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STRENGTH OF A CITY: A DISASTER RESEARCH  
PERSPECTIVE ON THE WORLD TRADE CENTER  
ATTACK

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## Strength of a City: A Disaster Research Perspective on the World Trade Center Attack

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The September 11 attacks and their aftermath are a living laboratory for those wishing to better understand how individuals, groups, and organizations respond under extreme disaster conditions. Along with other major disaster events, September 11 revealed much about institutional responses and collective behavior in crises, underscoring what is already known about the social processes that characterize such events, while at the same time highlighting aspects of disasters that the literature has yet to explore fully.

### The Response to the Attacks: Adaptive and Effective

Focusing on New York City as the site of the greatest carnage, destruction, and social disruption and the most complex organized response, much of what was observed on September 11 and in the days and weeks that followed constituted almost a textbook case for the disaster research field. Beginning when the first plane struck, as the disaster literature would predict, the initial response was dominated by prosocial and adaptive behavior. The rapid, orderly, and effective evacuation of the immediate impact area—a response that was initiated and managed largely by evacuees themselves, with a virtual absence of panic—saved numerous lives. Assisted by emergency workers, occupants of the World Trade Center and people in the surrounding area helped one another to safety, even at great risk to themselves. In contrast with popular culture and media images that depict evacuations as involving highly competitive behavior, the evacuation process had much in common with those that occur in most major emergencies. Social bonds remained intact, and evacuees were supportive of one another even under extremely high threat conditions. Prior experience with the 1993 Trade Center bombing had led to significant learning among organizational tenants and occupants of the Towers, and planning and training contributed to their ability to respond in an adaptive fashion to highly ambiguous and threatening conditions.

With respect to the organizational response, even though the facility that constituted the central node in the City's emergency management coordination system, the Emergency Operations Center (EOC) at 7 World Trade Center, had to be evacuated following the and collapsed in late afternoon on September 11, both the management and the conduct of emergency response activities continued uninterrupted through the most intense phase of the crisis. Having lost a technology-rich, state-of-the-art facility, experiencing very significant communications disruptions, and facing a massive tragedy unforeseen even in their worst-case plans, response organizations in New York City were highly resilient, showing great capacity to mobilize and coordinate resources.

The effective management of the initial emergency response was a major accomplishment

for the organizations involved, particularly given the suddenness, severity, and highly unexpected nature of the September 11 attacks. Most US disasters are well-managed, but most US communities have never had to face events on the scale of the 9-11 tragedy in New York. Indeed, some large metropolitan areas have shown themselves to be deficient in response capability in other major crises, as evidenced by the mismanagement of the Los Angeles riots and Hurricane Andrew in 1992 and the inability of the city of Seattle to cope with anti-World Trade Organization demonstrations in 1999. In each of those cases, the communities in question had at least some forewarning of significant impending problems and yet were unable to mobilize effectively when those problems materialized. How and why New York was able to cope so well on September 11 is an important topic for future research, but insights can be gleaned both the disaster literature as well as from research by scholars such as Karl Weick and Gene Rochlin, whose work focuses on factors that contribute to organizational resilience in crisis situations.

### Improvisation, Emergence, and Convergence

In drawing lessons from the New York disaster, it is important to note that while the response activities undertaken by official emergency agencies were crucial, those activities constituted only part of the picture. Equally significant was the manner in which those agencies interacted with and obtained support from non-crisis organizations and from residents of the impact area. September 11 also demonstrates how planned and emergent action blend in disaster settings. It has long been recognized that disasters represent occasions in which the boundaries between organizational and collective behavior are blurred. As disasters become larger and more complex, routinized organizational roles and even disaster plans give way to improvisation, as it becomes increasingly evident that those earlier expectations and guidelines no longer apply. The responsibilities of designated crisis-relevant organizations such as emergency medical service providers may be taken over by community residents for periods of time, while new groups emerge to carry out other newly-defined tasks. Local capabilities are enhanced through the active involvement of organizations from outside the impact area and of spontaneous volunteers. In the World Trade Center disaster, all these organizational patterns could be observed at Ground Zero and at other key sites in the immediate aftermath of the attack: City emergency response organizations were assisted by counterpart organizations from throughout the tri-state region and ultimately from communities around the country, by private organizations offering whatever help they could, and by countless volunteer groups that emerged spontaneously to assist with search and rescue and the provision of support services to emergency workers.

For nearly fifty years, disaster scholars have documented and analyzed the phenomenon of disaster-related convergence—that is, collective behavior involving the mass movement of people, goods, and other resources into disaster-stricken areas. Convergence stems primarily from emergent definitions that call for altruistic responses and also from a collectively-felt need to provide assistance and solace to the victims of disasters. Both beneficial and problematic, convergence brings needed volunteers and resources to disaster-stricken areas while simultaneously creating substantial management challenges. Like the earthquake that struck Kobe, Japan in 1995 and like other major natural disasters in the US and worldwide, the Trade

Center attack became an occasion for large-scale convergence behavior, with both the benefits and the problems convergence creates. Tens of thousands in the immediate impact region took part in vigils of remembrance at fire houses and other sites, performed emergency-related tasks, and formed an astonishing array of support groups to assist and complement the activities of formal disaster response and relief agencies. Hundreds of thousands donated money and goods. And as is typical in major disasters, material donations following the September 11 attack included both things that were urgently needed and goods that were of no conceivable use, creating massive logistical and storage challenges for hard-pressed local agencies.

This meshing of prior learning, planning and improvisation and this diverse panoply of organized and collective action enabled the City of New York to manage the Trade Center disaster. Effective responses to community crises often look messy from the outside, but that is part of what makes them effective. The failure to understand the emergence and complexity that is typical of major disasters often results in characterizations of disaster settings as chaotic and unorganized. Critical observers may express exasperation because “no one is in charge”—as if the activities of hundreds of organizations, thousands of small groups, and tens of thousands of individuals should be controlled in real-time by some single individual or overarching entity. These kinds of comments are often rooted in inappropriate militaristic command-and-control images of disaster management and in a mistrust of non-elites and non-experts. All such criticisms fail to appreciate the strengths of situationally-driven, problem-focused, locally-based, and improvisational response strategies like those observed in New York on September 11 and in the days that followed.

### Collaboration, Social Divisions, and Conflict

The Trade Center disaster also illustrates how in disaster settings high levels of cooperation and collaboration among organizational and community actors can co-exist with societal divisions and conflicts. Disasters are commonly depicted in the literature as “consensus crises” that can be distinguished from wars, civil conflicts, and riots due to the high levels of cooperation and communitywide altruism they engender. Communities responding to disasters are seen as coping with collectively-shared pain, loss, and disruption and as temporarily suspending ongoing conflicts and disagreements in the interest of meeting urgent needs and beginning the recovery process. This was the predominant response to the Trade Center attack, particularly during the first few days. At the same time, however, like other disaster events, September 11 exposed differential vulnerabilities and community fault lines and gave rise to competing and often conflicting disaster framing processes. With few exceptions, poor and marginalized victims of the Trade Tower attack remained as invisible in death as they had in life. After September 11, the city and the nation seemed to rediscover the underpaid and underappreciated public safety and municipal employees whose labor makes urban life possible. However, now that the immediate crisis has passed, those lauded as heroes will likely find it difficult to obtain the financial compensation they deserve. Soon after September 11, conflicts emerged between public safety workers and their families, who insisted on the need to continue the careful and deliberate search for victims and bodies, and city and other governmental agencies

wishing to move clean-up and recovery efforts forward as rapidly as possible so as to lessen the negative economic impacts of the attack.

In the weeks following September 11, the barriers erected to prevent public access to Ground Zero became lines of demarcation between the recovery workers on the inside, who collectively defined the impact area as sacred ground, and the sightseers and purveyors of disaster kitsch on the perimeter, who converged to pay their respects, take advantage of photo opportunities, or turn a quick profit on the event. New Yorkers and people across the nation learned what residents of the San Francisco Bay Area discovered (and loudly denounced) after the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake: that when the Red Cross solicits donations for victims following major disasters, those funds may in fact be expended anywhere, despite what contributors may have intended. Groups representing victims of the Trade Center attack have emerged to protest the conduct of disaster relief and recovery efforts and to press compensation-related claims. As these examples show, in addition to bringing community commitment and involvement to new levels, disasters can also constitute occasions for conflict and contentious collective action.

Similarly, the recovery period following damaging disasters is often marked by conflicts over the recovery process—for example, debates concerning whether a disaster-stricken community should be restored consistent with pre-disaster development patterns or rebuilt in ways consistent with new community visions. Because of the savagery and immense cultural significance of the September 11 attacks, the deep wounds they have caused among survivors, and the enormous economic interests at stake, controversies surrounding reconstruction and recovery planning are certain to be even more heated and protracted than they typically have been following other major disaster events.

### September 11 and US Disaster Policy

Domestic crisis management efforts in US society have been marked by tensions and shifts in emphasis between war planning—particularly plans for nuclear war—and efforts to manage natural and technological disasters. Over the past five decades, “civil defense,” fallout shelters, and nuclear crisis relocation planning have gradually given way to policies and programs that focus on enhancing the ability of US communities to better respond when disasters strike and to reduce losses through improved pre-event mitigation and planning. The end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the Soviet Union gave further impetus to this policy shift. However, those same changes also sent some elements within the military and defense establishment on a search for new missions. After what was widely acknowledged as an inadequate governmental response to Hurricane Andrew in 1992, discussions began on whether the military should have a greater role in disaster response within the US. Later, interest grew in applying intelligence- and defense-related technologies to the management of both foreign and domestic disasters. Since September 11, as new agencies have been created in an effort to prevent future terrorist attacks and improve preparedness, domestic disaster management has once again taken on a decidedly militaristic tone. The Trade Center disaster was caused by the actions of terrorists, not by a natural disaster agent, and its aftermath blended elements of natural disaster, crime scene, and national security

emergency—subsequently followed by an anthrax-generated public health emergency. Some argue that such highly-complex crisis events need to be managed by military, quasi-military, and law enforcement institutions and by centralized command-and-control structures. However, the literature on community and organizational response to disasters indicates that militarizing disasters—even those brought about through terrorism—would be taking precisely the wrong lesson from September 11. Indeed, if the common public response patterns and indigenous community strengths such as those outlined here are not taken into account in planning for future crises, our society may find itself less capable than before of coping with the next major disaster—or terrorist attack. Rather than creating new structures or assigning responsibility for protecting US communities to defense-oriented or non-local institutions, the appropriate strategy should be to continue to rely on our current systems for managing disasters and other major community emergencies, which generally work well, and, following New York’s example, to pursue ways of effectively incorporating volunteers, emergent groups, and a range of civil-society institutions into crisis-management efforts.