

University of Delaware
Disaster Research Center

ARTICLE #458

ORIGIN AND HISTORY OF THE
INTERNATIONAL RESEARCH COMMITTEE
ON DISASTERS (RC-39)

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2009

On International Journal of Mass Emergencies and Disasters Web site (School of Policy,
Planning, and Development, University of California, host), 2009.
<www.usc.edu/schools/sppd/ijmed/history>



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INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF
MASS EMERGENCIES AND DISASTERS

Origin and History of the International Research Committee on Disasters (RC-39)

This version of the origin and history of RC-39 was prepared by E. L. Quarantelli, President Emeritus of the RC-39 and Professor Emeritus, University of Delaware (USA).

Part 1: Origin and Historical Evolution

The RC-39 developed out of the fact that sociologists predominated in the pioneering stage of disaster studies.

The social aspects of natural and technological disasters were touched on in the early days of sociology. Samuel Prince, a Canadian, wrote the first doctoral dissertation in sociology at Columbia University which was published in 1920 and was called *Catastrophe and Social Change: Based Upon a Sociological Study of the Halifax Disaster*. Lowell Carr has an article in a 1932 issue of the *American Journal of Sociology* entitled "Disasters and the Sequence-Pattern Concept of Social Change." Pitirim Sorokin, the famous Russian theorist, in 1942 wrote a book on *Man and Society in Calamity: The Effects of War, Revolution, Famine, Pestilence Upon the Human Mind*.

However, continuous and systematic social science research on disasters did not emerge until after World War II. This effort was pioneered primarily by sociologists such as Fred Bates, Charles Fritz, Lewis Killian, E. L. Quarantelli, and Harry Williams. Much of the earliest systematic work derived from a major research project at the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) located (1949-1954) at the University of Chicago which eventually became the prototype of how quick response field studies could be made immediately before, during, and right after disasters. Much of this research was guided by ideas from the sociological sub-specialty of

collective behavior. Also, unlike a focus that developed at roughly the same time among geographers that primarily looked at hazards, the central concern of sociologists from the start was always disasters.

Another key happening was the establishment in 1963 of the Disaster Research Center (DRC) at The Ohio State University and directed by sociologists Russell R. Dynes and E. L. Quarantelli. DRC soon merged the collective behavior framework with a focus on community and on organizational changes during disasters. Most of the field work was undertaken by graduate students in sociology, many of whom went on to distinguished careers in the area (e.g., Tom Drabek, Bill Anderson, Gary Kreps, Bob Stallings, Dennis Wenger, etc.). Apart from DRC, other sociologists, especially in the 1950s-1960s contributed empirical studies and theoretical statements to the area; these included, for example, Allen Barton, Charles Loomis, Harry Moore and Ralph Turner.

After initiation of systematic studies in the United States, research and writings started to appear elsewhere, although much of this did not occur until the 1970s-1980s. In particular, sociologists were among the early leaders in Sweden, Italy, Germany, and Japan (including such scholars as Orjan Hultaker, Carlo Pelanda, Wolf Dombrowsky, and Ritsuo Akimoto).

There were also early efforts to establish international linkages among disaster researchers around the world. Professional papers were presented in the earliest World Congresses of Sociology such as Varna, Bulgaria, in 1970; Toronto, Canada, in 1974; and Uppsala, Sweden, in 1978. During that decade, a formal Working Group on the Sociology of Disasters was organized in the International Sociological Association (ISA) with the leadership being taken by Hultaker and Quarantelli. However, ISA Working Groups were limited to only one session at every Congress. The absence of a lead organization became obvious, and increasingly informal discussions addressed that problem.

Finally, at the World Congress of Sociology in Mexico City in 1982 a major step forward was taken. As the minutes of the meeting of the Working Group reported:

"Henry Quarantelli explained why he and Orjan Hultaker had called for the establishment of a research committee on disaster research. Disaster scholars have met at international meetings and seminars for many years, but they have not had any organizational setting for their cooperation. An informal association was established four years earlier during the World

Congress of Sociology in Uppsala, Sweden, 1978, but the association never became active. Scholars in the area of disaster research wanted a more formal organization to serve their needs, and 59 scholars from 17 countries signed a petition for a new Working Group on Disasters within the International Sociological Association (ISA). The petition was mailed to the ISA prior to the Mexico City meeting. The working group will welcome everyone interested in the social aspects of disasters and is not to be considered as an organization for sociologists exclusively. It is possible to become a member of the working group without becoming a member of the ISA. It was stressed that anyone with a research interest in the human and social aspects of disasters would be welcomed to join the committee."

The two dozen persons at this meeting unanimously approved the establishment of a Working Group on Disasters. Later in the meeting, Hultaker from Sweden proposed the election of a provisional board. This resulted in the election of Quarantelli (USA) as President, Akimoto (Japan) as Vice President, Jan Trost (Sweden) as Secretary-Treasurer, and Russell Dynes (USA), Ovesi Gelman (Mexico), Carlo Pelanda (Italy), and Roger Wettenhall (Australia) as members-at-large.

Several days after those actions, the ISA formally approved a Working Group on Disasters within the ISA. The provisional board then took over as the ISA-approved Board in August 1982. It was also decided that the name for non-ISA activities would be the International Sociological Association Research Committee on Sociology of Disasters (RC-39) and that the RC-39 should launch a new disaster journal, along with a newsletter.

The next year and under the initiative of Hultaker, a professional journal, the *International Journal of Mass Emergencies and Disasters*, was launched. The journal was published in Sweden, and Quarantelli was drafted to be its first editor. The first issue in March 1983 contained 13 papers on Family and Disaster.

Also in 1983, the DRC offered the RC-39 the newsletter, *Unscheduled Events* (UE), that it had published since 1967. The offer was accepted, and Trost (Sweden) took over as the UE editor.

In 1984, Quarantelli wrote in UE that the RC-39 had been operating without a constitution (elsewhere called a charter) and without bylaws. So he proposed the following statement to be voted on by IRCD members:

"The general objective of the committee is to promote the social scientific study of disasters. More specifically, the purpose is to help increase scientific knowledge and understanding of the social and behavioral aspects of sudden collective stress situations usually called disasters or mass emergencies. These situations are most often created by natural disaster agents and technological accidents, but are sometime associated with acute environmental threats, abrupt shortages of vital resources, focalized violent intergroup conflicts, and other kinds of major hazards to life, property, well-being, and everyday routines. The committee is supportive of research on individual, group, organizational, community, societal, and international activities in preparations for, responses to, and recoveries from the indicated kinds of sudden mass emergencies."

This statement has never been changed since it was written, except a somewhat longer version of it is printed inside the cover page of the *International Journal of Mass Emergencies and Disasters* to indicate the kind of articles that the journal would consider for publication. Also, at one time the application form for membership in the IRCD contained the paragraph quoted above as well as the following additional paragraph:

"The committee is multi-disciplinary and multinational in scope. It welcomes membership from anyone interested in the social studies of disasters such as anthropologists, civil defense directors, communication and mass media personnel, crisis intervention workers, disaster planners, economists, emergency organization personnel, geographers, government officials involved in emergency planning and managing, health and medical personnel, political scientists, psychologists, social welfare workers, sociologists, and others concerned with the human and group aspects of disasters and mass emergencies."

The 1984 statement as well as the by-laws was approved in a vote (49 for, 1 against) by RC-39 members that year (at that time, there were 171 individual and 34 organizational members in 15 different countries).

In March 1986, Quarantelli, acting on behalf the Working Group, requested Research Committee status within the ISA. The ISA in the World Congress of Sociology meeting in New Delhi, India, in August of that year formally designated Research Committee No. 39 as the Sociology of Disaster committee. While the latter is the official title within the ISA, for non-ISA activities the group established in 1982 continued and informally continue to call itself the International Research

Committee on Disasters (IRCD). The RC-39 has had sessions at the American Sociological Association annual meetings almost every year since 1983 and also has sponsored disaster-related publications.

Part 2: RC-39 Awards and Recipients through 2008

1. *The Charles E. Fritz Award for Career Achievements in the Social Science Disaster Area.* It is given for significant and numerous contributions to the disaster area such as the conducting of research, publications, policy development as well as providing of major input into the professional developments of the field. The intent of the IRCD is to recognize major and notable career achievements over a lifetime.

Award winners have been Charles E. Fritz (USA), Enrico L. Quarantelli (USA), Burke Stannard (Canada), T. Joseph Scanlon (Canada), and Russell R. Dynes (USA).

2. *The E. L. Quarantelli Award for Social Science Disaster Theory.* It is given in recognition of notable and significant theoretical work by social and behavioral scientists in the disaster area. The intent in giving this award is to encourage the international development of theory relevant to disaster phenomena.

Award winners have been Allen H. Barton, Russell R. Dynes, Thomas E. Drabek, Gary A. Kreps, and Walter Gillis Peacock.

3. *The Samuel H. Prince Award for a Doctoral Dissertation on a Disaster Topic in the Social and Behavioral Sciences.* It is given in recognition for initial and notable accomplishments by disaster researchers in the social and behavioral sciences. The intent in giving this award is to encourage the early identification of exceptional research talent, to the extent it can be indicated by a doctoral dissertation.

Through May 2008, no Prince Awards have been conferred.

Part 3: Officers of the RC-39, 1982-2008

1982–1986 (Includes first year as ISA Working Group status)

President: E. L. Quarantelli (USA)
Vice President: Ritsuo Akimoto (Japan)

Board Members
Russell Dynes (USA)
Carlo Pelanda (Italy)

Secretary/Treasurer
Jan Trost (Sweden)

1987–1990

President: Russell Dynes (USA)
First Vice President: Orjan Hultaker (Sweden)
Second Vice President: Carlo Pelanda (Italy)

Board Members
Hirotada Hirose (Japan)
Joseph Scanlon (Canada)
Roger Wettenhall (Australia)

Ex-officio Members
E. L. Quarantelli (USA)
Jan Trost (Sweden)

Secretary/Treasurer
Joanne Nigg (USA)

1991–1994

President: Thomas Drabek (USA)
First Vice President: Wolf Dombrowsky (German)
Second Vice President: Anna Maria Boileau (Italy)

Board Members
Frederick Bates (USA)
Nicholas Petropoulos (Greece)
Uriel Rosenthal (Netherlands)

Ex officio Members
Russell Dynes (USA)
Joanne Nigg (USA)

Secretary/Treasurer
Kathleen Tierney (USA) 1991–1992
David Neal (USA) 1993–1994

1995–1998

President: Joseph Scanlon (Canada)
First Vice President: Patricia Bolton (USA)
Second Vice President: Alan Lavell (Costa Rica)

Board Members

Neil Britton (Australia)
Bruna de Marchi (Italy)
Dennis Mileti (USA)

***Ex-officio* Members**

Thomas Drabek (USA)
David Neal (USA)

Secretary/Treasurer

Brenda Phillips (USA)

1999–2002

President: Benigno Aguirre
First Vice President: Maureen Fordham (Great Britain)
Second Vice President: Jesus Macias (Mexico)

Board Members

Robert Fleming (Australia)
Nicholos Petropoulos (Greece)
Ronald Perry (USA)

***Ex-officio* Members**

Joseph Scanlon (Canada)
David Neal (USA)

Secretary/Treasurer

Brenda Phillips (USA)

2003–2006

President: Robert Stallings (USA)
First Vice President: Boris Porfiriev (Russia)
Second Vice President: Andrew Coghlan (Australia)

Board Members

Jose Batista (Cuba)

Hilda Herzer (Argentina)
Betty Morrow (USA)

Ex officio Members
Benigno Aguirre (USA)
David Neal (USA)

Secretary/Treasurer
Brenda Phillips (USA)

2007–2010

President: Ronald W. Perry (USA)
Vice President: Andrew Coghlan (Australia)

Board Members
Nuray Karanci (Turkey)
Ari Kirschenbaum (Israel)
Lori Peek (USA)
Susann Ullberg (Sweden)

Ex officio Members
Brenda Phillips (USA)
Robert Stallings (USA)

Secretary/Treasurer
Gary Webb (USA) 2004–2008
Carla Prater (USA) 2008–2012

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