

Taxonomy and Disaster: Theoretical and Applied Issues

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During the past three years I have reviewed nearly one thousand publications that assessed various aspects of human responses to disaster (Drabek 1986). While most of these were prepared by sociologists, many were published by social geographers, economists, anthropologists, psychologists, political scientists, and representatives of other social science disciplines. My aim was to identify the key findings from each study and then to synthesize them into a series of analytical propositions. The propositions serve to summarize the major contours of the disaster research legacy.

Because I had participated in a similar effort a decade earlier (Mileti, Drabek, and Haas 1975), I had some awareness of the issues and limitations inherent in such a venture. For example, Aguirre (1976) has challenged us to think much more carefully about numerous barriers that preclude the construction of propositional inventories and other types of integrative syntheses. In contrast, Torry (1979) has urged that we not limit our inquiries by excessive adherence to disciplinary boundaries so as to preclude the conclusions provided by anthropologists. Of course, a similar argument could be made regarding the other social science disciplines. Thus, as I proceeded to cluster over two thousand empirically verified findings around 153 subtopics, my concerns intensified about defining disaster and current approaches to its study. As I wrote in 1986,

Throughout this book I have argued that the most basic scientific problem confronting social scientists studying disaster responses is the matter

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