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SOME OBSERVATIONS ON THE HANDLING OF THE DEAD
IN THE RAPID CITY, SOUTH DAKOTA,
FLOOD DISASTER

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On June 9, 1972, rains had swollen the river leading into Rapid City; the dam above the city had weakened. By late evening with little forewarning the weakened dam unleashed a torrent of water that swept through the city leaving 237 people dead.

In response to this tragedy, the Disaster Research Center sent a team of observers to the area. Several follow-up teams were sent later resulting in a total of thirty-six interviews with individuals in Rapid City who had had major responsibility for developing and administering the response to this disaster. The major focus of the data collection dealt with how the dead were handled. More specifically, the interviews were oriented to discovering how the search for, recovery, identification, and burial preparation of the dead were done. We were interested in collecting data that dealt with the nature of the organizations which developed during the emergency period and with the manner in which they addressed these task areas. In addition, the interviews focused on eliciting data that might uncover typical modes of individual adjustment to such a massive death toll, as well as modes of adjustment adopted during the fulfillment of duties associated with the search for, and recovery, identification and burial of the dead. What follows then is a description that incorporates both levels of attention, i.e., individual modes of adjustment and organizational means.

Since the flood had occurred at about 10:00 in the evening, there was difficulty in organizing a planned response to the situation with regards to the search and recovery of the large number of dead. In fact, the number of dead was unknown throughout the evening and following day. There had been no contingency planning for such an event; thus the community was caught completely unaware of how to proceed. This perhaps accounts for the widely fluctuating estimates of the probable number of dead, as well as the initial uncoordinated manner in which the dead were recovered. During the first 24 to 36 hours, the search and recovery of the dead was done in an unorganized and quasi-individualized fashion. By quasi-individualized we mean that many of the 155 bodies recovered during this period were brought in by members of the police and fire departments, as well as the local national guards, but often their actions were as much the result of individually decided courses of action as they were organizationally determined. Many of these bodies were brought in by family members and friends of the deceased as well as by people who "just happened upon" a body.

These bodies were delivered to the two functioning funeral homes causing a massive strain on their resources. The third funeral home in the city was temporarily inoperative due to slight flooding; however, its services were restored about a day and a half after the flood occurred. It is important to note that the area damaged by the flood was restricted to a narrow band adjacent to each side of the river. Consequently, major services such as those associated with utilities, transportation, etc., were not affected outside of the damage area. Though the two operating funeral homes were extensively over-burdened, these first bodies were cleaned and prepared for identification within a 36-hour period. This was accomplished with some help from morticians outside the community as well as from local volunteers.

About a day and a half after the flood, when the magnitude of the disaster became more apparent, the organized effort began. Since there was little preplanning for a response involving large numbers of dead, an ad hoc planning and coordinating group was formed by a county commissioner. Most of our data focuses on this stage of the response, i.e., after the more organized effort began.

The Manner and Efficiency of the Response

The response was organized by the planning group composed of a county commissioner, the county sheriff, a local national guard representative, a local judge, and the probation officer. These were the major individuals involved though it was a flexible group sometimes including others on particular projects. In retrospect, the primary focus appears to have been to define the task areas and then to furnish a general program of action. Accordingly, there emerge three well defined groups: the missings persons group headed by the probation officer, the identification group headed by the judge, and a seven-man search-and-recovery group headed by a national guard officer.

The search task was less specifically organized perhaps because of the intrinsic character of the assignment. That is, searching for bodies was a somewhat random process that depended to a great extent on volunteer information as to probable locations. Volunteer searching was encouraged by the ad hoc planning group since it was felt that a great deal of assistance was needed in this area. There were some attempts to systematize the search process. Mechanical "sniffers" were obtained in addition to trained dogs that were supposed to be capable of detecting odors emanating from deteriorating corpses. However, these proved less than successful since at times they failed to discriminate the deteriorating flesh of humans from other animals. Attempts were made to specify likely areas by taking into consideration such variables as the number of bodies previously discovered, distance from flood area, density of population in the area, nature of the flooding in the area, and other more particularized factors thought relevant. Finally, after most of the bodies had been recovered debris clearance crews were cautioned to maintain a sensitivity to the chance discovery of additional bodies. Thus, though the search procedures were less organized in the sense of being assigned solely to a specific group, the procedures used proved effective since volunteer efforts were quite extensive, and since information which tended to systematize the search was collected and used by transport groups and others.

The transportation team was composed primarily of city policemen and national guardsmen. The seven-man team responded to reports of bodies as well as searching in areas where it was suspected bodies were located. This was by far the most professionalized group, being made up of men officially connected with the police and national guard. In addition, it was quite a stable group after the first day or two when there were some changes in the members. This task was voluntary; that is, a man could decide to discontinue his work with the group without any sanction. However, as has been noted this did not occur after the first day or two. Thereafter, the group's membership remained the same. The men interviewed on this team characterized their attitude towards this task as simply "a job to be done" and one man further noted that "it was not all that bad." In the beginning this group responded to all reports that a body had been located, however, it was discovered that about half of these "findings" were inaccurate and an attempt was made to first verify that a body had been found rather than just some suspicious odors. When bodies were located, an attempt was made to collect and preserve all identifying objects or characteristics associated with the body. Under this category was included body location, clothes, watches, purses and wallets, intact hands and fingers for finger printing, etc. This information was then sent to another group which was in charge of the identification process.

The identification group was headed by a local judge chosen (among other reasons) so as to nullify any legal problems that might arise from mistaken identifications or the thorny but impractical rule which necessitates the appearance of a coroner before a body can be moved. A judge, or so it was thought, might operate with a bit more latitude in these matters. In most cases the identification could be made using the prosaic evidence available: the individual was recognizable and known by someone on the identification team or had already been identified by friends or relatives previous to its recovery, or the wallet or purse would contain identification material. However, in many cases the body was discovered de-clothed (due to the force of the flood) and unrecognizable due to the body's deterioration. In such cases sophisticated resources were brought to bear. These included individuals from the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the states department of criminal investigation who provided technical assistance in this identification process. Finger prints were taken, body marks cataloged, and dental records recorded. Many local volunteers also assisted in this process making certain objects associated with a particular body were not lost or improperly recorded. After all the body's identification traits were collected and cataloged, this information was checked against the missing persons list.

The missing persons group headed by the probation officer was charged with preparing and updating a list of identified dead and missing. In the first few days the list had ballooned to over 2000 persons as frantic friends and relatives of persons simply thought to have been in the area phoned in their concerns from all over the country. Since Rapid City is located near a popular tourist area, it is understandable how distant relatives might worry. At any rate, the number was drastically reduced after a systematic attempt was made to verify the status of each person on the list. This was usually accomplished by simply calling a friend or relative of the person on the list who generally reported that they had just heard from them and that they had not even been in the area. After the missing persons list had been reduced to a more realistic number, it and the identification-traits information were placed on a computer to facilitate matchups. In this manner, very rapid and successful correlation occurred with proper identification the result. There were only a few mistaken identifications.

The planning/coordinating group coordinated the actions of the funeral homes and the volunteers associated with the homes with the search, identification, and transportation activities. The transportation team delivered the bodies to the areas designated by the funeral directors. A coordinated effort was facilitated by actions taken independently by the three funeral directors. They agreed that the normal competition between the homes would be eliminated. Provisions were made to provide a "moderately priced " funeral for all affected. The same type of casket was provided with the same kind of cement vault, and minimal cosmetics were applied. Viewing time was reduced usually to a single viewing by close relatives and often only when specifically requested. Thus, although there was a reduction of choice with regard to funeral arrangements, it was generally felt that such a reduction was necessitated by the large number of dead. Two of the three funeral directors, however, did evidence some misgivings about these procedures feeling that relatives might in retrospect feel they had not "properly" handled the burial since few choices were afforded to them. We do not have any longitudinal data on this issue to shed some light on the question of how "proper" is defined in this situation. That is, if "proper" relates to material choices (casket types, cosmetic features, etc.) or to less material choices. The data collected does indicate that at least during

this period of time the reduction of these kinds of choices was not felt to be overly important in light of the emergency situation. The funeral directors assisted in the identification process by insuring that all identifying objects remained with the correct body until this information could be cataloged. Finally, after the recovery, identification, and burial preparation was completed the body was buried, usually in a short 15 to 30 minute graveside ceremony.

It appears that the overall operation was quite efficiently accomplished. In about a week and a half almost 237 bodies (about half the yearly rate of burials in the community) were recovered, identified, and buried. There were few mistakes: several mistaken identifications quickly corrected, a man embalmed where it was requested he not be, etc. Most importantly, the missing persons list and the identification-traits list were closely matched. After three and one-half weeks when the search was discontinued only three persons remained unaccounted for. However, it was generally thought that these bodies had been washed down the river and hence would probably never be recovered. Moreover, the identities of these persons was thought to have been accurately established.

In this section we have described the more instrumental activities of the community, the actions oriented to the solution of what can be seen as a problem, viz., the search for, and recovery, identification, and burial of a large number of dead. In one sense it is a practical problem which can be addressed with practical means such as the organization and coordination of groups assigned discrete tasks. But it is important to note that these groups performed these tasks with a zeal that would have been noticeably absent had the task been debris removal or some other such activity. It is to the description of this second more elusive characteristic that we turn in the following section.

The Organized Response and the Respect for the Dead

The data collected attempted to provide not only a description of the response in terms of the organizations established but also in terms of the behavioral patterns which developed in the community's relationship to the dead. The disaster situation provided an unusual opportunity for such observation since it necessitated a widely-socially organized response to death. This is in contrast to the normal situation where the death of an individual usually involves only a family, close friends of the deceased, a mortician, a religious actor, and peripherally some medical or health personnel. The community's response involved a large segment of the city's population. Volunteers helped in the search, identification, and burial preparations. And, of course, many in the community were intimately involved by having lost a family member, friend, or acquaintance in the flood. And members of many organizations were often involved by being part of the organized effort. In this case then, the organized effort is to some extent a distillation and partial reflection of the community's relationship to the dead. Of course, the kind of organization evident imposes some constraints on the types of actions that can occur. This will be discussed more fully in the concluding section.

The most prominent attitude in the livings' relationship to the dead was one of respect. This attitude surfaced in the interviews conducted as well as being plausibly implicit in the actions described. One of the primary mechanisms for accomplishing this attitude was individuation. That is, it was deemed important to treat each

body in as individual a manner as possible. Of course, this proviso was balanced with the necessity to maximize the efficiency of the recovery operation. For example, although the recovery team thought it would be "more appropriate" to transport each body individually, they settled on two or three as the number of bodies that could simultaneously be transported to the funeral homes. The organized and often sophisticated efforts to identify and provide the proper name to the correct body can be seen as another example of individuation. Finally, the importance of this individuation norm can be seen by the swift and effective squelching of a mass burial rumor that surfaced a couple of days after the flood struck. When this rumor became evident to the planning/coordinating group it was quickly denied via the town newspaper. Essentially what seems to be important in this individuation is that the body is located or placed socially via a name, geographically via a grave site, and moreover that this placing occurs not only at the end point (grave site) but additionally en route to the end point. It is also significant to note that the reduction of burial choices as mentioned in the previous section apparently did not radically detract from this placing process.

In addition, other norms were evident that facilitated the fulfillment of a respectful posture vis-a-vis, the dead. Attempts were made to limit the mutilation of the body as it was removed from debris. Usually debris removal was not begun in an area until it was thought that all the dead had just been removed, thus reducing the chances of accidental body mutilation by large debris removal equipment. The operators of these machines were also instructed to wait for the arrival of the transport team should a body be uncovered, thus insuring that more expert care might be taken in the body's removal. In the funeral homes the bodies were cleaned by volunteers as well as by the funeral home personnel. Few if any cosmetics were used though partial embalming did occur. In this situation respondents reported that attempts were made to insure the "dignity" of the body by covering it, as well as by keeping it off the floor while it was being stored. (The great numbers of dead necessitated their storage in a garage area of a funeral home till they could be cleaned, identified, and placed in a casket for burial.) The covering characteristic was also evident in other situations. For example, the transport team requested and obtained a closed vehicle in which to transport the dead. (In the first few instances an open vehicle had been available and was used.) Whether this indicates a concern for preserving the dignity of the dead from idle observers or for protecting the sensitivities of these observers is uncertain.

Respect was also the dominant attitude in all those relationships where death formed the context of the relationship. In the identification process, the relative or friend of the deceased first went to the group in charge of the missing persons list which also had access to the descriptive characteristics of the recovered bodies. Using this information this group would narrow down the possibilities. Then the family member or friend (a friend was preferred in this first identification) was taken to the funeral home where he was met by a social worker, a member of the clergy, or the funeral director. He was then shown a limited number of bodies in order to complete the identification. In this situation great care was taken to reduce the necessity of viewing a large number of bodies, and also to provide some social support and sympathy for the identifier. One funeral director noted however, that few people "broke down" during this process and that usually the identifier seemed "relieved" that the person had been recovered and was now fully accounted for.

More generally, the efficient and effective manner of body recovery and identification fulfilled the obligation of manifesting respect for unknown others who had a more intimate relationship with the deceased. We have identified two objects of respect in the previous examples: (1) the body and (2) the other, whether it be known, unknown, present or absent from the immediate situation. In the second case, respect or deference was rendered to the other in an unambiguous fashion. However, the data collected from informants and respondents in this case study presents a more ambiguous picture when the body is the object of respect.

Though the dominant attitude appeared to be one of respect, many examples of avoidance behavior were also noted. The belief that the unrecovered human bodies presented more of a health hazard than other animals (though this belief was not universal especially not among the health officials) and were basically "more unclean" is such an example. Additionally, the tasks associated with the transportation group were thought to be unpleasant at best. It is interesting to note that this group was the most professionalized in the sense that no volunteers were sought; rather, individuals from the police department and the national guard were chosen, individuals who have a reputation for the stalwart accomplishment of sometimes unpleasant duties. Several members of the team noted that they attempted not to "look at the bodies, especially the face," to generally ignore the bodies and thereby suspend the affective ties to the body that the respect theme implies. The times when this suspension was jeopardized usually were in cases involving small children where as one member noted "kids were the hardest since most of us had kids of our own." These actions can perhaps be interpreted by noting that such a suspension enabled the team to efficiently complete its instrumental duties emotionally unencumbered. Of course, this implies that the body while an object of respect is also an object that is best avoided if possible. However, as the body achieved a name and gradually moved from cleaning to burial, --from an initially displaced to a placed position-- the respect rendered to it appeared to increase. For example, although it was considered inappropriate for bystanders to touch the body when it was as yet unrecovered, volunteers freely washed and cleaned the bodies after they had been delivered to the funeral homes. Health and identification reasons were given as reasons for the policy broadcast to not touch the bodies. And though the identification reason was justified since any moving of the body might destroy characteristics that could help in the identification process, the health warning was exaggerated except in those cases where extensive bodily deterioration had occurred. Finally, as has been previously noted, the necessity for covering the body, transporting it in a covered vehicle, etc., can either be interpreted as preserving the "dignity" of the body or as protecting the sensitivities of the onlookers by shielding them from an unpleasant and unwholesome sight.

Conclusion

It is evident that one can properly characterize the organized response to the handling and disposition of the dead in this disaster situation as having been carried out quite efficiently and with respect for the "prerogatives" of the dead and the living. Moreover, the organizational structure -- which provided mechanisms for the flow of information among the particular task groups (e.g., the computer to correlate the information from two groups assigned different but complementary

tasks, or the policy to preserve identifying characteristics as a supplementary task in the transport and burial preparation groups) and specific groups associated with specific tasks -- contributed to the effective response. But perhaps most importantly, each of the groups by simply effecting an efficient operation demonstrated and accomplished the value of respect for the dead and living. This was especially true in the transportation group where an affective relationship with the body could be suspended, and was true in the identifying and missing persons groups since their ultimate task did provide respect by providing a name for the body. Essentially efficiency and respect for the dead appear to be compatible goals, though the case is not without exception. Compromises were needed, e.g., the decision to carry three rather than just one body at a time, or the decision to reduce the number of burial choices. There is certainly a balancing situation being accomplished.

Respect for the dead has limits as is perhaps evidenced by the more ambiguous attitudes adopted toward the dead in contra-distinction to the living. As is true in most cultures, society seems to opt for the living. But these are limits also to the respectful deference accorded the living who are in mourning. The community in this disaster situation held a communal mourning ceremony about two weeks after the flood, thus closing the official or community bereavement period. The balancing of the efficiency and respect goals does present a problem in a specific situation. But it seems that as a practical problem the solutions can be worked out in accordance with the particular desires of the community involved. What occurred in Rapid City was simply that the problem (though never expressly stated) was addressed -- usually with a high priority given to the "proper" completion of the task. And individuation, "placing" and other actions manifesting respect for the living and dead were evident and fulfilled the "proper" completion.

Another more self-evident problem in the situation was the ballooning effect on the missing persons list. Perhaps an awareness of the possibility of this contingency could eliminate its occurrence. A suggestion is that priorities be established immediately so as to classify "realistic" to "possible" death tolls so that further planning can proceed with the estimates in perspective.

Finally, one further comment is necessary. This disaster was a localized phenomenon creating chaos and tragedy in a small city. There was little property damage but large loss of life. It is perhaps necessary to note that the description of the situation may have comparability only to other like situations, i.e., small city where loss of life is the major disaster. In a larger city many of the tasks performed by local volunteers having a more probable personal relationship to deceased as friends or relatives would probably be performed by more professionalized actors or volunteers having little if any personal relationship to the "clients." Thus the efficiency element in the previously mentioned balancing equations might become more prominent with a consequent reduction in the respect element (especially with regard to those aspects of the respect element that incorporate a direct affective bonding to the objects of the respect). Finally in a situation where property damage was also acute, one might expect a less pronounced high priority assignment to efficient and respectful disposition of the dead and consequently with the analytically oppositional element in this value dyad, respect for the living.