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APPLICABILITY OF COMMUNITY IMPACT MODELS DEVELOPED IN DISASTER STUDIES TO CORPS PLANNING

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Certain terms, such as problem, crisis, impact, come into widespread usage although the users of these words imply quite different referents. Some of the differences are semantic only, but other differences suggest analytically different phenomena which should not be lumped together.

Here, I want to use the vocabulary of crisis and develop a framework for viewing organized community activity in dealing with situations defined as crises.

CRISIS-GENERATING THREATS

The term crisis itself has taken on various meanings in recent years, but its popular imprecision need not obscure its analytic utility. The term is simply a label applied to certain types of social situations. It signifies that existing ways of doing things and existing patterns of social organization are no longer accepted as appropriate. This implies that new social action guidelines must be worked out. In contrast to crises as socially defined situations are those physical and social conditions which provide the context for social behavior. The important point is that these events or conditions themselves are not crises; rather, they are conditions seen as threats to accepted patterns of relationships among members of a social system or between the system as a whole and its environment. The distinction between threats and crises is useful for two reasons. First, it implies that there is no necessary relationship between conditions and crisis situations. Second, it allows separate examination of the variable properties of both threats and crises.

The term threat is perhaps not ideal, but it does convey the connotation of potential disruption of existing social structure. Theoretically, any event or condition has such potential, but the probability of crisis generation differs widely. For American cities, it may well be that the range of such threats has never been so varied as it is today. Yet, not all communities face threats of the same degree of severity. The threat of air pollution, of traffic congestion--and of racial violence--may be so slight in a rural commercial center as to be thought nonexistent, while in a large industrial community these may significantly affect the quality of life. Rather than arbitrarily establishing minimal criteria for the existence of such

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threats, it is analytically more convenient (if not, in fact, more accurate) to assume the universality of all types of threats and move to measurement based on differences of severity.

One immediate, but often overlooked implication from even as limited an inventory as these, is that any single community condition in which one is interested exists, not in isolation, but in the context of many other conditions. The comparative analysis of crisis and organized community attempts at its resolution needs to consider this multiproblem context, for part of the explanation for community activity (or lack of it) is a product of this condition. The presence of concern for other threats is often overlooked in research efforts aimed at predicting the extent of activity in a single problem area from a number of community characteristics.

But what is it about a particular type of event or condition which makes it more likely to bring about massive organizational involvement and change? In other words, what characteristics of threats make them more likely to generate a crisis? The following suggestions will include only a few such factors. Many others are possibly relevant here, including physical properties of various conditions or events. However, only social characteristics of crisis threats are included in this paper.

The scope of potential crisis-generated threats appears to have much to do with the probability of leading to a state of crisis. Here, the distinction between system and subsystem is a useful one. Events or conditions having consequences for community systems as wholes, possess greater crisis potential than others whose impact is largely confined to a particular community subsystem. The use of bussing to alter the racial composition of local schools contains high crisis potential in part, at least. This is so because, rather than being an alteration within that community subsystem (the educational institution), bussing threatens to undermine existing patterns of dominant-minority relations characteristic of the community as a whole. The aftermath of a natural disaster, such as a tornado, possesses crisis potential to the extent that routine behavior of the community as a whole is affected. Telephone outages, debris-blocked streets and closed schools and businesses are examples. Likewise, racial disturbances generate crisis situations because they threaten the entire community social structure.

The nature of a specific threat has much to do with its crisis probability. Novel or nontraditional events have greater disruptive potential for ongoing behavior patterns than routine occurrences or conditions. Such events have dramatic impact, providing a clear distinction between a previous period of normalcy and the resulting unstructured situation. The threat potential of such occurrences is further increased if they are infrequent or unpredictable, both because dramatic impact is greater and because the possibility of

emergency social mechanisms having been worked out beforehand is lessened. For example, relatively high levels of air pollution may exist for extended periods, but a sharp rise in contamination levels disrupts daily routines (of breathing, seeing, and such) and is significantly more likely to generate organized reaction.

The context in which physical and social events take place is also closely related to their crisis potential. An event may occur in nearly identical fashion and be considered a crisis in one case but not in another. A large group of college students take to the streets in support of an expanded Black Studies program, and their actions are defined as a "riot." But a crowd of equal size and of identical composition engaging in a similar behavior following victory in an athletic contest is viewed as part of a "normal" celebration. Vandalism and arson, routine occurrences in American cities, in a different context becomes looting and fire-bombing and part of a subversive plot to undermine the community.

In this instance, there are undoubtedly several factors which provide a framework for such events. Frequency of occurrence seems to be one of the more relevant physical properties of crisis threats. More germane here are specific cultural patterns against which events are defined and evaluated. Some events become institutionalized and are accepted as expected behavior under specified conditions. An example is the Latin American coup d'etat, in many countries an accepted method for replacing the national leadership. Reactions to such attempts in countries where popular elections have become routine are vastly different.

Finally, crisis threats differ in their controllability--that is, in the extent to which methods exist and are implemented for their reduction or elimination. Controllability is a function of two factors, the state of technical know-how at any particular time and the extent of consensus over both desired ends and over the means to achieve them. While a discussion of the former is beyond the scope of a sociological analysis, the social implications of consensus are directly related to a consideration of crises as social situations. Natural disasters are a type of crisis threat characterized by a high degree of consensus over the desirability of their elimination or reduction, but the means are not available for accomplishing this. Racial disturbances, on the other hand, are characterized by sharp dissensus over the method for reducing their threat, and there is only slightly more agreement as to desired outcomes (complete integration versus total segregation or even elimination, to mention only a few proposed solutions).

Admittedly, the crisis potential of threats varies along many other dimensions as well, but these at least illustrate the nature of a framework for the comparative analysis of crises at the community rather than at the individual level.

THE RESOLUTION OF CRISES

Since concern here is with urban crises, the community level is the appropriate one for this analysis. Following Warren, community is conceived of as a combination of organizations performing functions of locality relevance.[1] Groups and organizations thus are seen as having primary responsibility for crisis management at the local level. Included among these are municipal government and its major divisions (such as police and fire departments, civil defense, and public works), utility companies, hospitals, and any number of other organizations. An adequate understanding of both crisis situations and the resolution of crises requires examination of these organizations, the interrelationships among them, and the context in which they operate.

The Context of Restructuring

A crisis is a situation in which existing norms have been neutralized. Once this has taken place, there begins a search for meaning, a process of collective definition whereby members of the community come to share some interpretation of the meaning of the situation. The end product of this collective search is the emergence of a complex of norms which serve not only to label the crisis situation, but which also set the tone for organized efforts of crisis management.[2] As is true of any set of nroms, emergent norms restructuring crisis situations are likely to be contradictory, if not actually conflicting. In civil disturbances, for example, pressures to end the emergency rapidly as possible are weighed against considerations of the acceptability of tactics and courses of action. As with all norms, those evolving in the early stages of crisis are likely to be situationally specific, providing guides for action in certain instances but lacking continuity or generality in others. Also, such norms are differentially shared. Some community members at one extreme hold such beliefs deeply, those at the other extreme reject them entirely, while still others are unaware of such collective definitions.

One way in which various crisis situations differ is in the extent of community consensus regarding the definition of the situation and of the nature of group action required by such a definition. Crises generated by a number of differing threats may be arranged along a continuum of consensus (Figure 1). At one end are crisis

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[1]Warren, R.L., The Community in America, Chicago, Illinois: Rand McNally, 1963.

[2]Turner, R.H., "Collective behavior," R.E.L. Faris (ed.), Handbook of Modern Sociology, Chicago, Illinois: Rand McNally, 1964, pp 382-425.

information required in decision-making is sought from the environment, then processed and communicated, both within and between organizations.[9] It constitutes the organizational-level process of rumor behavior.

Under conditions of environmental uncertainty, the organizational intelligence process is assumed to be especially significant. Everyday conditions under which organizations normally operate have been altered; feedback from the environment is urgently sought. Intelligence data are needed on the nature of the threat, how the crisis situation is to be interpreted and labeled, and what constraints are operative and likely to affect organizational behavior (for instance, the level of conflict prevailing normative expectations, and power considerations).

Regardless of either the quality of such information or the quality of the intelligence process itself, organizational decision-making takes place, utilizing whatever feedback is available. Numerous questions are raised, either formally or informally, inside normal channels or outside. Three broad issues must be decided: Is organizational action required in the crisis situation? If so, what type of action is called for? How is this course of action to be organized? It is in the process of answering these questions that restructuring at the community level is achieved. Regardless of the specific nature of the process, the major consequences of restructuring are seen in terms of organizational change. Two broad classes of change may be distinguished: changes in existing community organizations and the emergence of new groups.

Consequences of Restructuring: Changes in Existing Community Organizations

Organizations operating in crisis situations search for cues in order to decide upon a pattern of response. Conditions operative in most crises are such that normal patterns of organizational activity come to be viewed as inappropriate through feedback and collective definition of the situation. Modifications are worked out through both formal and informal means. It is important to distinguish between those changes which are of relatively short duration, lasting typically only until the crisis situation has been resolved, perhaps best called adaptations, and those which become permanently embedded in organizational structure.

Although the observation is far from conclusive, it appears that changes in community organizations operating in uncertain crisis

[9] Wilensky, H.L., Organizational Intelligence: Knowledge and Policy in Government and Industry, New York: Basic Books, 1967.

situations are likely to be incorporated on a permanent basis in the areas of domain (definition of the organization's role in the crisis), equipment and other material resources, planning, and relationship to other groups and organizations. Adjustments worked out in organizational structure (including authority relations, decision-making roles, communication patterns, and interpersonal relations), tasks and activities, and normative structure are more likely to be short-term adaptations rather than permanent changes. All such changes are products of the restructuring process necessitated by the advent of a crisis situation, a process made up of the interaction of community organizations and their environments, which include other groups and organizations. Such nontraditional groups as crowds and publics are important varieties of the latter.

Consequences of Restructuring: Emergence of New Groups

Resolution and management of crisis situations at the community level involve changes of a different order as well. Numerous community activities, especially those falling outside the domains of existing organizations, form the base around which new social groupings emerge. Many are of such short duration that they appear to have been abortive efforts. Others continue to exist as active organizations for relatively long periods of time, operating well after the specific crisis in which they emerged has passed. Falling in between are groups which actually exist only intermittently, most commonly in similar types of crises. A number of emergent groups of all three varieties are discussed in several of the papers which follow. They, too, are both shaped by and help to shape the restructuring process brought on by the suspension of established patterns of community social organization.