

Commentaries on "Taxonomy and Disaster"

Taxonomies of Disaster and Macrosocial Theory

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I would like to introduce the subject of taxonomy in disaster situations by asking you to suppose that a chemical had been released across the United States to which tens, perhaps hundreds of millions, of people would be exposed and that would kill hundreds of thousands of people a year. What would you call this? What response would you expect to it? I call the chemical tobacco. Suppose that a famine is causing hundreds of people to die every day in a city. Is that a disaster? What response would you expect to this? The city is Calcutta. Now imagine a country with seven million working people who have no regular jobs. That is where we are now, the United States. Imagine a town and surrounding region in which the largest part of the population are slaves. That is the town of Williamsburg 130 to 200 years ago. Barely mentioned in all the information on Williamsburg culture is the fact that it celebrates a slave society and its products.

Gary Kreps has defined disasters as events in which societies or their larger subunits incur physical damages and losses and/or disruption of their routine functioning. You should note that this includes nonphysical impacts because it uses "and/or," and disruption of routine functioning would presumably include sudden economic breakdowns, sudden social breakdowns, riots, strikes, massive loss of jobs in a locality, and so on.

Note however, that by referring to disruption of routine functions it excludes routine mass deprivations, for example mass malnutrition and

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ployed in Marienthal. Marienthal was a community where everyone lost his and her job and that did nothing but sit and suffer in apathy, much to the discontent of the socialists and the social researchers who came out from Vienna to study it. There is also the question of the mass culture, which accepts the deprivation as a normal state, or the mass tendency to blame the victims and say, "Well, we don't have to do anything, it's up to them, they should stop smoking or the blacks should work harder, the unemployed should try to get jobs."

If one starts combining these spatial-temporal impact characteristics and social definitions, one can find a place for all the examples that I started with. Down somewhere in that list of about fifteen permutations and combinations of these characteristics, one finds community-level physical disasters (see table 12.1). That is the location of most disaster research. There are also regional physical disasters, which are very rare and which tend not to have been studied because we have not had "good" ones in the United States since the disaster money came through. There are some old studies by the Red Cross, and of course if you go overseas you find large-scale examples of this type of research. Here is where the geographers and the environmentalists enter, complete with studies of the famines and the question of whether it isn't, after all, the victim's own fault because they have too many children or too many goats.

In summary, I would first ask why there is a taxonomy rather than sets of analytic dimensions or variables? Why pigeon-hole rather than construct causal models? The empirical side of the work by Gary Kreps involves converting taxonomic dimensions into analytic variables and constructing causal models within the types of organizational behavior that have been studied. You can see a nice critique of taxonomy in Parsons' *Structure of Social Actions* and his discussion of Weber's ideal types as a set of rigidly composed sets of characteristics as opposed to analytical characteristics in which you can freely combine, recombine, and analyze. And this leads to another question: why should one focus on so-called disaster—physical disasters essentially—rather than theoretically defined sets of situations of mass deprivation and their subtypes? The choice of situations and variables tend to be related to the original problem. Are researchers particularly concerned with whether (Drabek mentions this) the community is resilient in its response or whether it is wounded and dying. Is it like tornado-struck cities or is it like Buffalo Creek or Marienthal? Are the persons resilient or are they suffering mental illness? Is the community responding with solidarity or with social conflict? With altruism or with looting? The crucial point about almost all the natural disasters studied is the enormous role of normative consensus about altruistic behavior. The tendency to focus on these physical disasters blinds people to the problematic nature of that normative consensus. It tends to blind people to the problematic nature of the role of elites because in general the elites are part of the normative

disease, mass poverty, slavery, routine official persecution. By this definition a ghetto is not a disaster, but a ghetto riot is. What does this sensitize us to? I would contend that *disaster* is part of everyday language, it is a folk term, it is a bureaucratic term for deciding when funds are given or not given, it is a research funder's term for deciding which researchers are awarded grants by various agencies who are defined as supporting disaster research. It means different things to different people in different societies and in different historical periods. It has a strong ideological component. In particular, what the elites define as normal is not a disaster. The Depression was not a disaster until the New Deal defined it as one. Plant closings are not disasters in the United States but they are in Sweden because of a complicated set of mechanisms. Technologically induced loss of jobs by a entire occupational category across the United States is normal and up to the individual to respond to in this country. In Sweden, however, they spend about two to three percent of the gross national product on an active labor market policy to retrain people who lose their jobs through technology or through plant shutdowns or through simply coming onto the labor market without any skills.

I argue that rather than operate from common language, sociologists have to start by developing a theoretical concept. One might start with the broadest concept of large-scale stress situations, those in which many people in the society suffer from relatively severe deprivations of needs and wants. (Some people would say that this is a definition of a social problem.) Next one could think of a lot of examples and see what kind of dimensions arise if one tried to classify these examples. Dimensions of large-scale stress situations (most of them have been used many times in typologies) would include the scope across the society, the proportion of the total society that is impacted, the situation's concentration in time—whether it is sudden and temporary, sudden with long-lasting consequences, gradually growing, or a chronic condition that seems to be crucial to the response and to the institutionalization of responses. Is it concentrated in space or is it dispersed? If the smoking deaths were concentrated in a community with a chemical plant one would certainly see something different happening from what happens when they are dispersed. These are spatial-temporal dimensions. Then there are dimensions in terms of cultural meanings; when I hear the word *culture* I don't reach for my gun. Instead I reach for Marx or for Mills and say that there are elite and mass definitions of social situations. The Depression was accepted as normal by elites, a natural consequence of a free market economy about which nothing could be done, and was considered a situation where individuals were expected to cope as best they could. You can read all about this ideology in Robert and Helen Lynd's *Middle Town in Transition*, one of the great disaster studies, or in Jahoda, Lazarsfeld, and Zeisel—now available in English as *The Unem-*

Table 12.1
A Typology of Collective Stress Situations

Impact characteristics		Social definitions		Examples
Societal Scope	Concentration in time	Elites accept as "normal"	Masses accept as "normal"	
LARGE SCALE NATIONALLY	Sudden	Widespread	Normal	Famines in premodern society
			Normal	Depressions in 19th century
	Chronic	Widespread	Normal	Depression (1930s)
			Abnormal	Famines in 20th century Depressions (post-New Deal) Epidemics (modern societies) Major wars (since WWII)
MEDIUM SCALE NATIONALLY	Sudden	Widespread	Normal	Poverty (traditional societies) Slavery (preabolitionism) Endemic diseases
			Abnormal	Prerevolutionary situation of rising mass expectations
	Localized	Localized	Normal	Sudden obsolescence of an occupation (US) Farm price collapse (US)
			Abnormal	Plant closings (US) Plant closings (Sweden)
REGIONAL PHYSICAL DISASTERS				

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