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SOME COMMENTS ON THE RESEARCH ENTERPRISE  
STUDYING DISASTER: CAUTIONS ON FIELDWORK

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(Preface: These comments were written as an appendix to a paper "Conceptualization Del Disastre En Forms Productiva Para La Investigacion En Ciencias Sociales" which appeared in Al Norte Del Rio Grande Ciencias Sociales, Desastres: Una Perspectiva Northamerican, Ed. by Allan Lavell (Columbia: La Red, 1994) Since the appendix was neither presented nor published, it is recorded here with an addendum.)

The basic argument to be made is that research on disasters does not require any new methodologies. The full range of methods used and useful within different disciplinary traditions are adaptable and relevant to the subject matter relating to disaster. Of course, individual researchers will have preference for particular methods based on their own methodological orientation. For example, my own preferences suggest that the most useful focus is at a community organizational level and with data collection where there is a considerable dependence on semi structured interviews with organizational informants. While there is no unique disaster "methodology", there may be some cautions concerning field work which are worth noting here.

1. Many conventional concepts widely used within various disciplines may be too static to be useful and will "blind" the observer to actual social reality. Most social science concepts are "constructed" on a static reality. One of the more fruitful areas of research involves "emergent" behavior- that is behavior which has no pre-disaster existence. Conventional concepts will often exclude these emergent behaviors as being irrelevant.

2. While there is a place for attitude studies about many aspects of disaster, one should be especially cautious about using them as behavioral predictors. The correlation between attitudes and behavior is likely to be much lower in disaster situations than in most other areas of social life. Asking people how they think they will behave in certain disaster situations is almost useless. It is obviously better to ask people how they did behave in certain situations.

3. While much of the interest in disaster is in "negative" outcomes, it is also useful to inquire about "positive" effects. For example, asking questions about the anxiety of children subsequent to disaster impact might also be combined with questions about changes in

"obedience" to parental suggestions. Including such questions, however, will make the interpretation of data more complex.

4. If people tell you something, that does not necessarily mean that it is "true". There are a number of myths about disaster which now constitute popular truths since they are so widespread. Systematically collecting these myths is not necessarily science nor is presenting such results statistically an increase in critical knowledge.

5. Since the effects of disaster may seem to be random, random sampling is not necessarily the optimum sampling method. Disaster effects are, however, socially connected and other sample methods, for example, snowball sampling, are more likely to capture those critical social relationships.

6. Sampling points and data sources are important. One widely cited disaster study on the negative effects of disaster was based exclusively in legal briefs of victims who were participating in a class action suit seeking damages. So it was not difficult to imagine that their reactions would be especially negative. No information, however, was presented on the size or social location of these "victims" within the entire population of the impacted community.

7. Conventional disaster statistics provide little understanding, especially if used comparatively. Neither the number dead or injured or the monetary loss of property are accurate indicators of social impact, without knowing other dimensions about the community in which those losses took place. Consequently, compilations of national and especially cross national statistics are not likely to provide any useful information or knowledge.

8. While disaster would seem to adapt themselves to research designs which utilize Time I/Time II contrasts, one will soon discover the lack of availability of Time I data which can be

used as base line to contrast with Time II variables. The types of pre-disaster data important to the social sciences are seldom maintained as a part of routine statistical reporting.

9. Since disasters can best be studied as social processes, it is important that the data collection be appropriate to time period. Since disaster studies are difficult to organize and fund, "planned" studies of the "emergency" period may be done a year after the actual end of that period. Given such a time delay, it might be better to structure such a study on the recovery process.

10. Since disasters are fragile opportunities to collect data, there is considerable urgency to get into the "field". However, urgency is seldom a good reason for poor theory or poor methodology. Ad hoc studies are likely to produce ad hoc results. This can be avoided if some preliminary planning is done with the development of several alternative data collection instruments which can be adapted when the opportunity for research presents itself.

11. If funding is obtained, it is likely to be directed toward issues which are administratively important to the funding agency. In general, it is likely to be poorly conceptualized. Part of the negotiating process requires a background knowledge of the literature so that the initial idea can be more adequately conceptualized. At times, reformation may be difficult and perhaps impossible. Given that situation, some attention should be given to collecting some data that will be theoretically important. Half a loaf is better than none, and perhaps even several slices are still important.

12. Field work during the emergency period may appear to be difficult, but there are, in fact, a number of decided advantages over "normal" field work. Conditions within the impacted area are not as chaotic as the media usually presents. In fact, there is usually the overwhelming

appearance of normalcy amidst even considerable physical damage. One decided advantage is that the usual barriers to access to informants are reduced. Traditional bureaucratic barriers of access to persons in "protected positions" are reduced, providing much easier entry. In addition, if the research is presented as an opportunity for respondents to pass on "their" experience so others might learn, people are willing to share their experience. In other words, the conditions in the emergency period are such that social barriers are reduced and the expressive behavior is enhanced. This provides optimum conditions for gathering information. While time restraints might prevent obtaining complete information, earlier physical presence provides a form of research legitimacy which sanctions future data collection.

13. On the other hand, while the emergency period is characterized by an unprecedented openness, the recovery period often is characterized by considerable community controversy. This, at times, makes certain types of data collection more difficult and even makes researchers vulnerable to various political and legal pressures. While there is no absolute protection against such problems, a continuing knowledge of dynamics of community life will suggest ways to minimize research problems. Community conflict about disaster related issues is, of course, an interesting arena for research.

Finally, the results of any study needs to be reported in the context of existing literature as well as in the social context of the disaster when it happened. One example of how interpretations of data can lead to questionable conclusions can be illustrated by research after the accident at Three Mile Island. Some saw the accident as a research opportunity but were not familiar with existing research on disaster. In addition, they concluded that a nuclear power accident was unique and different. With that assumption, one study claimed to have data which showed that

more people evacuated than necessary, and they went longer distances than usual. These "unique" findings were interpreted as a consequence of the great fear shown by those around the plant.

A primary problem with this interpretation was the assumption that only people who should evacuate were those who had official notification to do so. Others who did not follow orders and left were assumed to reflect great fear. A major problem in TMI was that there were many ambiguous public signals given. The then governor said that it would be a good idea if pregnant women and children under five leave. In addition, there were conflicting media reports that the danger zone was from three to 20 miles from the plant, in concentric circles. Too, there were other messages that no problem existed. When people evacuated, and they did, it was not clear whose orders were being followed, if any. But the study gave a name to those who "should not" have evacuated, calling it the shadow effect which linguistically sounds ominous. Official messages are, of course, only one variable in accounting for disaster and not a very determinative one. Neither is fear. The existing literature would never suggest that evacuation occurs with geographical precision nor pavlovian compliance. One clear conclusion from the ambiguous messages is that no one knew what was going on and evacuating might be a prudent action.

That decision was facilitated by conflicting media reports on Friday and, during that day, there was an announcement that on Monday, schools in the area would be closed. Since the weekend was the first good weather of the spring in the area, many residents took the opportunity to "evacuate" and to visit friends and relatives. With Monday, an unanticipated holiday, even more distant relatives could be visited until the local confusion over the accident was clarified. Later, however, the investigator without knowledge of the community context at the time

suggested that the extensive miles traveled was indicative of a great fear of nuclear power. This points to the necessity of considering disaster behavior in the context of a knowledge of familiar behaviors in a community rather than imputing it to some generalized fear.

ADDENDUM: Since a portion of disaster research is opportunistic and driven by a sense of urgency, there is often little effort given to reading the existing literature. This leads to predictable consequences. The research repeats the same mistakes others have made, and the research is written up claiming, like Christopher Columbus, to have discovered new land while that land has been mapped many times before. While it is true that the disaster literature is diffuse, scattered over several languages and disciplines, the Internet now reduces the excuse provided by the paucity of local library holdings. In addition, a special issue of the INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF MASS EMERGENCIES, Vol. 15, No. 1 March 1997 on "Methods of Disaster Research: Past, Present and Future" Robert A. Stallings, Editor provides an extended discussion of various methods. The issue contains an extended article by E. L. Quarantelli on "The Disaster Research Center Field Studies of Organizational Behavior in the Crises Time Period of Disasters", pp. 47-70.