

ETHICAL ASPECTS OF DISASTER RESEARCH

by

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Introduction

I was somewhat surprised when I was given this topic to speak on by Dr Sandy McFarlane because the issue of ethical aspects of disaster research is not one that is commonly considered. I think it is a reflection of the state of the art in this area firstly, to be having a conference such as this at the Australian Counter Disaster College and secondly, that a topic such as ethical issues in disaster research is being addressed. It is my experience that the state of knowledge in an area has to reach a certain point before issues of ethics are seriously considered. In the beginning of the development of a new field of study, workers do various pieces of research building up a picture of the field until the point is reached when the 'gestalt' of the field can be seen, and only then does an interest in the more subtle aspects of a field develop such as aspects of the ethical considerations in such research.

Ethical issues in disaster research have particular importance because the research is being done on people who have neither assumed the role of patients nor are likely to do so. The importance of the study of human behaviour during and following disasters is well known. It can provide valuable insights into the psychology of coping particularly in extreme environmental circumstances and provides clues about the etiology of psychiatric disorder. The nature of the crisis however, the extent of the personal distress and the helplessness of individuals affected, make those afflicted by disaster a particularly vulnerable group, whose distress may be increased by the researcher.

Recent Interest in Psychiatric Ethics

The reasons for an increased interest in ethical issues in Psychiatry in general, and in psychiatric research in particular have been well summarised by Bloch and Chodoff in their recently published book 'Psychiatric Ethics'. They summarised the factors contributing as being the following. Firstly, the medical consumer movement has in recent years come to constitute a potent and more or less coherent social force. The physician and other members of the helping professions no longer compel blind reverence nor is there unquestioning compliance with their methods. There is a much more general sceptical attitude towards authority. Secondly, an increased interest in ethics