

DISASTER RESEARCH CENTER
THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY
COLUMBUS, OHIO 43201

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COMMUNITY CONFLICT:

ITS ABSENCE AND ITS PRESENCE IN NATURAL DISASTERS*

by

Russell R. Dynes
Department of Sociology
Disaster Research Center
The Ohio State University

E. L. Quarantelli
Department of Sociology
Disaster Research Center
The Ohio State University

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"It was the best of times, it was the worst of times. It was the age of Wisdom, it was the age of Foolishness. It was the Spring of Hope, it was the Winter of Despair." This, of course, is the famous opening passage from Charles Dicken's A Tale of Two Cities that deals with the French Revolution. The balancing phrases capture well the dual theme that both literary men and scholars assert characterizes personal and group behavior at times of great social stress.

That community-wide stress brings out both the "good" and "bad" in man, that it evokes "positive" and "negative" features in group responses is an old theme in human history. Literary writers -- be it Boccaccio writing on the Fourteenth Century plague in Florence, or Defoe and Chaucer writing on similar catastrophes in England -- have frequently and graphically depicted the dual nature of the response. In a more scholarly way, the same pattern is depicted by the ancient Greek historians and Thucydides and Herodotus, and much more recently by the British historian, Toynbee.

Among sociologists, Sorokin is the one that has most explicitly stated the dualistic nature of the response at the time of great stress. In one of his lesser known works (Man and Society in Calamity) he observes that catastrophes evoke "saints" and "sinners" insofar as human and group behavior is concerned. Sorokin notes that calamities produce polarizations in effects, with individuals and societies reacting in diverse ways: "Some become brutalized, others intensely socialized. Some disintegrate -- morally, mentally, and biologically; others are steeled into an unbreakable unity. In adversity some lose their sense of honor; others are ethically and spiritually reenforced. . . . This diversification and polarization of effects upon the mentality and conduct of various units of the population, as well as upon sundry fields of culture, manifests itself in practically any calamity."

Stated in such general terms, what the writers of fiction and what the social scholars depict is a commonplace observation and almost certainly true as a general statement. We need no further illustration of the possible dualistic response to sudden severe stress. While the frequency and intensity of the phenomena may still be a problematical issue, its existence as such seems beyond question. Instead what is required is a specification of what response occurs under what conditions. When will men be "saints" and when "sinners;" when will groups engage in cooperative and altruistic efforts and when will they be rent by dissension and conflict? Relatively few sociologists have addressed themselves to this problem. The two major exceptions, Fritz and Barton, have been severely handicapped in their analyses since for the most part they have had to depend on secondary analysis of relatively few cases.

Recent research at the Disaster Research Center at The Ohio State University has allowed a sharper focus on the problem. Field studies have been conducted of about 100 different natural disaster situations. While our research has not been directed primarily to the problem involved, nevertheless, the data gathered permit us to specify more clearly the conditions under which conflict and the conditions under which cooperation emerge at times of major emergency. We have firsthand data on many cases allowing us to make a more intensive analysis than could earlier students of the problems.

The research focus of the Center has been on the urban community and the major organizations and groups likely to be involved in the collective response to a large-scale disaster. Not only has the immediate emergency period been examined, but some attention has also been given to longer run responses during the relief and rehabilitation periods in the aftermaths of disasters. Thus, we have been in a position to observe both short-run and long-run community conflict and cooperation in such stress situations.

For reasons of time, as well as because our research focus has been most sharply attuned to it, in this paper we will primarily discuss conflict and conditions associated with its absence and presence. To some extent, cooperation is the converse of conflict and accordingly conditions which produce one will often limit the development of the other, and vice versa. At any rate, our discussion here will concern itself in the main with a report of our observations about community conflict as well as the factors that seem associated with its absence and its presence in natural disaster situations.

Some General Observations

There are three general observations that we can make on the basis of our studies. (1) There is considerable variation in the presence or absence of community conflict following a natural disaster. (2) To the extent that there is any pattern, it is the absence of conflict in the emergency period and its presence in the post-emergency period. (3) The presence or absence of conflict is functional or dysfunctional depending upon a series of other conditions. Let us examine these observations in more detail.

It cannot be said that community conflict is always present following a disaster. This is contradictory to common sense notions that severe stress situations should, if not create conflict, at least amplify existing social cleavages within a community. Several logical although not necessarily empirical reasons might be advanced for such a supposition. Given the sudden destruction of existing resources which occurs in a disaster, the competition for scarce resources might seem to move normal competition towards more open conflict. The caricature of this is the sometimes literary fiction of victims fighting over food. Often too there exist opportunities for the assessment of blame of some kind in many severe crisis situations, thus creating or magnifying the social

division involved in any sort of scapegoating process. Here the caricature is of mob action against officials seen as derelict in their community duties in the emergency. Then too, the fluidity of most disaster emergencies would seem to lend themselves to different kinds of opportunism and selfishness. The caricature image here is of Mr. Hyde taking over from Dr. Jekyll when social control is less possible.

However, an assertion of necessary conflict for whatever logical reasons might be advanced, has simply not proven to be empirically true. At least the emergence of conflict is rather rare in the immediate emergency period following disaster impact; nor are there many indications that social cleavages which existed prior to the event are amplified during that time period. Neither is it true that community conflict always appears in the longer run time period when relief and rehabilitation is being undertaken, rather than just emergency response.

However, it is true that if there is a pattern, it is for the absence of conflict in the emergency period and its presence in the post-emergency period. This in fact appears to be the most likely sequence following any major community disaster. Exceptions to this pattern can be found. Strong disagreements if not conflict appeared very early in some of the Gulf Coast communities of Mississippi after Hurricane Camille struck the area. But these are rare instances, and as we shall note later using the specific historical case just mentioned again, they are explainable in terms of certain pre-impact social conditions. The general proposition stated earlier is generally true.

One reason we suspect that community conflict is expected more than is actually the case and is more noticed when it does occur in disasters, is because it is generally seen as being inappropriate in an emergency situation. In layman's terms it is viewed as "bad," or if we conceptualize it in the sociological vocabulary, conflict is seen as dysfunctional for the maintenance or survival

of the social system in which it occurs. Certainly at a common sense level, conflict would not seem to make for efficiency and effectiveness in community disaster responses.

However, is this really necessarily the case? Is conflict always dysfunctional? Sociologists such as Simmel and Coser have pointed out in detail some of the functional consequences of conflict in different areas of social life. We suggest and will try to illustrate in passing later that community conflict in disasters is also not always dysfunctional. Putting it more generally, there is nothing inherently "good" about the absence of conflict, or inherently "bad" about its presence in post-disaster situations.

Factors Associated with the Absence of Conflict

There are at least seven factors that are associated with the absence of community conflict in a natural disaster situation. These, of course, can and do differ both quantitatively and qualitatively in any given crisis, and can reinforce one another in very complex ways. For analytical purposes, however, we will discuss each factor separately and as if each operates in isolation from all others.

1. Natural disasters involve an external threat. The disaster agent is from outside the community system. Many other stress-producing agents are not, as for example in the case of civil disturbances, mass purges, or drastic currency devaluation. Members of the larger community or its organizational components are usually the sources of such crises and are accordingly foci for possible conflicts. But since disasters come from outside the community system they do not lend themselves as readily to amplifying existing community cleavages or creating new internal conflicts.

Furthermore, as sociologists have long noted, one way to create solidarity within a social system is to face that system with an attack from the outside. In a sense, a natural disaster agent is an attacker from outside the system. In fact, disaster victims not infrequently personalize disaster agents so that they are talked about almost as if they were human agents attacking the community. Such kinds of external threats mute existing conflicts and discourage the emergence of overt differences.

2. In almost all natural disaster situations, the disaster agent can generally be perceived and specified. It is the wind and funnel associated with a tornado cloud, the land movements associated with an earthquake, the rain associated with a hurricane, etc. There is something which can be seen and to which labels can be attached. Many other types of community crises are situations where it is not easy to isolate and to identify the agent involved. To some extent, certain currently popular environmental problems fall into this ambiguous category.

The importance of this general point, for our purposes, is that an identifiable threat makes it easier to mobilize for action. It provides a focus and a point around which a coordinated response can be made. Vague sources of crises because of their very ambiguity leave unclear the course of action to be followed for resolution; in fact, they tend to suggest alternative responses thus allowing community polarization around different possibilities. The myriad suggestions advanced on how to deal with campus disturbances is a current case in point.

3. There is high consensus on priorities in natural disaster situations. In general, it is not only relatively clear what should be done, but more important, in what rough order crisis-related activities should be carried out. Yutzy, in an analysis of this problem, has in fact detailed the general priorities

attached by communities to their emergency responses. As might be expected, the saving of lives takes precedence over anything else.

Thus, the development of an emergency or disaster consensus places high priority on the activities which benefit the "total" community and low priority to segmental "selfish" interests. Considerable social pressure exists to avoid actions which can become sources of social division. This contrasts with other community crises, such as civil disturbances, which are manifestations of open conflict between different parties in the locality. Such crises exhibit the very lack of consensus on community priorities that shows itself in natural disaster situations.

4. Natural disasters, almost by definition, create community-wide problems that need to be quickly solved. The problems created by disaster agents are often immediate and imperative -- e.g., rescue, debris clearance, medical care, food, and shelter, etc. -- and the reasons why solutions are necessary are fairly apparent. The very existence of community life presupposes a minimal handling of such problems. In many other community crises, individuals and groups will often have not only different and conflicting definitions of the nature of the problems but also of the reasons they should be solved.

When problems are immediate and imperative, there is less likely to be conflict in solving them. This is especially true if, as in disaster situations, the necessary solutions are relatively apparent to all. In other types of crisis situations, the community can often afford the luxury of "waiting for another day," and arguing about possible solutions particularly if these are not obvious to all.

5. Disasters lead to a focusing of attention on the present. At least in the emergency period, the past and the future are temporarily laid aside.

In this respect a disaster provides a degree of liberation from many everyday concerns which does not always occur in other kinds of large-scale stress situations

During normal times in a community, people are preoccupied with the past and the future, as well as with the present. They worry about past conflicts with others and their future ability to meet responsibilities and goals which might be a source of disagreement with others. A disaster, however, produces a present orientation which minimizes previous memories of and future possibilities for conflict. Worries about the past and the future are unrealistic when judged against the realities of the moment. People thus concentrate attention on the immediate day-to-day, if not hour-to-hour needs. In a disaster situation, this perspective speeds up the decision-making processes and provides a degree of satisfaction in acting directly and seeing accomplishments quickly. In general, cooperation rather than conflict is encouraged by a present time focus.

6. There is a leveling of social distinctions in disaster situations. Whereas many stress situations accentuate status and other differences, natural disasters democratize social life. Existing social distinctions are minimized in the emergency period of disasters in the sense that all groups and statuses within the community may be indiscriminately affected. Since the threat comes from "outside" to affect "all" community members, this produces a temporary breakdown in class, ethnic, and other status distinctions. A general democratization of social life is further facilitated by the fact that danger, loss, and suffering become a public phenomenon.

In other crises, people can often point out discriminating injustices. Even in most accidents or personal life crises, the victim often feels discriminated against since there are others who have been spared. And the necessity to explain why a particular person or category of individuals has been singled out for special

punishment or suffering can heighten existing community cleavages. In general, community stress situations not accompanied by social leveling are likely to lead to conflict; natural disaster situations usually provide just the opposite context.

7. Disasters strengthen community identification. They do this by (a) creating a dramatic event in the life history of the community, and (b) allowing wide opportunities for participation in community-relevant activities.

(a) Disasters have been compared to drama which facilitates group identification by gripping people's imagination and heightening the sense of importance of collective human action. This is a very valid observation. Disasters do not involve mundane matters but often the very issue of human life itself. In addition, the drama is not played out in private and among a few. A disaster is a public event widely shared by community members. Furthermore, many initial emergency reactions are at the level of human beings responding to one another as human beings. For example, while initially there is considerable anxiety generated for the welfare of family members and other relatives, much rescue activity is directed toward those whose social tie is simply that of another human being in trouble.

As a consequence, all those who share in the experience are brought together in a very powerful psychological sense, by their common participation in such a dramatic event. To victims, the disaster is "our" disaster, an experience that is important in the collective memories of the affected community almost as soon as impact is over. While some other community crisis events may be as equally dramatic, few can match disasters in highlighting the sense of having undergone a common and a very human experience.

(b) Disasters also provide very wide opportunities for participation in activities for the "good" of the community. After initial rescue activities,

there are subsequent chances for participation in community activities, either as a volunteer or as an organizational member. Such activities are centered on emergency tasks created by the disaster so that many of the elements of community conflict which exist prior to the event are no longer relevant. In contrast, pre-impact, day-to-day activities are often carried out in conditions of opposing community interests and in situations which often engender hostility, not cooperation.

Participation in disaster activities is also frequently undertaken in social contexts which give a person great latitude or choice in the determination of what and how certain things should be done. Earlier rules which might be felt as restrictive, previous procedures which encourage routine, as well as standardized situations which make for repetition tend to disappear. The premium is on adaptation and innovation. But others with whom the person is involved are faced with similar situations, not different ones, so interests become common rather than conflicting. Also, the individual efforts are relatively easy to evaluate and therefore a person can easily see his own contribution to the "good" of the community. This, in turn, strengthens his own identification with the local community. The person is a contributing member -- an individual with something to offer who can now show concrete and positive accomplishments.

Let us now turn to a very brief look at the consequences of a lack of community conflict in a natural disaster situation.

There are obviously functional aspects to the absence of conflict engendered by the natural disaster conditions we have just been discussing. Whether viewed from the viewpoint of individuals or groups, the lack of conflict can be seen as "good." It can be viewed as contributing to the "therapeutic community," to use Fritz' felicitous phrase concerning the positive social processes in a disaster

situation. Or stated in another way, the conditions that contribute to lack of conflict contributes also to the enhancement of community morals.

This contribution might seem to be totally desirable in a crisis situation. However, this is not necessarily so. Increase in solidarity within the community at a time of disaster tends to be accompanied by an increase in social distance with "outsiders." This can hamper cooperation with extracommunity organizations trying to assist in a disaster.

The overall pattern is very complex in any given community emergency, and affected by many factors. All we are trying to do here is to illustrate what we mean by saying that the absence of conflict is not necessarily always functional. The conditions that discourage conflict are those that enhance community solidarity; but solidarity in turn makes it more difficult than otherwise would be the case to cooperate with extracommunity persons and groups.

Community Conflicts in Disaster Situations

Not only might there be, as we have just implied, conflict between the people of a locality and the outside world, but as we stated earlier there can be and often is community conflict, i.e., intracommunity clashes in the aftermath of a disaster. We now will turn to a discussion of this. However, in part because of the little time we have left, and in part because we want to stress the absence of conflict in disasters, the rest of our remarks will be in more truncated and outline form than our preceding words.

Community conflicts in disaster situations tend to focus on two themes: (1) the allocation of blame, and (2) the allocation of resources for rehabilitation. These are not the only sources of conflict, but they are the major ones. There is conflict at times on over who is to blame for the community response to

the disaster, and conflict at times regarding how the community should react with regard to relief and rehabilitation.

As to the first, blame is seldom attached in a community stress situation where the disaster agent is seen as outside of human control, the so-called "acts of god." That is, there will be no blame -- at least in American society -- placed on the supposed supernatural source or the disaster agent itself. However, this does not mean that attempts to fix responsibility of some kind do not occur in natural disasters. Blame can be and is frequently placed on some persons or groups even in natural disasters. But instead of the source or agent, the blame will be laid on those thought responsible for either not warning or preparing the community adequately for the catastrophe. Thus, the Weather Bureau may be singled out for a failure to warn of an impending threat, or the mayor may become the focus of community irritation over the pre-impact failure to prepare emergency plans or to issue evacuation orders.

Here again any given disaster situation is quite complex and the process of blame assignment will be affected by many factors. Drabek and Quarantelli, for example, have noted that blame is often personalized when actually it is a flaw or weakness in the social system that may be partly responsible for the disaster consequences. Furthermore, blame of this kind is not likely to occur if there is not much perceived possibility of a recurrence of the disaster.

Community conflict over the allocation of resources is even more widespread than blame assignment. In fact, it is almost a certainty in the long-run aftermath of community disasters of major magnitude. In general, community conflict over allocation of resources for relief and rehabilitation involves (1) the procedural steps in obtaining such aid, and (2) in some way, the activities of extracommunity organizations or agencies. The first matter of dispute frequently seems to

revolve around bureaucratic versus more informal ways of assisting people and localities at times of stress. This is an issue on which, for example, the Red Cross often comes off badly in a disaster impacted community; there is community disagreement and controversy over its seeming bureaucratic ways which for organizational efficiency and effectiveness it tries to maintain. As to the second matter, extracommunity agencies operating in a disaster situation likewise can easily become foci of community controversy. From the viewpoint of uninvolved observers, as a matter of fact, it is sometimes surprising how bitter the controversy can become and how deep the community conflict may cut regarding outside agencies attempting to aid a disaster-stricken community.

There are, of course, good sociological reasons for these kinds of conflict which we will not be able to discuss here. However, in passing we would like to mention two factors that especially seem to amplify community conflict in the areas we have been mentioning. If there has been pre-impact stress between different groups (local community or otherwise), this is likely to reemerge even more strongly after the emergency period of the disaster is over. This is one of the factors (although there were many others) that for example was at play in the rapid emergence of conflict in the Gulf Coast of Mississippi after Hurricane Camille. Pre-disaster political strains as well as other complex social factors allowed conflict to come to the fore in this situation far sooner than it usually does in other disaster situations.

We want to conclude by acknowledging that the dysfunctionality of conflict is obvious. However, here again it is important to note that in some respects it can be functional. For example, conflict in a disaster situation may reinforce certain aspects of local community solidarity which may be very vital for recovery from a major catastrophe.

Finally, the similarity of community conflict to conflict in other than natural disasters is something that is of importance. Some of our observations are quite similar to those by Coleman for example, in his book on community conflict which deals with other than major community crises. Thus, the study of community conflict in natural disasters, because of the stress involved, should be seen as a means of studying in clearer fashion a social phenomena which is an integral part of everyday life.