silent Quake Preparedness for the Hearing-Impaired" is available from the American Red Cross, Los Angeles Chapter, Audio Visual Department, 2700 Wilshire Boulevard, Los Angeles, CA 90057 for $30.00, plus $5 shipping and handling.