

## 6

## Here There Is Life: The Social and Cultural Dynamics of Successful Resistance to Resettlement in Postdisaster Peru

*Anthony Oliver-Smith*

When a natural disaster strikes a society and becomes part of the personal experience of every surviving member, that society and its individual members are faced with many new adaptive tasks for the changed conditions of their environment. Human adaptation is multidimensional, entailing far more than a simple accommodation to the physical demands or problems of an environment. Other problems, far beyond the realm of material survival, require other forms of adaptive strategies. Human beings must adapt socially and psychologically, as well as physically, to achieve a proper fit with the total environment. This fit is largely attitudinal in the sense that it involves the way in which people perceive themselves in relation to their environment (Mechanic 1975:165). Indeed, part of the total adaptational pattern must be focused on the individual's personal adjustment to his new life situation or altered identity.

Consequently, it must be recognized that natural disasters constitute more than just physical destruction; they also involve psychological destruction for the individual and ultimately cultural crisis for the group in that they may challenge the very existence of a society. Disaster is the ample demonstration to the individual that his culture, his way of life, has suddenly become inadequate, insufficient to protect him from the vicissitudes of the environment. If culture is in part a set of adaptations to the problems presented by the total environment, then a disaster casts serious doubt on the efficacy of those adaptations. Such situations resemble psychotic experiences in which events and conditions defy existing concepts of logic and proportion, and personal as well as physical security may be seriously threatened. When the efficacy of one's culture is

---

The research on which this chapter is based was undertaken in Yungay, Ancash, Peru, in 1970-1971, 1974, and 1975. The initial research was supported by the Midwestern Consortium for International Activities. The research undertaken during the summers of 1974 and 1975 was supported by the University of Florida and the Society for Health and Human Values, respectively. Their support is gratefully acknowledged, as is the assistance of Anne Bailey in the initial collection of data.