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The changing meaning of disaster

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Adverse events such as disasters are interpreted through a system of meaning provided by culture. Historically, research into society's response to disasters provides numerous examples of community resilience in face of adversity. However, since the 1980s, numerous researchers have challenged the previous optimistic accounts and argue that such incidents result in long-term damage to the community. It is claimed that community response to a disaster episode is far more likely to be defined by its vulnerability than its resilience. This new vulnerability paradigm of disaster response is underpinned by the belief that contemporary technologically driven disasters have a peculiarly destructive outcome. This paper explores the changing conceptualisation of adversity. It suggests that the shift from the expectation of resilience to that of vulnerability is best understood as an outcome of a changing cultural conceptualisation of adversity.

Key words: *disaster, adversity, blame, resilience, vulnerability, community*

Introduction

Catastrophes – natural and man made – catch communities unaware. Events like the destruction of the World Trade Center or the Great Tsunami of December 2004 force society to account for the incomprehensible. 'Where is God in all this?' was the question posed by religious leaders after the Tsunami. How society makes sense of such an unexpected catastrophe contributes to its impact. This is a story about which sociology has a lot to say.

Since the destruction of the World Trade Center on 11 September 2001, there has been a renewed interest in the field of disaster research. Concerns about the likely response of communities to a major terrorist incident have led to questions being posed about what we know about public reactions to incidents of disaster (Durodie and Wessely 2002). Research into disaster has sought to explore the behavioural response of individuals and communities to the experience of large-scale disruption and destruction. As a result, the findings of this research may help provide insights into the dynamic of public response to large-scale destruction and acts of terrorism, as well as offer ideas for lines of further inquiry. According to one American sociologist involved in the field of disaster research, the 'disaster research literature provide the best model for predicting the likely behavioural scenarios in terrorism involving WMD' (Fischer 2002, 123). Kathleen Tierney, a leading specialist in this field, concurs. She believes that

> based on both collective behaviour theories and empirical evidence, there appears to be no a priori reason to assume that patterns of collective behaviour before and during terrorist incidents will differ markedly from those observed in other types of crisis events. (Tierney 2004, 28)

There is little doubt that learning from the historical experience of how communities cope with disasters can provide useful insights into the problems posed by the threat of terrorist incidents. And the disaster research literature represents an important resource for conceptualising many of the issues faced by people post 9/11 (Furedi 2007). However, as we

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shall argue, there is no single model of public behaviour offered by disaster research. Indeed, over the years, in line with changing cultural norms, research into disasters has undergone a significant shift in emphasis.

Changing ideas about disasters

Throughout history people's explanation of what caused a disaster, what would be its likely impact on their lives and what meaning they should attach to it have gone through important modifications. As Carr argued, a disaster is defined by human beings and not by nature. He noted that 'not every windstorm, earth-tremor, or rush of water is a catastrophe'. If there are no serious injuries of deaths and other serious losses, Carr argued that 'there is no disaster' (Carr 1932, 211). Carr's association of disaster with an event associated with the destruction of human lives and economic loss is very much shaped by the modernist imagination of his times. Michael Kemp argues that in the Middle Ages, 'solar eclipses and comets were seen as catastrophes, because they were interpreted as signs of divine anger against human sins, as were earthquakes and volcanic eruptions' (2003, 151–2). It was not so much the intensity of human suffering but the powerful signals sent by a major act of physical disruption that shaped the perception of a catastrophe.

Historically, ideas about disasters have gone through three important phases. Traditionally, catastrophes were attributed to the supernatural. They were characterised as *Acts of God*, 'with the implication that nothing could be done about their occurrence' (Quarantelli 2001, 3). The rise of Enlightenment secularism led to an important shift in the way society conceptualised disasters. The development of science as the new source of knowledge altered people's perception of disasters. 'They were increasingly seen as *Acts of Nature*', writes Quarantelli. However, in more recent times, the view that disasters are caused by *Acts of Nature* has been gradually displaced by the idea that they resulted from the *Acts of Men and Women* (Quarantelli 2001, 4). In the aftermath of a disaster today, the finger of blame invariably points towards another human being. Government officials, big business or careless operatives are held responsible for most disasters. The rumour that the Great 2004 Tsunami was not 'natural' but caused by nuclear testing readily found an audience sceptical of the official version of events.

Attempts to conceptualise the nature of the human response to disaster appeared to go against the grain of common sense driven caricatures. Many early observers were impressed by the relative absence of panic and the flourishing of acts of solidarity in disaster situations. Writing in a Durkheimian vein, Freud regarded disasters as occasions when social solidarity emerges and a spirit of altruism influences human behaviour. He observed:

> One of the gratifying and exalting impressions which mankind can offer is when in the face of an elemental crisis, it forgets the discordances of its civilization and all its internal difficulties and animosities, and recalls the great common task of preserving itself against the superior power of nature. (Freud 1927, 21)

One review of the state of research in 1969 observed that 'most studies of sudden natural disaster report great emotional solidarity and mutual helpfulness in the disaster-stricken population'. It also claimed that 'an outpouring of altruistic feelings and behaviour begins with mass rescue work and carries on for days, weeks, possibly even months after the impact' (Barton 1969, 206). Some of the leading figures of American disaster research even concluded that the social impact of disasters was not purely negative and drew attention to studies that indicated that in 'some cases disasters have been beneficial to the victims involved'. They noted that victim families were 'better off with respect to family solidarity and relationships than matched nonvictim families in the same community with which they were compared' (Quarantelli and Dynes 1977). Fritz claimed that

> disaster-struck communities and societies naturally develop therapies that quickly and effectively overcome the losses, traumas, and privations of disaster – without the intervention of mental health professionals. (Fritz 1996, 17)[1]

Fritz drew on the experience of the Spanish Civil War, the bombing of Britain and of Dresden and Hiroshima during the Second World War to argue that in all these cases something akin to the local equivalent of the Blitz spirit emerged. These communities affected by mass destruction demonstrated a formidable capacity for resilience (Jones *et al.* 2004).

However, since the 1980s the emphasis on community resilience has come under direct challenge by a new generation of researchers. Instead of emphasizing the element of resilience, researchers

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stressed the vulnerability of communities to the disaster experience. This change in focus was underwritten by a shift away from the sociological to an ecological perspective on disasters. Earlier disaster researchers like Quarantelli were criticised for defining a disaster too emphatically from a sociological perspective and for depicting it as a 'social crisis occasion'. The new perspective based on environmental and risk consciousness preferred to regard a disaster from the vantage point of an 'extreme environment' and claimed that the 'idea of extreme suggests the absence of a meaningful way of comprehending an event or circumstance that produces the (possibly) negative effect of rendering a situation incoherent' (Kroll-Smith *et al.* 1997, 3, 6).

Ecological perspectives on disasters claimed that the finding of community resilience in previous research had limited applicability, since these older case studies were confined to natural disasters such as floods and tornadoes. It was suggested that research had now turned towards the relatively new phenomenon of 'man-made' toxic and technological disasters, whose impact on people was likely to be different. Central to the argument promoted by the new *vulnerability paradigm* of disaster research is the contention that in contemporary times, communities are far more affected by a technological than a natural disaster. It is claimed that a

> clear preponderance of evidence points to technological disasters as creating a far more severe and long-lasting pattern of social, economic, cultural and psychological impacts than do the natural ones. (Freudenberg 1997, 26)

Supporters of the claim that technological disasters have a peculiarly powerful impact on people argue that this response is related to the 'ambiguity of harm'. The possibility of indeterminate casualties over a long period of time breeds apprehension. Its destructive consequences are unknowable and therefore people continue to live in a state of anxiety well past the eruption of the disaster. Following the thesis developed by Kai Erikson (1994), it is suggested that toxic disasters are invisible and never have a clear end. They are unbounded and become a permanent source of anxiety. They insist that rather than leading to the emergence of solidarity, technological disasters help create a 'corrosive community'. Blame, mutual recrimination and conflict are presented as the consequence of technologically driven disasters (Erikson 1994; Kroll-Smith *et al.* 1997; Freudenberg 1997).

What causes a disaster may well have an impact on the manner in which it is experienced. However, perceptions regarding causation are shaped by a cultural script that seeks to endow events, especially extreme ones, with meaning. So in the nineteenth century many so-called technologically 'caused' disasters were interpreted as a manifestation of God's anger toward human arrogance. In such instances, anxiety about the consequences of technological change encouraged the perception that ultimately a disaster was caused by an Act of God. Today such events would be associated with human action and the cause would be perceived as that of human irresponsibility or malevolence. For most people the really important question is not *how* but *why* a disaster occurred. It is through people's search for meaning that the answer to this question is constructed.

Changing cultural expectations for framing adversity

The contrast between the conclusions drawn by earlier disaster researchers from those adopted by the post 1980s ones may be due to the different cultural influences that prevailed in the communities they investigated. Whatever causal effect one assigns to specific disaster agents, their human impact is mediated through a community's system of culture. One review notes that

> some researchers view disasters, particularly those perceived to result from human agency, as more 'corrosive' than therapeutic because they often produce psychological stress, economic problems, and community conflict. (Webb 2002, 89)

If that is so, it still raises questions about why the role of human agency is perceived in such destructive terms. It is worth noting that some of the earliest disasters studied by researchers involved human agency and yet the emphasis on community corrosion is absent from these accounts. The first serious sociological study of a disaster, Samuel Prince's work on the explosion of two munitions ships in Halifax harbour in 1917, clearly involved human agency. However, instead finding a corrosive community, Prince drew attention to the creative cultural readjustment made by the people of Halifax in the aftermath of this tragedy (Prince 1920). Nor did researchers detect symptoms of community corrosion in the aftermath of the bombing of Dresden, London and Hiroshima. Yet these episodes were clearly the outcome of intentional human agency.

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It is also worth noting that the attribution of disasters to human causation has been part of the repertoire of the reaction to such events for some time. Since the rise of modernity, many commentators have blamed industrialisation, progress, technology, manufactured risk and human arrogance for causing disasters. In the nineteenth century, technological accidents were perceived as representing a new form of violence and danger (Cooter 1997). However, this orientation towards blame did not necessarily lead to community corrosion or the kind of behaviour that advocates of the vulnerability paradigm now associate with technological disasters. Take a few examples. The destructive flood that hit Galveston, Texas (1906) leading to the death of 6000 people led one commentator to note that the haste to grow and thrive' may have led to the neglect of protective measures. Nevertheless the author was impressed by the 'energy' of Galveston's 'citizens in wresting prosperity out of unparalleled disaster' (Russell 1913, 210, 249). Rapid modernisation was also blamed by some for the fire that devastated Boston in 1872. 'Our calamity is our penalty, a fine we pay, long ago predicted to our inflammable architecture by prophets of combustion, yet defied by the greed of rapid gain' preached a cleric in his sermon (Barton 1872, 7). Nevertheless the sermon celebrated the resilience of the people affected by this disaster. A similar diagnosis was made by a Leeds newspaper editor of the 1852 Holmfirth Catastrophe. Eighty-one people died due to a reservoir bursting its banks. It was widely known that due to deficient construction of the reservoir, this was a disaster waiting to happen. John Heaton editor of *The Appeal* observed:

> It would seem, however, that our very civilisation, by inciting us to subjugate the mightier powers of nature to our use, exposes us to artificial dangers almost as great as those natural ones which we escape. (Editor of *The Appeal* 1852, 3)

Again this denunciation of human recklessness did not question the ability of the community to deal with the tragedy it faced.

If community corrosion is a legacy of a disaster, it can not be simply because of the role of human causation. A far more important role is played by the manner in which that agency is perceived and prevailing cultural attitudes towards adversity, the prevailing system of meaning and relationships of trust. This point is implicitly recognised by many proponents of the vulnerability paradigm. Freudenberg observes that

> if the aftermath of a natural disaster is typified by volunteers who come in to offer a hand, the aftermath of a technological disaster is perhaps best typified by lawyers who offer instead the back of a hand. (Freudenberg 1997, 191)

But it is not a specific disaster agent that invites lawyers to appear but cultural attitudes toward adversity and blame. Pieterman (2001, 153) argues that a recent shift to what he calls *precautionary culture* has led to a shift in the moral reaction to misfortune for which no one is to blame to one where damage is regarded as a disgrace for which someone has to pay. Ewald (2002, 284) also points to a shift in the moral reaction to injury and notes that victims 'are no longer satisfied with compensation' but are 'only satisfied when those responsible are held criminally liable'.

Ewald (2002, 282) argues that as a result of new cultural attitudes towards safety we are seeing 'the insistence on individual and collective injuries of unequalled magnitude, at least in peacetime'. Moreover our heightened sense of insecurity disposes us towards 'rediscovering the existence of disaster, but with the difference that disasters are no longer, as before, attributed to God and providence, but to human agency'. It appears that the culture of disaster response that prevailed throughout most of the twentieth century has become modified by the rise of a new sensibility towards adversity.

The changing conceptualisation of adversity

How we view adversity and pain have important implications on how society engages with the threats that it faces. Ideas about how people are likely to cope in an emergency or a disaster are shaped by prior experience but also by a cultural narrative that creates a set of expectations and sensitises people to some problems more than others. It provides a frame through which people understand and make sense of their experience. Western culture frequently transmits the view that we live in a uniquely dangerous era where humanity faces hazards and potential disaster. Gray and Oliver note:

> The modern era is often cast as an age of catastrophe, of global conflicts, genocides and 'ethnic cleansings', disasters of industrial and agrarian change and of technological hubris, and – increasingly – environmental cataclysms. (2001, 1)

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Academic research has itself internalised some of these sentiments and often promotes such views through its publications. The belief that disasters are increasing in frequency and represent a growing risk to our life is frequently argued by academics, journalists and advocacy groups. 'It is increasingly apparent that large-scale disasters will be central features of the 21st century', is the verdict of three American academics involved in the field of disaster research (Marshall *et al.* 2003, 73). According to a study that is actually devoted towards deconstructing 'disaster mythology', society is confronted with a growing number of disaster agents and as the 'population of the United States continues to increase, the number of potential victims continues to grow' (Fischer 1998, 4).

In line with an inflated sense of disaster consciousness, there is also a manifest tendency towards expanding the range of events that can be characterised as a disaster.

> These days, disasters may result in modest levels of harm, and perhaps relatively straightforward tasks for the emergency services and yet still they are called 'disasters'. (Horlick-Jones 1995, 304)

In line with contemporary crisis consciousness, often the line between misfortune, accidents, adversity and disaster have become blurred. According to the philosopher Marcio Seligmann-Silva (2003, 143), the definition of catastrophe has altered. Instead of representing it as an 'unusual, unique, unexpected event', it is increasingly seen as an everyday event.

The process outlined by Seligmann-Silva has been conceptualised by social constructionist sociologists as that of *domain expansion*. Domain expansion – the process through which 'the contents of previously accepted social problems expand' is a constituent element in the construction of social problems today (Loseke 1999, 82). Through the process of domain expansion a heightened sense of anticipation surrounds the discussion of disasters in Britain. 'Our recent history is littered with large scale disasters and catastrophes' is the first line of a book on the subject. Its author believes that the 1980s can be appropriately described as a 'decade of disasters' in the UK (Newburn 1993, 9). Another account writes of 'the spate of disasters that hit Britain in the mid-late 1980s' (McLean and Johnes 2000, 120). Its inference is that we are living through uniquely dangerous times and is testimony to a cultural imagination that perceives the world as uniquely risky. Horlick-Jones observed that the association of disasters in the UK with the 1980s may have served for many as a symbol of a 'political and economic system in crisis' (Horlick-Jones 1995, 307).

Ideas about disaster are culturally specific and are linked to wider attitudes about the meaning of misfortune, blame and social expectations. It is our contention that contemporary disaster consciousness is not the direct product of a qualitative change in intensity of this threat. Rather what has changed are attitudes to adversity and ideas about its impact on the individual. Whether or not a decade is associated with disasters is determined by a variety of influences. The scale of damage and the number of casualties may produce anxiety towards disasters in the future or it may not. Historical examples are quite useful in highlighting the influence of cultural norms on perceptions of adversity and hazards. It could be argued that if there was a decade of disaster in the UK in recent history, it would be the 1950s. In one year alone (1952) there were a larger number of casualties than in all the UK 1980s disasters put together. 15 August 1952 saw one of the worst flash floods ever to have occurred in Britain. It swept through the Devon village of Lynmouth, killing 35 people. Between 4 and 9 September, the smog in London killed several hundred people. On 8 October, three trains crashed in Harrow railway station, leading to 110 fatalities. And then the really big one. In December the smog hit London, leading to an estimated 4000 deaths.

Yet, despite the mass scale of fatalities, these disasters were not represented as events that signified that the world had become a more dangerous place. Individuals who recall this event often note that back in 1952 the Smog was not considered to be a disaster. According to one account,

> I think it has to be realised that people thought that these disasters of smogs were the result of the industrialization of our country, and that they were a necessary evil which we had to put up with in order to get the benefits of our industry making us more wealthy. (Berridge and Taylor 2003, 21)

Jon Ayres recalls that as a youngster during the 1956 Smog, he and his friends regarded it as 'rather fun'. He noted,

> You know, here were the grown-ups getting all worried about it; for us there was a real chance that school might be cancelled. It was really rather splendidly eerie, the muffled sounds and all the rest of it. It was rather exciting, you could play all sorts of

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> games that young boys did with 'baddies round the next corner'. And, it is a funny sort of thing, that's how we recollect it. (Berridge and Taylor 2003, 17–18)

From the standpoint of today's cultural sensibility, such a light-hearted reaction to a major episode of pollution is unthinkable.

Throughout the 1950s, Britain suffered from a large number of air and rail crashes and mining disasters. Compared to reactions to adversity today, the response to them appears as almost casual. A sense of loss and fear was tempered by the conviction that the effects of these tragedies would be contained and soon overcome with little long-term damage. Despite the fact that far more people died in disasters in the 1950s than in the 1980s, the era was not characterised as a decade of disasters. The experience of disasters – major and minor – is a social phenomenon which is mediated through the public's cultural imagination

The ascendancy of the model of vulnerability

During the past two decades the psychological dimensions of confronting adversity, its damage to the individual's state of mental health and his or her identity has acquired tremendous significance in the way that the response of the public to disasters and emergencies is conceptualised. The focus is increasingly on the psychological state of the individual. Consequently, there has been a shift of emphasis from community to the individual. Concern with the psychological state of the individual is premised on the recently emerged cultural narrative of vulnerability.

The concept of vulnerability emerged in the 1970s and was promoted by the environmentalist movement. The concept was central to a new discourse that regarded a disaster from an ecological perspective. 'Disasters occur because a community is vulnerable to the vagaries of the environment' (Westgate and O'Keefe 1976, 61). And since they believe that 'societies and communities are always vulnerable', it is seen to define the condition of existence. From the standpoint of the vulnerability paradigm, disasters are a normal feature of societies who are unable to deal with the hazards they confront.

It is important to note that the concept of vulnerability did not emerge from the experience of adversity confronting communities. It is a term of description or a form of diagnosis that professionals adopt in their characterisation of communities. Even advocates of this concept concede that this is a term that outsiders use to label others. As Heijmans noted, vulnerability is not a 'concept that grassroots communities use'. She believes that 'vulnerability to disasters is a matter of perception, and in most aid agencies' perceptions, the view of local people is lacking' (Heijmans 2001, 1, 15) and adds that 'most agencies tend to think on behalf of the victims, not realizing that disaster-prone communities might interpret their circumstances differently'.

The vulnerability paradigm has emerged from a Western cultural imagination that regards the world as an increasingly out of control and dangerous place. This perspective is informed by a perception that regards human society as paying a price for its apparent irresponsible behaviour to the environment. One of its principal claims is that disasters are dramatically increasing in number and that human communities have become more and more vulnerable to their impact. 'People are more vulnerable to disasters than in the past' commented Peter Walker, Head of the Disaster Policy Department at the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies.[2] The message conveyed by this statement is that the cumulative impact of human irresponsibility towards the environment has led to the creation of a new era of disasters. The insistence on the growth of human vulnerability is encouraged by an ideological estrangement from modernity. The modern world is experienced as a vulnerable one. In a review on anthropological research on disasters, Oliver-Smith notes:

> Basically, the increase in number and severity of natural and technological disasters constitutes one of the clearest tests available of the lack of resilience and sustainability of many human environmental adaptations. (1996, 304)

Vulnerability is conceptualised as the natural state of being. Ewald suggests that it has acquired the status of a 'sacred term' (2002, 294). As a growing range of human experiences are associated with disasters, the distinction between normal daily life and a disaster becomes ill defined. The concept of vulnerability helps normalise disaster consciousness. According to one of its advocates,

> the conceptual framework of vulnerability was borne out of human experience under situations in which it was often very difficult to differentiate normal day-to-day life from disaster. (Cardona 2003, 4)

From this perspective, disaster ceases to possess any distinct features. It is but an extreme symptom of a general state of vulnerability.

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The paradigm of community and individual vulnerability provides the dominant cultural conceptual framework for making sense of the public response to flood and other natural disasters. Vulnerability is not a state of being that emerges in response to a disaster – it is something that precedes it. It is conceptualised as an 'intrinsic predisposition to be affected, or to be susceptible to damage' (Cardona 2003, 2). That is why in recent times it has become common to use the recently constructed concept of *vulnerable groups*. Vulnerable groups do not simply refer to a small minority of economically insecure individuals. Children, indeed all children, are automatically assumed to be vulnerable. A study of the emergence of the concept of vulnerable children shows that in most published literature, the concept is treated 'as a relatively self-evident concomitant of childhood which requires little formal exposition'. It is a taken for granted idea that is rarely elaborated and 'children are considered vulnerable as individuals by definition, through both their physical and other perceived immaturities'. Moreover this state of vulnerability is presented as an intrinsic attribute. It is

> considered to be an *essential* property of individuals, as something which is intrinsic to children's identities and personhoods, and which is recognisable through their beliefs and actions, or indeed through just their appearance. (Frankenberg *et al.* 2000, 588–9)

This identity is also frequently attached to women, the elderly, minorities, the disabled and the poor – all of whom are sometimes characterised as a *vulnerable group*. From this perspective, vulnerability is a key marker and defining feature of a wide variety of group identities. It has also become a cultural metaphor through which society makes sense of adversity. Vulnerability as a state of being encourages the normalisation of a heightened sense of loss towards disasters.

Notes

1 This text was originally written in 1961.
2 Peter Walker 'there are no natural disasters' in *Geographical* July 1994.

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