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Research Note #3

Methodological Procedures of the DRC  
Field Team Developed Following the  
Indianapolis Coliseum Explosion,  
October 31, 1963

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This is a brief discussion of the methodological procedures devised by the DRC field team while engaged in the study of the Indianapolis Coliseum explosion.\* While not intended to be an exhaustive theoretical discussion on field work in disasters, this list of the procedures, innovated by the team as a result of the Indianapolis field experience, should prove of value to others who may in the future be faced with a similar problem.\*\*

Since the DRC had just been established (September, 1963), the major objective of the trip to Indianapolis was that of training. Several discussions and seminars held at the Disaster Research Center were of value but since most of the staff members had never done field work in a disaster situation, actual first-hand experience was desirable. Upon returning from Indianapolis, the field staff held meetings at which problems and new ideas precipitated by the field experience were discussed. The many points discussed were classified into the following major areas: general procedures, data sources, and interviewing guides.

General Procedures

1. There is an advantage in getting to the disaster scene as soon as

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A substantive report on this disaster was prepared, see: Thomas E. Drabek, Disaster In Aisle 13: A Case Study of the Indianapolis Coliseum Explosion, October 31, 1963, in press.

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For a more theoretical discussion see Lewis M. Killian, An Introduction to Methodological Problems of Field Studies in Disasters, Washington, D. C.: National Academy of Sciences-National Research Council, 1956.

possible. Thus, team members can observe emergency operations, even if interviewing must be delayed.

2. To facilitate quick departure with minimal confusion a field kit for each team member was constructed which contains identification material, forms for recording information on each interviewee, letters of introduction, business calling cards, etc. Also included is a check list of additional items that may be needed in the field, e. g., spare batteries for portable tape recorder, and a supplemental list if the trip is to a foreign country. Several additional field trips since the Indianapolis study have confirmed the necessity of such a technique when speed of departure is to be maximized.
3. To insure an efficient method of identification, a "standardized" explanation was devised as to the nature of DRC and its work.
4. Since many requests were made for the DRC report of the disaster or for a special report with recommendations as to how the organization should be changed, a "standardized" explanation of DRC policy was formulated and made known to all team members.
5. To alleviate the identification problem, an OSU faculty identification card which includes a photograph of the owner, was obtained for each team member. These cards will be used in conjunction with CD identification papers, which also include photographs, and a CD release which briefly describes the research project.
6. To avoid any complications in the field, a "standardized" explanation

of the relationship between the DRC and CD was also formulated and made known to all team members.

7. Team members should make efforts to obtain all available news information on their way to the disaster scene to obtain a "feel" of the conditions and major organizations involved. Tape recording of radio reports is useful.
8. An attempt should be made to compile a list of key organizational personnel by name (multiple copies so all members have a copy) to which team members can refer; in "stress" situations names are handy to "drop", e. g., by stating that he wished to talk with the Superintendent of the State Police (his name used), two of the team members were able to gain immediate entrance into the Indiana Fairgrounds where State Police guards were under orders to admit only authorized personnel.
9. Upon reaching the disaster area, the team should establish a communications post to provide coordination. The team member assigned to this post should be kept informed as to activities, location, and immediate plans of all field staff.
10. DRC headquarters in Columbus should be notified as soon as a communications post is established. The following information should be provided: an appraisal of the disaster setting, a tentative return date, and a telephone number at which the team can be contacted in the event of personal emergency or another disaster to which the team might be directly sent.

11. To avoid delays appointments should be made by telephone before appearing in person. The list of names discussed above proved very valuable for making such appointments.
12. Since team members will be in the field for a limited time, care must be exercised in selection of interviewees. Normally, for example, the hospital administrator would be the likely person to be interviewed. In one instance, however, he was not notified of the disaster and did not arrive at the scene until the following morning; any attempt to interview him as to what actually happened the night before would have been unsuccessful.
13. As the interviewing progresses some type of assessment must be made as to where gaps in data exist; such gaps can be remedied only while in the field.
14. Organizational position, address, telephone number, etc., should be obtained from all interviewees; to facilitate this process a standard form has been devised which will be carried by all team members.
15. Upon returning from future disaster field trips a DRC "debriefing" session will be held by all team members who made the trip. Among decisions made at this meeting will be the following:
  - a. One person will have responsibility to write a short research memorandum which briefly describes the disaster, field team procedures, and the major organizations studied; this report is to be available within two days after the team returns.

- b. A decision will be made as to whether or not a detailed report will be prepared; if so, the nature of this report will be determined.
- c. One person will assume responsibility for preparing the detailed research report, when one is to be prepared.
- d. One person will assume responsibility to assemble and file all materials collected on the trip, e. g., newspapers, public relations brochures, special reports.
- e. One person will assume responsibility to collect and catalog all tapes, and will check each to insure that all interviewees are properly identified.
- f. One person will assume responsibility to compile a list of all persons contacted in the field. This list should indicate those who offered to mail additional materials, those with whom unusually good rapport was established, etc.
- g. One person will assume responsibility, utilizing the list indicated above, to write letters of appreciation to appropriate officials, and to follow through with additional letters as needed, to secure materials that might be available as indicated by interviewees, or as might be desired by the individual preparing the final report.

#### Data Sources

1. Many urban police and fire departments tape record official communications, both radio and telephone; these are especially

valuable since they are a record of exactly what happened, and are not altered by an interviewee's lack of memory or distorted perceptions.

2. Tape recordings of special radio and television reports, special programs and newscasts can easily be made while at the scene or later obtained from the source.
3. Subscription to one or several of the local newspapers may assist in providing follow-up information after the team has left the disaster area.
4. Large quantities of written material can usually be obtained from most organizational officials. Of particular value are charts outlining the structure of the organization, annual reports, disaster plans, public relations material, etc.
5. Much additional material can also be obtained if the interviewer is aware of the potential. He should indicate the desire of DRC to obtain special reports on the disaster that might be prepared by the organization, tapes or minutes of critique meetings, etc.

#### Interview Guides

1. Do not schedule interviews too close together, as in many instances the interviewee will enjoy describing to you what may well have been the most exciting event in his life. No less than two hours should be allocated for each interview.
2. Interview only one person at a time. In multiple person interviews lower ranking personnel will tend to respond with only the "company

line", if they respond at all.

3. Should you interview in an organization where other staff members have interviewed previously, be sure to obtain from them information, as to who they contacted, reactions, etc.
4. When the interview is interrupted by entrance of another person or by telephone conversation, do not call attention to the recorder by attempting to shut off the machine. Additional information may be obtained by letting the machine run during these interruptions.
5. Beware of requesting that an interviewee describe activity at locations other than where he was, unless you specifically desire his perceptions of such activity.