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PATTERNS OF SHELTERING AND HOUSING IN AMERICAN DISASTERS

E. L. Quarantelli

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Introduction

There is a somewhat exotic field of study called the history and sociology of science. It basically try to describe and explain the factors that are involved in the initiation and growth of any area of organized study. Among other findings, it has been discovered that there are some predictable stages in the development of concepts used in any scientific area. Typically and particularly in a relatively new field of research, the earlier workers in the area, almost inevitably start out using everyday terms and labels to describe and explain whatever they are studying. Then as the scientific field develops, certain distinctions begin to be made. Certain phenomena which are put together by everyday labels are analytically pulled apart and given different labels, whereas other phenomena which are not treated under the same name by ordinary discourse are conversely put together in the scientific conceptualizations. Eventually, as the field matures, new and different from everyday terminology terms and labels are often created and used as major concepts in the area. In this last stage, both the names for the concepts and the phenomena being conceptualized are frequently rather different from the original everyday usages.

You can see this occurring, for example, in how the term "disaster" has been changing in scientific study. Starting with popular usages of the term, the label "disaster" has come increasingly to be qualified in ways so that it is coming apart from commonplace usages. In fact, in the more advanced theoretical work in the area, the term and its referents are starting to be differentiated in ways that are sharply divorced from everyday word usages (see Kreps, 1989; Quarantelli, 1989).

We mention this tendency in the development of scientific concepts to highlight two points about any discussion of sheltering and housing in disasters. The first is that clearly we have barely moved out of everyday usages of terms. If so, it is certain that we are still fairly blind to much of what is important in what we are trying to discuss. However, the second point is that researchers have started to attempt to make distinctions in the concepts used. As such, we are on the right path.

As usual, some will see this only as the development of scientific jargon. Of course, what is usually called jargon is the use of terms that have precision and clarity within a specific field. Everyday terms, useful enough for ordinary discourse, are not only imprecise and unclear, but carry ambiguous and often contradictory baggages of connotations and denotations that do not allow for knowledge and understanding of the phenomena involved. It is no accident that any organized field, whether it be stamp collecting and football or physics and genetics, develop many concepts that are seen as jargon by outsiders but that only add clarity and precision for those in the area.

The Problem

As with many other concepts in the area (e.g., evacuation, see Quarantelli, 1980), until recently the terms "sheltering" and "housing" have been used with little attention to clarifying and specifying their referents. There has been and often still is an implicit assumption that the terms are self explanatory. Until the last few years it has been the atypical writer who attempted to define the terms or otherwise attempted to give them explicit referents, whether the author was a disaster researcher or a disaster planner, or someone from the operational sector of some organization.

One consequence is that the terms have been given multiple and ambiguous meanings. Thus, the term shelter has been used to refer to everything from an evacuee leaving his home to stay in his neighbor's house for a few hours while awaiting the passing of a dangerous threat, to an evacuee staying with relatives for several years in a different part of the country while awaiting for the rebuilding of her home in her local community. The term shelter also has had reference on the one hand, to solo behavior by an individual, and on the other hand, to multi person and group activities involved in mass sheltering of many evacuees in public facilities. The term housing as used in the literature has equally suffered from similar problems. It sometimes refers to an evacuee's returning to her original home; at other times, it is to the obtaining of new quarters in a different locality by displaced households.

In fact, the terms sheltering and housing are often used interchangeably without being specifically defined as to point of time reference in a disaster life cycle from the appearance of a threat to the return back to normal routine activities in the community. It is not unusual for a writer to use both terms, shelter and housing, in several and not always consistent senses.

With this as background, let me now turn to a discussion of where we stand in our understanding of disaster sheltering and housing as this has been advanced by research in the area. Although some of the earliest social science research focused on the topic (e.g., Klausner and Kincaid, 1956; Moore, 1958; Fogelman and Parenton, 1959-60) it has not become a major focus of study. Interestingly, there is more research on the problem of housing and sheltering in developing countries, than in developed countries such as the United States (probably because most major disasters in developing countries create problems of sheltering and housing, whereas this is not necessarily true in disasters in this country). Since our concern here is primarily with the American scene, my observations will therefore be mostly about disaster housing and sheltering in the United States (although we will make some comments about the cross-societal aspects of the problem near the end of the paper).

First, we will present some general observations and then turn to more particular ones.

General Observations

1. There are different and heterogenous phenomena that can best be captured under different labels.

It is not very useful to talk of disaster sheltering and housing as if it were one unitary and homogeneous phenomenon. About ten years ago we suggested distinguishing between four somewhat different phenomena by using four different terms, namely:

Emergency sheltering;
Temporary sheltering;
Temporary housing;
Permanent housing.

Emergency sheltering. We use this term to refer to actual or potential disaster victims seeking quarters outside of their own permanent homes for short periods: hours in many cases, overnight at most. For example, residents have to leave their undamaged homes in Xenia, Ohio, after a tornado because all utilities in the town were not functioning, but they were able to return after an overnight stay elsewhere.

Temporary sheltering. This refers to behavior that involves more than just taking shelter elsewhere during an emergency period; it refers to peoples' temporary displacement into other quarters, with an expected short stay. For instance, some residents of Wilkes-Barre were forced by floods from their homes for several days. They stayed elsewhere but made no attempt to reestablish household routines until they returned to their original homes. Their temporary stay, whether in a second home, friend's house, motel, or public facility--was for more than just the height of the emergency period.

Obviously, emergency and temporary sheltering shade into one another, but there are differences in the behavioral aspects which are worth distinguishing for practical as well as theoretical purposes. For example, emergency sheltering does not usually raise the question of where and how the displaced disaster victims will be fed, but temporary sheltering does.

It also seems valid and useful to distinguish between sheltering and housing. The latter involves resumption of household responsibilities and activities in the new quarters. The evacuees know that the living arrangements exceeds a mere emergency or temporary basis, and extend for months, if not years. The evacuees may occupy mobile homes, rented apartments, tents, or whatever, but the important point is that unlike temporary sheltering, household routines must be established.

Finally, the difference between temporary and permanent housing is that the latter involves disaster victims returning either to their repaired or rebuilt original homes or moving into new quarters in the community --but in both cases, the moves involve occupying permanent, residential faculties. Unlike the shading between emergency and temporary sheltering, there is usually a sharp distinction between temporary and permanent housing. The exception occurs when what is initially defined as temporary housing actually becomes the permanent homes of the disaster victims, as occurred in the case of some Sicilian earthquake survivors in 1968. Some evacuees are still living in what had originally been defined as simply temporary housing while new homes were to be built, but they never were even as of today.

We developed these conceptual distinctions to make some sense of the variety of sheltering and housing activities noted in the research literature. Not only is it necessary to disaster researchers to recognize such differences, but disaster planners and operational personnel who have some kind of responsibility for displaced persons and evacuees must also understand that what are often given the same label are in reality quite different phenomena. Of course, we are under no illusion that this fourfold distinction is the final or even a very definitive word on the matter, but it is at least a start in the right direction.

2. Different but usually low degrees of attention are paid in American communities to preparing for the different kinds of sheltering and housing problems.

Whatever it is called, except in certain localities such as some earthquake prone areas in California, there is little detailed planning of any kind. More attention is paid to the evacaution process (Lindell and Perry, 1991) which produces the bodies that have to be sheltered and housed. But to the extent there is any local community level planning on the latter activity, it is aimed at temporary sheltering. But there is little consensus on which community organizations should be involved, and to some degree also on which should be the lead agency in preparing for temporary sheltering. A Congressional mandate and tradition may give the local Red Cross chapter a major responsibility for the sheltering problem, but this not always known or accepted, especially outside of the larger metropolitan areas. Local emergency management agencies exhibit the range of no interest or involvement with the problem of evacuees, to an acceptance of the major responsibility for coordination of all disaster sheltering and housing activities in the local community. Leadership for meeting the housing needs are even less clearly defined.

The matter of housing disaster victims, whether on a temporary but particularly on a permanent basis, is generally ignored in planning or operational activities. At one time, but increasingly less so

at the present time, some attention was paid at the local level to the problem of wartime housing--especially under the rubric of crisis relocation--but the results of that preparedness planning were seldom extrapolated to the needs of a community following a natural or technological disaster occasion.

3. Many of the problems that surface in sheltering and housing stem less from the individual evacuees involved than from the organizations trying to help them.

There is a strong tendency for planning and operational agencies and their personnel to perceive the evacuees as being "the problem" and the source of difficulties in the situation. However, a strong case can be made that it is such matters as lack of preimpact housing inventories; failure to recognize preimpact conflicts and differences in community power; erratic organizational mobilization; inadequate use of surviving community resources; poor interorganizational coordination; difficulties in intergroup information flow; and other organizational and community level factors which make for the problems in preparing for and providing sheltering and housing. Blaming disaster victims for that which they are not responsible is of course not peculiar to this disaster related issue, but as elsewhere unless this focus is set aside and a more realistic approach is taken, there will be no improvement in preparing for and providing disaster sheltering and housing of any kind.

5. An evaluation of the sheltering and housing which are provided in postdisaster occasions in American society will vary depending on the perspective and criteria used.

Little, if any, overt public reaction occurs in response to sheltering activities; seldom are grievances or protests made. Evacuees usually find shelter of some kind, but from an organizational viewpoint it can be argued that temporary sheltering activities are generally inefficiently handled (e.g., resources are often used to set up mass shelters which are seldom or only very slightly used). Housing in contrast to sheltering--whether of a temporary or permanent nature--is the source of widespread and often intense complaints. In fact, some public expression of discontent over the housing provided appears to be a nearly universal feature of major disasters. Looked at from an organizational perspective there often seems to be lengthy delays (especially in providing permanent housing), sudden and unannounced changes in policies, inconsistencies in application of standards and requirements, and in some cases, very poor administration of the programs. On the other hand, practically everyone that does need housing, eventually does get housing. Thus, the degree to which how well or how poorly sheltering and housing are provided to disaster victims, depends in part on the criteria which are used in any assessment made. (We should note that we take the view that while the views of those directly involved should be part of any

evaluative criteria, they should not necessarily be the only criteria).

6. We may anticipate that disaster sheltering and housing problems in American society will get worst in the future.

There are two major reasons for this expectation. For one, American society is faced with more and worse disasters in the future. THis is true for a variety of reasons: old kinds of natural disaster agents that simply have more people and things and complex social systems to impact and disrupt; new and increasing kinds of technological accidents and mishaps in the nuclear and chemical industries were almost nonexistent prior to World War II; technological advances that add complexity to old threats such as fire retardant material which prevent burning but asphyxiate people; new versions of past dangers such as urban rather than rural droughts; and new kinds of complicated risks in such areas as biotechnology and computer usage. If the current planning and response for sheltering and housing victims remains in place, the more and worse disasters to be expected, we can only anticipate poorer handling of the problem.

In addition, American society is changing in a variety of ways, most of which will complicate preparing for and providing disaster sheltering and housing. Simply as illustrations, let us mention three trends.

(1) Changes in household composition. Besides the traditional family form of a couple and children, there are these other forms of households patterns that are increasing--single parent families, unmarried couples (of the same or different sex), childless couples, single person units, small collective aggregations such as in religious or political communes, and even the homeless (see Bolin, 1989: 194). The various household compositions have different kinds of sheltering and housing needs compared to the traditional family form as well as alternative availability of sheltering and housing help (e.g., elderly women are not infrequently overlooked in relief efforts, seldom have the knowledge or take the initiative necessary to find help, and often are apart from social support and formal aid networks).

(2) Changes in age distributions. As is well known, the American population as a whole is getting older. Research suggests that while contrary to popular beliefs the elderly are not more vulnerable to psychological stress than younger people, they are in disasters more at risk from economic disruption and loss. As a general category, they receive less aid and are less able to recoup from material losses (e.g., households of older members who lose their homes in a disaster find it more difficult to obtain mortgages from financial institutions since they are usually retired from work outside the home). In fact, it has been suggested that there is a pattern of neglect of disaster help with

respect to the elderly (see Bolin and Klenow, 1983; Drabek and Key, 1984). If so, with the more and worse disasters that we can expect in the future, there is likely to be an acceleration of this problem of the aged in the future.

3) Changes in social expectations about disaster help and relief. Since the late 1960s and early 1970s certain values have become more mainstream in American society than they once were. Many of these are associated with notions of participatory democracy and categorical entitlement to certain rights. These more general expectations have spilled over and will increasingly be manifested in the specific problems of disaster sheltering and housing. Much of the disaster assistance which was once gratefully accepted if offered is now seen as a mandated right. These expectations tend to be strongly reinforced by the existence of all kinds of special interest and advocacy groups which since the late 1960s have increasingly entered into the disaster area, particularly in arguing the rights of victims to disaster relief.

Particular Observations

At a more specific level, the following observations can be made about the four different kinds of sheltering and housing we mentioned earlier.

1. **Emergency Sheltering.**

This permits the least planning, but it is the sheltering problem which least requires preparedness planning. Situational factors and contingencies greatly influence whether or not disaster victims have to seek emergency sheltering and where. Thus, some locations become identified as shelters simply because threatened or impacted individuals and households congregate at a particular place. But because such shelter seeking is of a very temporary nature, disaster victims will accept conditions unacceptable under other circumstances. For example, victims will be willing to stay in public or quasi public quarters for a few hours even through they might not want to sleep overnight. As a result, schools, churches, armories, stadia or any building which can temporarily house large numbers of people can be used for emergency sheltering. Again, because of the brief stay, there usually is no great need for supervisory personnel or a staff to run such quarters, although emergency medical care may be a problem.

2. **Temporary Sheltering.**

This involves living in quarters other than one's own long after the peak of the emergency time period. It almost invariably involves more than obtaining physical shelter; it also involves feeding outside of predisaster homes. This requires some community planning, and in fact is the most locally preimpact prepared of all aspects of sheltering and housing.

However, most preparations are usually for public or mass shelter arrangements; unfortunately, as disaster researchers have consistently found, this is the least preferred of all sheltering arrangements. (However, as we noted earlier, this might be what would be needed in a catastrophe when victims can not go to friends and neighbors). In typical disasters in American society those that have to leave an impacted area overwhelmingly prefer to stay with friends and relatives, although they will, if there is no other choice, use mass shelters to obtain food. Even those that go to mass shelters tend to stay as briefly as possible. But mass shelters do provide places for distributing information and they can also sometimes be useful in providing quarters for relief workers coming into a stricken community.

The problem of providing emergency medical services at mass shelters is frequently noted. When multiple mass shelters are in operation are in operation there can be an uneven distribution of supplies and/or volunteers. Often volunteers are not only inexperienced but are generally unaware of established agency policies or appropriate procedures. Shelter management is a definite problem in almost all cases, with security as a perceived although not necessarily an actual problem. Sheltering evacuees in mass shelters requires far more of an integrated interorganizational response than is typically recognized in most communities.

Our limited knowledge of mass sheltering is matched by a similar restricted understanding of the other kinds of temporary sheltering. The most established finding is that most victims go to relatives and friends if that is possible (and further threats are not expected in the locales of those households). There is also some evidence that unaffected households in an impacted locality will voluntarily make aid available to evacuees in the community, but we have little idea of the nature, magnitude and duration of such help. Additionally, there are some indications, mostly from anecdotal accounts, that households with children are more likely to seek temporary shelter than those without children. Similar accounts suggest that the welcome extended to evacuees may not last long, but there is no hard evidence on the point. Almost nothing is know about how the preimpact composition of the populations affects postdisaster temporary sheltering, although it can be suspected such factors as age and sex distribution as well as ethnic and lifestyle membership of the evacuees and potential shelter givers would make a difference (e.g. it seems unlikely "street people" would be welcomed in middle class neighborhoods).

Emergency and relief organizations usually have little knowledge of non-mass shelter temporary sheltering arrangements and have no ready mechanism for obtaining information about the phenomena. Such organizations spend their time, efforts and resources on mass sheltering even though the great bulk of temporary sheltering takes

other forms. But without knowledge of temporary sheltering, relief agencies are handicapped in quickly estimating what temporary housing might be needed, which may account for the typical overestimation of the need.

3. **Temporary Housing.**

This involves the reestablishment of household routines but with the understanding that more permanent quarters will be eventually obtained. It appears that there is usually an organizational overestimation of the need for such housing, although there are some indications that not everyone who would qualify applies officially for temporary housing. Renters seem to apply for such assistance more than homeowners. However, it is unclear whether this is related to income levels, the amount of house damage done by a disaster, social class differences in the acceptability of applying for help. or other factors. What accounts for and what happens to those who apply but then withdraw their applications for temporary housing is mostly a mystery. The time it takes to find temporary housing for victims seems partly related to the capacity of organizations seeking housing for victims to maintain flexibility and not become imprisoned by bureaucratic procedures.

There is some evidence that there are social class differences in the acceptability of using mobile homes for temporary housing; American middle class households do not appear to like them. In almost all cases, despite great effort to provide them, mobile homes are seldom the primary form of temporary housing. It does seem clear that displaced households much prefer to locate in a mobile home on their own property rather than in a trailer camp. Such camps are often objected to by the residents of the neighborhoods in which they are located. The basis of the objection is frequently not clear, and may actually not reflect the real concerns of the objections (e.g., different lifestyles). On the whole, trailer camps show little collective unity or morale, and not infrequently become the source of certain kinds of social pathologies, especially when children and young people are part of the camp population. There seems to be little information and understanding of what might make for a well run trailer park. Organizations responsible for supervising such parks often compound problems by inconsistent and changing policies and rules. There is little prior knowledge about how trailers may malfunction or be inappropriate for certain localities. If officials neglect the deactivation of mobile homes and restoration of their sites, this can become a source of strong community complaint.

Only little is know or understood about phenomena associated with rental assistance for displaced disaster victims. Rental assistance is especially favored by households from higher socioeconomic levels. There is some evidence that higher income evacuees take over such surplus housing as may be available in a community, but the relationship of that to the preimpact housing

stock is unclear. There does appear to be a consistent problem in finding rental housing for households with low incomes. Placing elderly also frequently seems to be a problem, which may or may not be related to the matter of income. There is little research evidence about the problems of temporary housing for minority groups, although it hardly seems likely the situation would improve for them in terms of their predisaster status. Such data as exists indicates that blacks, for example, in areas where they are a substantial proportion of the population, are more likely than whites to end up in FEMA trailers which are not usually considered desirable by disaster victims. In tourist areas, there are usually many motels/hotels and these are sometime used to house evacuees, but seldom is such usage preplanned.

Just as there is little understanding of the relationship of temporary sheltering to temporary housing, there is a similar lack of knowledge about the connection of temporary to permanent housing. In fact, about many matters, especially those unrelated to mobile homes, we do not have even simple description of the activities and problems, organizational and household, associated with temporary housing.

4. **Permanent Housing.**

This is a topic almost totally ignored at local community level disaster planning in the United States, and perhaps understandably so. One inevitable consequence of this, however, is that when permanent housing has to be provided, local officials find themselves quite unprepared and have to act on an ad hoc basis. It is not surprising that permanent housing often becomes the task of some emergency group or other. The problem is further complicated by the fact that local officials may be dealing with federal agencies and/or some private welfare group who may have given considerable thought and/or had considerable prior experience in obtaining permanent housing for disaster victims. This situation may add stress to the usually uneasy relationship between local "amateurs" and "professional" outsiders which is typical of the postdisaster recovery period in most major disasters.

Some religious groups in American society (e.g. the Mennonites or Interfaith) have made it as part of their organizational mission to provide post-disaster assistance including rebuilding and providing of permanent housing. What criteria such groups use for designating those to be given help, and how well the aid is used has not been studied (except to some extent for the Latter Day Saints or Mormons as they are popular known, see Golec, 1983 and Bolin and Bolton, 1986). In fact, there has been no systematic inventorying of such groups although some of the major ones are linked into an informal contact network.

Also involved is the fact that evacuation almost inevitably involves a round trip--a coming back to as well as a going away

from a threatened or impacted locale (as illustrated in Haas, Kates and Bowden, 1977). It does appear that the vast majority of evacuees return to their old location, often rebuilding on the same spot they occupied in preimpact times. However, this seems more true of home owners than renters. Renters not only take longer to obtain permanent housing, but sometimes they never return to the same location. There often is actual resistance or objections to the development of multi family housing units which would be used as rental property. This appears to create a particular problem for the elderly, who are often renters. However, as a whole we have little data about the rate of obtaining permanent housing, which segments of the population have the most problem in obtaining such housing, and what happens to those who are very long delayed in getting permanent quarters.

Overall, it does appear that the kind of permanent housing which will be developed in a community after a major disaster is related to the predisaster housing situation and the influence of various local interest and power groups. The latter groups appear to insure that in the long run the housing configuration of the community will not be significantly altered from the predisaster situation. However, the importance of businesses and financial interests in the rebuilding process, how various power groups interact with one another, and in what way extra community agencies can and do effect the end result, are barely hinted at in what has been studied so far. But at the very least, there is the suggestion that the whole process of permanent housing in the aftermath of a major disaster cannot be understood independent of the larger community context. Whatever the governmental policies and programs for rebuilding are, they only develop in the context of the past history and social factors operative in any given community. They are not dependent only on what happened to the housing stock in the disaster.

Some Other Observations

1. Sheltering and housing phases after a disaster do not usually develop in a neat linear fashion. In a given situation, some disaster victims may be entering the permanent housing phase while others are still in the emergency sheltering phase. Furthermore, in any given phase there may be several moves as a household goes from one temporary housing situation to another. As a consequence, governmental organizations and relief groups may concurrently be dealing with segments of the population at different points in the sheltering and hosing activities after a major disaster. Sheltering activities may overlap with housing activities and some permanent housing may occur before some emergency sheltering is finished. Site preparations for mobile homes may have to be undertaken at the same time that other used trailers are being prepared for storage. For particular households, sheltering generally precedes housing, and emergency sheltering precedes temporary housing which precedes permanent housing; however,

organizations assisting victims may find themselves concurrently involved with different phases of sheltering and housing.

2. Some of our observations, as already noted, may not fully apply in a catastrophic compared to a major disaster occasion. An example may make this point clearer. In the typical disaster, certain in most Western type societies, persons from impacted households who have to leave their homes, in the great majority of cases go to the homes of friends and relatives. This is one of the most established generalizations from the disaster literature (see Drabek, 1986: 125-127). However, there can be catastrophic disasters where large inhabited areas are so devastated that there are few intact houses and apartments around that the disaster survivors can go to after impact; in one sense, there are no or few friends and relatives who can provide intact shelter or housing. To the extent that we may have catastrophic disasters in the United States in the future, the same situation could occur, as was true in the aftermath of the Friuli earthquake in Italy.

3. In conclusion, we would like to make one comment about the cross-societal aspects of the problem, especially since the greater part of the relevant research literature is on disasters in developing countries (see, e.g., Davis, 1977; 1978; Hogg, 1980; Leiversley, 1980; Aysam and Oliver, 1987). In general, the overall patterns that have been found in the United States with respect to disaster sheltering and housing have been found elsewhere. However, there are some differences in specifics. For instance, one DRC study of the Mexico City earthquake of 1985 had as a partial focus the sheltering and housing activities in the aftermath of that disaster (Dynes, Quarantelli and Wenger, 1990). This research found among other things that the great majority of evacuees went to the homes of relatives, but there was very little dissatisfaction felt or expressed with the problem of sheltering and housing. The first finding of course is what has generally been found in American society, but the latter observation is very different from what usually occurs in the United States where there is much postimpact complaining about the handling of housing in particular. At the very least, this suggest that while we can assume that the general patterns reported in the literature will more or less hold in all societies, particular or specific responses and reactions will probably vary.

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