



Natural Disasters Organisation
Department of Defence

**Report of Proceedings
of a Research Workshop
on
HUMAN BEHAVIOUR IN
DISASTER IN AUSTRALIA**

25 - 27 April, 1984

FOREWORD

There is little doubt that the paucity of post-disaster research into human behaviour in disaster in Australia was highlighted by the disaster events of 1983; or that, since then, the level of disaster research has been feverish in comparison. It could also be argued, quite fairly, that it took a disaster of the magnitude of Ash Wednesday bushfires to prompt the staging of this workshop, which was held at the Australian Counter Disaster College, at Mount Macedon, Victoria, on 26 and 27 April 1984.

The Workshop was funded by the Australia Department of Defence but, as a high level of specialised professional knowledge, understanding and interest in human behaviour in disaster were required to develop it effectively, some members of the Psychology Department of La Trobe University were approached, and accepted the invitation to assist in the preparation and conduct of the Workshop.

Although the stated aim of the Workshop was to exchange research findings on human behaviour in disaster in Australia and to discuss :

- * research questions which need to be addressed subsequently;
- * methodology to be employed following disaster;
- * application of research to the planning and provision of welfare, health and other services in and after disaster;
- * possible future directions of research; and
- * support required for research;

the program was designed to give a wider perspective and, in particular, to consider :

- * the extent to which disaster research influences, or might influence, disaster planning and
- * what the disaster planner wants from researchers.

During the Workshop, recent research findings on human and organisational behaviour in disaster were presented and the need for greater application of research findings to planning was discussed. The importance of an interdisciplinary approach to research was emphasised and the

diversity of the interests and disaster-related experience of Workshop participants suggests that inter-disciplinary collaboration in this country could be broadly based. This is of particular benefit for disaster planners, who need to be able to draw simultaneously on resources and expertise from a number of different areas.

The achievements of the Workshop are:

- * it brought together a group of new-to-the-area and experienced disaster researchers;
- * it stimulated discussion of methodology and focused attention on the ethics of disaster research;
- * it undoubtedly prompted the documentation of some research which might otherwise have gone unreported;
- * it has stimulated some collaborative research since planning for the Workshop began.
- * and the Workshop provided an opportunity for a "scientific debriefing" for those immersed in recent bushfire work.

The Workshop also brought researchers into contact with some of the planners and providers of welfare, health and other disaster services. The hope that there might be progress in the wider aims of the Workshop, related to the application of research findings in planning and the formulation of planners' needs in terms of research questions, was frustrated by the unavoidable limitation of the Workshop to two days.

Although the Workshop papers published here provide evidence of considerable activity in the field of disaster research in Australia, an unfortunate lesson of our nation's history seems to be that funding for disaster research follows disasters, whereas it should precede them. Too little support appears to have been given to research into human behaviour in disaster or support to related inter-disciplinary research. With every disaster Australian communities will continue to re-learn, at a cost of human suffering, the lessons of previous disasters.

MOUNT MACEDON

December, 1984.

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WORKSHOP OPENING ADDRESS

by

THE DIRECTOR, AUSTRALIAN COUNTER DISASTER COLLEGE, MT. MACEDON

Although, in comparison with many parts of the world, Australia is not overly prone to disaster, we have experienced several devastating natural disasters. This was probably one reason why in February 1974, Cabinet decided that "the Charter of the existing Australian Civil Defence School at Mount Macedon, Victoria be expanded to provide research into, and training to deal with, natural disasters, and the School be appropriately renamed."

Following this Cabinet Decision the School was renamed the Australian Counter Disaster College: and, the College Charter now requires it to contribute to the development of an efficient Australian counter-disaster capability by training; by fostering understanding and co-operation; and by undertaking research. Then, on 5 April 1974, the Minister for Defence wrote to the Ministers in each of the States of the Commonwealth saying:

"My Government is conscious of the need for a scientific approach to the solution of many problems which are related to natural disasters..... and proposes, with your advice and co-operation, and in accordance with priorities assessed on a national basis, to sponsor competent institutions, or undertake with its own resources, a series of research projects which will bear directly on selected natural disasters,..... These projects will seek to identify improved means for predicting natural disasters, assessing their probable intensity, effects and passage and devising methods of avoiding them or minimising the harm they do. Apart from the scientific research mentioned above, the Natural Disasters Organisation will be concerned with operational research in the field; post-disaster reports and evaluations; seeking to improve counter-disaster planning and control techniques; developing a reliable record of natural disasters and their general effects, and other matters with operational applications....."

As a result of the Cabinet decision and following the Minister's letter to States, the Natural Disasters Organisation attempted to have a small research cell - comprising a Senior Research Scientist, an Experimental Officer and a Technical Assistant - provided at this College. In April 1980

an Experimental Officer from the Materials Research Laboratory was assigned for duty at the College to work under my direction: and he continues to work alone, with no indication that further manpower resources will be made available in the future to increase our research capability.

Before the Experimental Officer was appointed, I could find no one who was really aware of what Australian disaster research had been completed, was being undertaken or was contemplated. It was apparent that disaster-related research effort in Australia was certainly limited, and not co-ordinated in any way. Justifiably so, you may argue - but, the need for more disaster research and the need to establish more exactly what Australian disaster research has been done were obvious. Indeed, it was not possible to detect the voids which existed in the application of research effort in Australia until the extent of prior research effort was established.

The Experimental Officer has attempted to find out just what Australian disaster research has been completed or is being undertaken. He has compiled the Australian Disaster Research Directory, published in provisional form in 1983. I hope it will stimulate you to provide additional input for the "expanded" Directory, to be published in 1985. When the expanded Directory is produced, we should be well placed to detect research voids and then publish a priority list of research subjects which, in our national interest, need to be addressed.

Insofar as research into human behaviour in disaster is concerned, a Disaster Behaviour Seminar was held at this College in October 1976, to study aspects of disaster behaviour, with a view to formulating guidelines of practical application by counter-disaster authorities. In the report of Proceedings of that Seminar it is stated that:

"the authorities concerned in counter-disaster response must recognise that psycho-social requirements extend across the whole field of such response..... The practical application of existing knowledge supported by continuing research, will assist materially in a number of areas of counter-disaster response":

That report also recommended to the Minister for Defence that he circulate the report to his ministerial colleagues, the Minister for Health and the Minister for Social Security, requesting their Departments to give early attention to ensure that:

- a. research needs are given adequate priority. Two fields in which early research is required were suggested;
 - (1) the systematic description of the range of human behaviour and coping mechanisms in extreme adversity, and
 - (2) the effects on health of exposure to extreme stressor experiences.
- b. authorities concerned in counter-disaster planning and operations recognise psycho-social requirements in disaster situations and co-ordinate their activities in this field."

Although there is evidence of some progress and activity in the field of disaster research since that Seminar in 1976, I believe it is safe to say that too little attention has been given to research into human behaviour in disaster in Australia. There is no doubt that the paucity of post-disaster research in human behaviour in Australia was highlighted by the disaster events of 1983, or that, since then, the level of disaster behaviour research has been "feverish" in comparison. It could also be claimed, quite fairly, that it took a disaster of the magnitude of the Ash Wednesday bush fires to prompt us to stage this particular Workshop.

I hope this Workshop will provide the opportunity for those who have undertaken research into human behaviour in disasters in Australia, to exchange findings and opinions with a view to deciding guidelines which might facilitate follow-up studies and research into future disasters.

Although the stated aim of this Workshop is to exchange research findings on human behaviour in disaster in Australia and to discuss:

- a. research questions which need to be addressed;
- b. the methodology to be employed following disaster;
- c. the application of research planning and provision of welfare, health and other services in and after disaster;
- d. possible future directions of research, and
- e. the support required for research,

the program has been designed to give a wider perspective and, in particular to consider, in addition:

- a. the extent to which disaster research influences and might influence disaster planning, and
- b. what the disaster planner wants from the researchers.

With this in mind, I invited Dr Anthony Michaelis, who is the Editor of the highly-regarded British publication, Inter-Disciplinary Science Reviews, to deliver the Workshop Dinner Address on the subject of "Inter-Disciplinary Disaster Research" and, Mr Barry Grear, Chairman of the Bushfire Relief Advisory Committee and Executive Director of the Bushfire Relief Unit in South Australia following the 1983 Ash Wednesday fires - and now Deputy Director-General of Technical and Further Education in South Australia - to address the: "Applications of Research to Disaster Planning." I am grateful to these two gentlemen agreeing to undertake these important tasks, and to Professor Raphael for her major contribution.

The response which Dr Meredith Wallace, from the Department of Psychology at La Trobe University, received to her invitations to people to present papers is also very heartening. The range of topics covered in the papers which are to be presented augurs well for the future and could be taken to indicate a heightened interest here, in Australia, in the subject of human behaviour in disaster in Australia.

I thank all of you who are contributing papers for your support.

Finally, thank you all for attending: I trust you will enjoy the time you spend at the College and that you will leave here believing that you have engaged in a professionally rewarding event. With the wealth of understanding, knowledge and experience you bring with you, the stage appears to be set for a successful Workshop if you will engage in frank and free discussions of human behaviour in disaster in Australia.