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THE FIELD TURNS FIFTY: SOCIAL
CHANGE AND THE PRACTICE OF DISASTER
FIELD WORK

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Introduction

Field work has been the most important data collection strategy used in disaster research since its earliest days. Perhaps because of its Chicago School, symbolic interactionist roots and its applied focus, the field has always gravitated toward naturalistic studies of the ways groups, organizations, and communities respond in actual disaster and threat situations, as opposed to conducting experiments or large-scale, quantitatively-oriented surveys.¹ As Brenda Phillips shows elsewhere in this volume, there has historically been a close affinity between disaster research and qualitative data collection and analysis, particularly field-oriented data-collection strategies. The first field studies, which were conducted by the National Opinion Research Center, the University of Maryland, the University of Oklahoma, and the National Academy of Sciences during the 50s and early 60s,² involved the collection of data on a wide range of natural

¹ I do not mean to imply, however, that these methods have never been used. Early studies on disaster impacts did include population surveys (Quarantelli, 1987) and laboratory and simulation methods were used in some of the most important early studies on organizational responses under stress (see Drabek, 1965; Drabek and Haas, 1969; and Drabek's chapter in this volume).

² The NORC and Maryland studies ran from 1950 to 1954, while the Oklahoma research was conducted from 1950 to 1952. The NAS Committee on Disaster Studies operated between 1951 and 1957; its work was continued by the Disaster Research Group until 1962 (Quarantelli, 1987.)

and technological disasters and emergencies, including tornadoes, floods, plane crashes, chemical emergencies, explosions, fires, and an earthquake (Quarantelli, 1987). Those early studies became the model for subsequent empirical research, which continued to emphasize the exploration of disasters and their social impacts through quick-response research and direct observation (whenever possible), qualitative interviewing, and related field work techniques. The Disaster Research Center, which was founded at Ohio State University in 1963 and which has now conducted nearly 600 different field studies both in the US and in other countries, is probably the best-known exemplar of the disaster research field work tradition.

Both published work (see, for example, Quarantelli's discussion of DRC's field methodology in this volume) and informal discussions with pioneering disaster researchers convey the idea that carrying out field research in the early days was generally unproblematic. From all accounts, entry and access to data sources didn't present problems for early disaster researchers working in the field. Funding wasn't always abundant, and field workers may have had to adjust to physically uncomfortable situations in conducting research immediately after disasters, but they generally didn't encounter significant barriers or resistance from the groups they studied.. Even though the field was initiated with funding from agencies like the Army and the Office of Civil Defense, and even though those agencies were seeking defense-related insights into human behavior in highly stressful situations, there was very little outside interference, either with field operations or with how data were analyzed and released (Quarantelli, 1987). Promises of confidentiality and anonymity reassured contacts in the field that they could be frank and open with their ideas even if they were being taped, and standardized methods were developed for protecting the privacy of research participants during the data analysis and reporting phases of research. Prospective field workers learned how to

operate in both the post-impact, quick-response context and in pre-planned field work activities, and those strategies generally worked well. The field work tradition has yielded numerous insights and an impressive literature on human and organizational behavior in disaster situations.

As disaster research approaches the end of its first half-century, field work is still the most common data-collection approach, and field workers are still remarkably successful in gaining access to people, activities, and information sources. People continue to show a willingness to talk candidly with researchers in the field, and they are often extraordinarily cooperative and helpful. Some of the best recent research (see, for example Peacock, Morrow, and Gladwin, 1997) effectively blends survey and ethnographic approaches, demonstrating that skillful researchers can gain access to many different types of settings, from the offices of high decision makers to the temporary living quarters of displaced disaster victims. At the same time, the context and environment in which field work is conducted have changed over the years, mostly in ways that make that work more challenging, but sometimes in ways that make it easier. In some cases, the changing climate affects not only disaster researchers but also other social scientists and scientific research in general. In others, the issues disaster researchers face are tied more closely to the nature of their work.

Having been involved in disaster field work since the mid-70s, first as a graduate student “apprentice” and later as a researcher, field team leader, and supervisor and trainer of another generation of field workers, I have experienced many of these changes first hand. This chapter contains observations on how the environment affecting research has changed since my early days in the field and some cautionary words on what the future may hold. Because my experience has been confined almost exclusively to work in the US, my comments apply only to that particular setting. The practice of field work doubtless presents very different challenges for

individuals and groups conducting studies in other societies.

Many new developments have influenced our ability to carry out work in the field, but in this essay I will discuss the six trends that I consider the most significant: human subjects regulations and their interpretation; the US “litigation explosion;” agency and organizational orientations towards research and researchers; the dramatic expansion in post-disaster field research activities; increasing diversity, both among field workers and among those contacted in the field; and the professionalization of emergency management.

Human Subject Protection Requirements

From its very earliest days, those conducting field research in disaster settings promised confidentiality to the individuals, organizations, and communities that were studied. Researchers in the disaster area have always been subject to the same ethical guidelines as other social scientists working in the field, and the procedures used to ensure confidentiality have also been no different. Like their social science colleagues, early disaster researchers didn’t have to worry about human subjects issues and institutional review boards, because there weren’t any. Doing research in disaster settings was challenging, of course, in the same sense that all field research is challenging, but it wasn’t seen as presenting extraordinary ethical dilemmas or risks to those who were studied. Post-impact reconnaissance work was considered form of participant observation in which a worker, once allowed into a particular setting such as an emergency operations center, had at least tacit if not explicit consent to collect field data. Indeed, getting access to such settings was considered critical for effective research.

Because field work involves the collection of various types of data and different data-gathering strategies, the human subjects issues involved are not straightforward. Some of the data collection that occurs in the field involves the observation of public behavior and

anonymous actors. More commonly, field work involves gathering confidential information from known individuals. Most field studies, particularly those undertaken immediately following disasters, consist of a blend of data-collection approaches. As discussed in the chapters by Quarantelli and Phillips, field workers must be able to operate flexibly in order to take advantage of research opportunities that emerge in field situations. For example, after the 1994 Northridge earthquake, our Disaster Research Center field team observed meetings of the Los Angeles Emergency Operations Board that were open to the public and that were attended by a variety of observers, including the press. After those meetings, the team remained in the City's Emergency Operations Center with the permission of supervising officers and with the understanding that we could observe as long as we didn't interfere with ongoing emergency activities. As is typical in these kinds of situations, our presence in the EOC also made it possible to conduct informal interviews with people who were in the setting. Following standard field work practice, these informal contacts and interviews typically led to lengthier, more structured interviews at a later time.

In today's research environment, entire range of activities--from the observation of people carrying out their public duties through formal interviewing--is subject to review for its appropriateness under guidelines governing research involving human subjects. And while the observation of anonymous individuals in purely public settings is considered the least problematic by institutional review boards, most other participation in research is generally interpreted as requiring some type of formal "informed consent" procedure. In earlier times, it was sufficient for disaster researchers seeking interviews in the field to explain the purposes of their research, promise confidentiality, ask for permission to tape, and answer any questions prospective interviewees may have had. Today, unless they are extremely skilled in negotiating

the institutional review process, extremely fortunate, or both, they are likely to be required to present written documentation explaining their research in detail when seeking all but the most informal, casual interviews and to obtain written consent to participate from their research “subjects.” The trend is moving in the direction of defining most contacts in the field as requiring these kinds of procedures. This complicates the process of field work, since highly formalized approaches to informed consent are inconsistent with the fluid, informal data-collection strategies and techniques that are required in post-disaster reconnaissance studies. More broadly, it is questionable whether the standard approach to obtaining consent, which is geared toward experimental research and studies on “at risk” populations, is necessary or appropriate in most disaster field work situations.

Relatedly, issues of informed consent are closely linked to notions about the risks research participants face. Like other social science research, disaster field work has generally proceeded on the assumption that research has very little potential for injuring the people and organizations that are studied and on the hope that it may ultimately actually do some good. Some of us even believe, perhaps naively, that talking to an outsider on a confidential basis might actually provide some direct relief to overworked officials, those who are trying to help community residents, and the disaster survivors themselves. However, the overall trend in the regulation of research has been to see those who are studied as almost invariably at risk during the research process and to require ever stronger protections to ensure that they are shielded from harm. This tendency may be particularly strong for research on disasters, since such events are by definition painful and tragic. The human subjects review board at my own university scrutinizes our field work activities closely, and the board members appear to assume that both residents of disaster-stricken communities and the personnel who are mobilized to aid them

should be considered disaster “victims” who require special protection. Agency officials discussing the performance of their official duties under guarantees of confidentiality are also seen as at risk for “reprisals” from their superiors based on what they tell researchers, even though there is no evidence that such interviews have ever resulted in harm. The board’s requirements have become increasingly strict over the years. For example, in addition to obtaining written consent for all interviewees, DRC has been asked to provide ever more detailed assurances and cautionary messages to interviewees. Besides offering the typical information on the study, the confidentiality policy, the funding source, and the right to refuse to participate, we must now also tell interviewees that we keep our interview transcripts, that other researchers may want to use the transcripts at some point in the future, and that they can refuse to permit that access. These kinds of requirements are of course no more stringent than those imposed on other kinds of social science research, and field workers in various settings are subject to the same constraints. However, they do constitute additional burdens both for field workers and, I would contend, for the people they study. Indeed, after being informed about all the factors they need to weigh in deciding whether to participate, our “subjects” may understandably be much more anxious and concerned about taking part in research than they would have been otherwise.³

Field Work in the Litigious Era

Nowadays, when we obtain consent and promise confidentiality to the people we study, our verbal and written assurances must also include that ominous tag line “unless pursuant to a

³ A recent DRC field study involved prearranged interviews with community informants. Prior to the interview, after being read and asked to sign the required confidentiality and consent form by the DRC field worker, one of the interviewees stated with alarm “Oh, I didn’t realize I’d be asked to give consent,” then agreed to be interviewed, but refused to be taped. The individual had already been informed about the study earlier, had agreed to participate, and obviously

court order.” Unlike our forerunners in disaster field research, researchers working today can no longer offer a blanket guarantee of privacy and anonymity, primarily because our academic institutions will not allow it, but also because the reality is that a lawsuit could conceivably require the release of information obtained from those who participate in our research.

In this country, disputes between contending parties increasingly tend to end up in court. Lawsuits are also a common strategy used by those who possess the resources to silence their opponents. Researchers get drawn into the legal process as expert witnesses, possessors of relevant data, and occasionally as defendants. In this litigious environment, courts are increasingly faced with balancing the privilege offered to researchers and research participants with the needs of litigants, often to the detriment of the former. By now we are all aware of the difficult circumstances faced by researchers whose confidential data have been sought by outside parties in civil or criminal cases. Medical researchers studying how small children were affected by the Joe Camel advertising campaign found their raw data subpoenaed by RJ Reynolds Tobacco Company, which charged that their work was flawed and biased against the industry (Barinaga, 1992). Mario Brajuha, a graduate student who was conducting sociological field research on the restaurant business, had to fight a subpoena seeking the release of his data for more than two years before the legal action against him was finally dropped (Brajuha and Hallowell, 1986). Rik Scarce, who was also a sociology graduate student at the time, went to jail for 159 days rather than turn over data obtained from research sources under assurances of confidentiality (Scarce, 1994).

The disaster area is among a number of fields of investigation that are becoming increasingly litigation sensitive--often with catastrophic results for the researchers involved.

wanted to talk, but balked when faced with the legal complexities of participation.

Several researchers who were involved in studying the social impacts of the Exxon Valdez oil spill became embroiled in extensive litigation to protect the participants in their research when Exxon demanded disclosure. Steven Picou was among a group of social scientists who studied how the spill affected communities and households in the impact region. His work was funded by a quick response from the Natural Hazards Research and Applications Information Center at the University of Colorado and by grants from the National Science Foundation and Earthwatch. While he was still collecting data, the President of Exxon wrote a letter to the Director of the National Science Foundation protesting NSF's funding of the study. Later, Exxon attempted to subpoena all the data Picou and his team had collected, including material that had not yet resulted in publications, as well as all his personal and financial records involving the Exxon study. With help from the attorneys at his university, Picou vigorously resisted Exxon's efforts to obtain data that had been collected under assurances of confidentiality, and eventually a compromise was reached that involved the release of data, with identifiers removed, to sociologist Richard Berk, the consultant Exxon had hired to review the research for its methodological soundness (Marshall, 1993; Picou, 1996a; 1996b).

John Petterson, whose research company Impact Assessment, Inc. conducted studies on affected communities with funding from a group that later decided to sue Exxon for damages, faced a similar fate. In this case, both sides in the lawsuit wanted access to his raw data. Petterson fought attempts to obtain the data at great personal and financial cost, but eventually he was forced to permit access to experts. Steven McNabb, an anthropologist who studied the impact of the oil spill under a contract with the Minerals Management Service, found himself subject to a blanket Exxon subpoena that asked not only for his research data, but also for material related to virtually every aspect of his professional life and personal finances. McNabb

relates that when he received the subpoena (McNabb, 1995: 332)

I engaged an attorney and learned that a comprehensive response would mean that I would deliver everything I had written since 1980; every source I consulted since 1980 (which meant virtually my entire personal library and all files, and an equivalent volume of paper and books from other archives and libraries); and financial records, including IRS returns, invoices, telephone bills, and assorted receipts since 1980...a strict reading of the subpoena would require me to turn over syllabi, course materials, and even grades and student evaluations from the courses I taught that were unrelated to the oil spill and that were dated earlier than the spill.

Exxon was unable to get access to the data it wanted--that is, information on individual respondents, raw field notes, and other documents that could link data with specific research subjects--because McNabb had already made that impossible through a systematic purging of all his files. He now cautions that all researchers who promise confidentiality to their interviewees should be prepared to undertake similar measures and even face jail in order to live up to that promise.

Exxon's attack on social scientists because of the threat their research presented are related to a broader trend involving the use of so-called SLAPP suits, an acronym that stands for "strategic lawsuits against public participation." SLAPP actions are brought by litigants for a variety of reasons, but their main objectives are to intimidate, silence, and financially burden their critics. Typically, such suits accuse those who attempt to exercise their free speech and petition rights of conspiracy, defamation, or intent to cause economic injury (Canan and Pring, 1988; Canan et al., 1990; Pring and Canan, 1996). As might be expected, suits involving hazards and environmental damage constitute an important category of SLAPP actions. Organizations in the environmental and anti-nuclear movement and citizens who speak out against polluters and locally-unwanted land uses (LULUs) are common targets of strategically-motivated suits (Pring and Canan, 1996).

Researchers are also at risk of being SLAPPED if some powerful party comes to see their work as threatening or troublesome. Earlier this year, for example, Cornell University researcher Kate Bronfenbrenner was sued for libel by Beverly Enterprises, one of the country's major providers of nursing home care, for statements she had made at a town hall meeting attended by several members of Congress. Her research had shown that Beverly was a consistent labor law violator that had tried various strategies to interfere with union organizing at its facilities. Beverly's \$250,000 SLAPP suit seeks release of Bronfenbrenner's confidential data and other research materials. (For more information on this case and its implications for researchers, see National Public Radio's "All Things Considered" for April 27, 1998).

While guidelines such as the American Sociological Association's Code of Ethics are quite clear on the rights and responsibilities of researchers, recent cases and court judgments are anything but reassuring. In several important decisions, courts have recognized the need for protecting the privacy and confidentiality of individual research participants. However, there is currently general agreement that no broad "scholar's privilege" exists that can shield data from subpoena and that researchers must take proactive steps to ensure that they can protect their data sources should the need arise. And the sad fact is that even when they win in court or are eventually vindicated in other ways, researchers pay a tremendous price in fighting these cases, and they often end up embittered and impoverished as a result of the process.

Some researchers (see, for example, Clarke, 1995) argue that in the current legally ambiguous and highly litigious climate it is not appropriate for any researcher to claim that research data are confidential or privileged. Others believe that researchers can still protect their data and sources if they plan ahead use appropriate safeguards. Everyone agrees that the litigation explosion has introduced a new set of complications into the research process. (For

other discussions on ethics, litigation, and field work and on protecting research data, see Cecil and Boruch, 1988, Presser, 1994, Erikson, 1995, and Picou, 1996).

Agency Perspectives on Research

It is axiomatic that organizations do not like to be studied--either during normal times or in disaster situations. Even when a researcher is invited into an organization to conduct a study, the sponsor is often less than delighted with the results. Virtually all organizations, both public and private, seek a favorable public image, and one means to accomplish that aim is to exercise control over information, including the kinds of information researchers seek. The need for organizational impression management is probably even more marked in disaster situations than during normal times, since crises open up the organizations involved heightened scrutiny, and since any mistakes they make may have grave consequences (Tierney and Webb, 1995). As the mass media have become ever more pervasive and disasters loom ever larger as news stories, agencies that deal with disasters have become ever more sensitive to the possibility of adverse publicity. After all, if snow can't be removed after a blizzard in Chicago, if sea birds and otters are seen on the evening news slick with spilled oil, or if the cavalry isn't ready to charge immediately after a hurricane strikes, heads may roll. Disasters can make or break careers and boost or damage organizational prestige. Under such circumstances, it is understandable that the organizations and individuals involved try to exert control over information.

Over time, government agencies and crisis-relevant organizations in particular have devised various ways of more effectively managing impressions and heading off adverse publicity, both during normal times and in disasters. One way has been to professionalize the activity of providing information through the creation of the position of public information officer (PIO). The PIO position--or at least the function--is now institutionalized in most

governmental and many private-sector organizations. In addition to disseminating information to the public, a key role of the PIO is to deal with the media in order to obtain favorable press coverage and more generally to ward off threats to the organizational image. To these same ends, another common agency strategy is to hold frequent press conference and use various other media, ranging from television to the Internet and satellite communication, to release and continually update information. A third approach is to control outsider access to the kinds of information organizations don't choose to share--including researcher access.

This is not meant to suggest that crisis management, governmental, and other organizations are doing anything out of the ordinary or sinister when they engage in these kinds of activities. Rather, they are merely doing what all organizations do, which is to attempt to manage transactions with their environments, including the flow of information. If a disaster represents a threat to that control, then from an organizational perspective that calls for even stronger evasive and defensive action.

However, as a consequence of these new impression management strategies, the field worker's role has become more difficult. When researchers arrive at a disaster site seeking information, for example, the officials they initially contact may try to send them to public information officers or press conferences rather than granting interviews. Security at emergency operations centers and other places where disaster-related activities are carried out is generally quite tight, with access controlled by badges and other forms of identification. Researchers seeking access to those places may be shunted off to the "public" areas that have been set aside for presentations and the press. Instead of having the opportunity to observe disaster operations directly and ask questions freely, the field worker may instead be handed a packet of pre-printed information. Agency officials are increasingly guarded with researchers, treating them like

members of the press even after receiving assurances of confidentiality. Front-line disaster workers may worry about sharing information with field workers, for fear that could anger their superiors and lead to sanctions.

The trend toward increasingly centralized information control has several consequences for the conduct of research on disasters. One is to promote a “command-post” point of view that privileges the official information-dissemination function over the perspectives represented by other elements in the disaster management network. Another is to present a unitary or monolithic view of disaster-related activities, rather than one that allows for multiple interpretations.

All these barriers to the free flow of information can be overcome through skillful field work, but they obviously represent additional challenges. Valid research depends on the ability to have access to information sources who are willing to be candid and on the ability to observe emergency operations and other activities of interest. It also depends on being able to explore a research question from a variety of perspectives, not just from the official one. Being able to obtain information on events independently as they unfold is particularly critical in crisis situations, when officials and responders are often under so much pressure that they may later lose track of sequences of events or fail to remember when certain decisions were made. Researchers lose a great deal when rather than direct access to events and people, they instead receive reconstructions and packaged narratives.

Another trend that affects field research in the disaster area is the increasing tendency for disaster-related agencies and governmental entities to carry out their own research and fact-finding activities. For example, the Federal Emergency Management Agency routinely administers surveys on “customer satisfaction” containing questions that the agency wants answered. Highly-committed governmental jurisdictions like the City of Los Angeles carry out

their own post-disaster reconnaissance activities and hold special workshops to find out how other communities have handled major disasters and to identify lessons learned.⁴ This kind of research, which is often done on a rapid-response basis, tends to focus on very specific, practical issues. Its goal is to help organizations solve problems, not to make more general contributions to disaster-related knowledge. Clearly, such studies can have very positive outcomes, particularly when they produce genuinely valid lessons and insights, give the agencies and organizations that carry them out a sense of ownership over the findings, and spur organizational change.

However, this trend can have negative effects on the overall research enterprise if it leads organizations to eschew involvement in curiosity-driven research or to believe that more systematic research is irrelevant to their needs. As they increase their capacity to address the practical questions they consider important, either through conducting their own studies or through contracting for specific research products, governments and disaster-related agencies may eventually come to view academic and other “outside” research as little more than a nuisance. This would clearly have a negative effect on the social science knowledge base.

A Crowded Field

During the early days of disaster research, a relatively small number of individuals and organizations were engaged in disaster-related field studies. Pioneering groups like the NORC, NAS, and early DRC teams had the field pretty much to themselves. Since social science field work was still so uncommon, the main challenges for researchers in the 50s, 60s, and even the 70s were to establish legitimacy, communicate the objectives of research, and achieve access to

⁴ For example, Los Angeles has sent teams into the field following the 1985 Mexico City earthquake, the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake, Hurricane Andrew, and the 1995 Kobe earthquake.

sources of data. Since the inception of the field, opportunities for conducting research have expanded greatly. Research budgets have increased, a wider range of field activities are receiving support, and a much larger number of organizations and investigators are actively involved in either conducting or sponsoring data-collection efforts in the field. Field work receives support from a wider spectrum of sources than ever before, including grants to individual researchers; small “quick response” grants from organizations such as the Natural Hazards Research and Applications Information Center at the University of Colorado; funding from professional organizations such as the Earthquake Engineering Research Institute; and support from research consortia such as the Multidisciplinary Center for Earthquake Engineering Research (MCEER).⁵ Government agencies organize their own post-disaster reconnaissance teams, and international collaborative field work is becoming more common. Major US disasters also attract researchers and research teams from other countries. Rather than being alone or having to struggle to explain why they are there, today’s disaster researchers are more likely to find themselves jockeying for position in an increasingly crowded field.

From the very beginning, disaster scholars have recognized convergence as a common problem in disaster situations. However, what we didn’t envision was the extent to which *researchers* would also converge in disaster situations. Whereas researchers in the early days could more or less assume that they would be the only ones conducting field work in a disaster-stricken area, today’s researchers can be equally sure that they won’t be alone. Like the

⁵ MCEER, which was formerly the National Center for Earthquake Engineering Research (NCEER) is headquartered at the State University of New York at Buffalo. It was supported by a major grant from the National Science Foundation between 1986 and 1996. In 1997, the Center received a second grant from NSF, and two other centers, the Mid-America Earthquake Center and the Pacific Earthquake Engineering Research Center, were also funded. All three centers

convergence phenomenon generally, researcher convergence is most marked in the immediate aftermath of a major disaster. A large, damaging urban earthquake, the mother of all field work opportunities for many disaster researchers, is the type of disaster in which massive convergence by researchers of all kinds is a virtual certainty, in part because such events are so rare, but also because a major share of social science research on disasters is funded through the National Earthquake Hazards Reduction Program, which funds National Science Foundation research. Following the 1994 Northridge earthquake, hundreds of researchers representing a wide range of earth science, engineering, and social science disciplines were in the field immediately after the event, and a large number of longer-term studies were subsequently funded. So much data collection was being undertaken by so many different researchers that it became necessary to develop mechanisms to facilitate coordination and cut down on duplication. The Earthquake Engineering Research Institute and the California Governor's Office of Emergency Services established a clearinghouse where researchers could go to obtain information, make contacts, and attend daily briefings. The National Science Foundation subsequently gave a grant to the California Universities for Research in Earthquake Engineering (CUREe) specifically to provide information to the research community on what studies were being conducted and who was involved. CUREe held a workshop that was attended by several hundred researchers, published a directory of the studies that were being undertaken and the investigators involved, and organized a major conference at which research findings were presented (California Universities for Research in Earthquake Engineering, 1995; 1997).

The fact that the field is increasingly crowded, particularly immediately after disasters, is a very good thing. It means that funding for disaster research is robust, that larger numbers of

will likely field reconnaissance teams in future damaging earthquakes.

researchers find disaster-related problems intriguing, and that disaster research is becoming increasingly institutionalized. However, this welcome trend can have negative consequences if the large amount of field activity makes researchers more intent on competing with one another in the field than on cooperating. Since careers and professional standing are tied to research performance and since a well-done quick-response study can give a researcher a clear advantage in competing for larger grants the competitive pressures can be intense. Under these circumstances, those of us who are active in the field, especially immediately after disasters, need to exercise caution lest we come to resemble rival reporters vying for an "exclusive," rather than colleagues and members of a scientific community.

The heightened intensity of field activity can also have detrimental effects if providing information for multiple research efforts becomes overly burdensome for the communities and organizations affected. Communities experiencing major disasters increasingly must cope not only with researchers, but also with numerous other interested parties who also converge seeking information. Large disasters attract the media in droves. Politicians are drawn to disasters, both to offer assistance and for the photo opportunities they provide. As I noted earlier, representatives of other jurisdictions routinely visit disaster areas to obtain information that will help them better prepare for their next emergency. People in specific roles--city managers, emergency managers, public works and water department officials--are contacted by their counterparts from around the country and asked to arrange meetings and tours of damaged areas. If the disaster is big enough, international delegations can be expected. This intense desire to visit disaster sites, which sometimes verges on "disaster tourism," is so strong that emergency management agencies have occasionally found it necessary to have formally-designated protocol officers on staff to manage visitor-related issues. The challenge for researchers facing this

increasingly crowded field is twofold: to clearly communicate the distinctiveness of research activity--as contrasted with journalism, fact-finding and the search for on-the-record information--and to avoid adding to the demands and problems stricken communities face.

Field Work and Diversity

Like other social science research and academic research in general, the field of disaster research was closed to women and minority groups throughout much of its history. Indeed, perhaps to even a greater extent than a number of other specialties, disaster research began as a virtually all-male, all-white field and remained that way for decades. Over time, mirroring broader changes in the social science disciplines, the field has become more diverse, incorporating a broader range of groups and perspectives. This change has been most marked with respect to gender. More women have entered the field over time, and concurrently the increasing emphasis in the social sciences on gender and its ramifications has been reflected in the work of disaster researchers.

Although a case can be made that gender affects the entire range of data collection and analysis strategies in the social sciences and science generally (see, for example, Harding, 1987; 1991; Nielsen, 1990), that influence is probably most marked in qualitative research (for discussions, see Warren, 1988; Fonow and Cook, 1991). Gender issues are extremely relevant to the conduct of field research, because the researcher's gender affects the ability to gain access to research settings, the roles in which the field worker is cast, and how the field worker is perceived and treated by those who are studied. Gender also shapes the manner in which the researcher collects and analyzes data, from the strategies and tactics used in field work to the manner in which field experiences and data are interpreted. Gender conveys both advantages and disadvantages in the field. It provides both a lens for viewing social life and a filter that

blocks access to information.

For the first twenty years, the conduct of disaster-related field work was almost exclusively a male province. Women were involved in early disaster field studies (for example, see Bucher, 1957), but in vanishingly small numbers, and prior to the 1970s the number of women who were active in studying and writing about disasters could be counted on the fingers of one hand. The Disaster Research Center, for example, was virtually an all-male research unit for the first ten years of its existence, and it wasn't until the mid-70s that the gender composition of research teams began to become more balanced.⁶

In considering gender issues in disaster research, it is also important to note that for the first generation during which studies were undertaken, the *informants and interviewees* who were contacted in the course of research were also overwhelmingly male. This was a reflection both of male domination of leadership positions within organizations and of the types of organizations (e.g., civil defense offices, fire and police departments) that were the focus of the early disaster projects. Indeed, it can be argued that one of the reasons the early field studies proceeded with relative ease was that the field workers and those they interviewed tended to resemble one another. This was particularly true in the earliest days of disaster field research, when the researchers tended to be males with military experience who were older than today's typical graduate students. Thus, the initial disaster literature was based almost exclusively on

⁶ DRC co-founder Henry Quarantelli provided the following background information on women's representation in early DRC field teams: From the Center's inception in 1963 through mid-1974, 56 graduate students took part in field studies. Of that number, five were women. The first woman to take part in a DRC field team did so in 1970. Beginning around 1974, the year I started working at DRC, more women began to be added to the field staff. There were other women involved in disaster field research prior to that time, working both as individual researchers and as members of the early disaster field teams, but their numbers were exceedingly

research contacts among males.

When women first became involved in disaster research, they faced twin challenges. As newcomers in male-dominated research organizations, they had to prove to their male counterparts and their superiors that they could operate in the field as successfully as men. At the same time, they had to establish their legitimacy and credibility with the male-dominated and largely male organizations they were studying. As is typically the case for women in field situations, boundaries needed to be re-established when co-workers or research participants veered into treating female field workers in ways that were not consistent with the researcher role, e.g., as social companions or objects of sexual interest.⁷ As former DRC field worker Joan Neff Gurney has pointed out (1985), while women in male-centered field situations experience pressures that men do not, they may feel very uncomfortable about acknowledging those pressures for fear that such admissions would compromise the credibility of their work.

The gender-balance situation has changed markedly in the nearly five decades since disaster field research began. Although men still outnumber women by a considerable margin, there is no question that the field has produced a number of very active women researchers. The organizations typically studied in disaster-related projects are also much less likely to be all-male bastions. Reflecting changes in the larger society, more and more women are entering positions of responsibility and leadership both in disaster-related agencies and in other agencies that are

small.

⁷ In my early days as a field worker I highly resented the fact that the male members of the field team seemed to want to adhere to the "male role" during our trips. For example, they would always insist on driving the car in the field, as if allowing a woman team member to drive was somehow inappropriate. Female team members would remark that the men seemed to view field trips as week long dates that gave them an excuse to spend time with women other than their wives or girlfriends. Undoubtedly the men also harbored gender-based feelings about the

typical points of contact in field research. In this respect at least, the field work enterprise is less strictly "gendered" than it was in the past.

To what extent did these gender-related issues influence the conduct and results of earlier research? Clearly numerous factors have shaped the development of the field and the contents of the literature, and a thorough sociology of knowledge analysis of how the field developed has yet to be written. At the same time, however, recognition is growing that early field research (and disaster research in general) was colored by unconscious gender biases. Arguably, the absence of a gendered perspective, together with the tendency to focus on the activities of officially-designated organizations, helped create a skewed picture of disaster response and recovery in the early literature.⁸ Disaster response was equated with what public organizations did--and what they did to cope specifically with disaster effects (see, for example, discussions on the concepts of "agent-related" and "response-related" demands in early post-impact response studies). Missing was a more holistic perspective that would take into account the contributions made by a broader range of community groups and the less-visible contribution made by informal helping networks, volunteers, and work carried out inside the home--spheres in which women tend to be more involved. In her analysis of gender issues in disaster research, Fothergill also (1996:44) observes that early study findings tended to characterize men as helpers and women as needing

women with whom they worked.

⁸ Early research did focus on the activities of emergent groups as well as on existing organizations (see Quarantelli and Stallings, 1985 for discussions), but by far the strongest emphasis in that work was on the activities officially-designated organizations. The emergent groups studied were those whose activities contributed to the response effort, which was defined as involving "disaster-related" tasks. We see no mention in the classic literature, for example, of emergent groups focusing on child care or of the informal provision of social and emotional support in the aftermath of disasters. Such topics only began to enter the literature in the mid-70s (see Taylor, Ross, and Quarantelli, 1976; Taylor, 1976).

help, revealing a “normative bias in disaster research concerning ‘appropriate’ gender role behavior.”

Because of the broader paradigm shift that has occurred in the social sciences and because of the gender-related interests of many researchers who are currently working in the disaster area, the recognition is growing that gender stratification and gender relations, which are pervasive throughout social life, affect the entire spectrum of hazard-related behavior, from risk perception through disaster preparedness, response, and recovery (for good overview discussions, see Morrow and Enarson, 1994; Fothergill, 1996; Enarson and Morrow, 1998). It is now becoming understood that men and women experience disaster impacts differently and that these differences are legitimate topics for investigation. For example, in work that presents ideas that are new to the field, Morrow and Enarson (1996) note many distinctive features of women’s disaster-related experiences, among which are that women’s ordinary caregiving activities expand and become more intense following disasters; that existing disaster assistance policies and programs fail to address the needs of women, particularly poor and minority women, who often experience the most difficulty recovering; that women play a very significant though often unrecognized role in disaster response activities; that women tend to be shut out of official response and recovery efforts; and that following disasters women face risks to their safety and security that men do not.

Despite these kinds of changes, disaster studies continue to be carried out in highly gendered terrain, in that field researchers--both male and female--still conduct the bulk of their work in organizations and situations that are “male gendered” (Acker, 1991; 1992). Not only are crisis-relevant organizations historically male-dominated, but *as organizations* they exhibit and extoll qualities that are culturally associated with maleness, such as hierarchy, decisiveness,

quick action, strength, and risk-taking. As recent field research has shown (see, for example, Chetkovich, 1997 on the fire service) these features, along with an attendant hostility to "womanish" perspectives and modes of action, persist despite changes in organizational gender composition. Indeed, the gendered quality of crisis-related agencies and institutions is a topic that is ripe for further research.

I have chosen to focus my discussion on gender issues in disaster research because the field has probably made the most progress in the area of gender diversity. It remains relatively homogeneous in other respects. Regarding the ethnic composition of the disaster research community, with certain notable exceptions, the field has failed to attract people of color. This has no doubt hampered its ability to gain access to non-white community groups and to non-majority perspectives on disaster issues. While bringing more members of historically underrepresented groups into the disaster field won't automatically solve those kinds of problems, it would definitely be a good start. With respect to the content of the studies that have been undertaken, historically very little research has focused on race, ethnicity, and social class as factors that structure both the human response to hazards and post-disaster outcomes. When such topics have been made a focus of research (see, for example, Bolin and Bolton, 1986; Perry and Mushkatel, 1986; Bolin and Stanford, 1991; Simile, 1995), findings show that different sociodemographic and sociocultural groups experience disasters in very different ways. The field's new emphasis on social inequality, diversity, and related issues is contributing to the development of a new paradigm for disaster studies that links disasters to broader social-structural and political-ecological factors (Blaikie, et al., 1994; Peacock, Morrow, and Gladwin, 1997).

The Professionalization of the Emergency Management Field

When the field of disaster research began in the early 1950s, the local civil defense

director was likely to be a retired military man operating out of a one- or two-person office that was both physically and functionally removed from the locus of community decisionmaking. The civil defense office typically lacked both resources and ties to other governmental units, and civil defense directors and their activities--which in the early days focused almost exclusively on war planning, rather than on disasters--were accorded little prestige or community visibility. The position did not tend to attract either the best and the brightest or young, ambitious people wishing to move up in government. Within other crisis-relevant organizations such as fire and police departments and hospitals, disaster-related activities were given a low priority, except when disaster did strike. Managing disasters was not seen as important to the missions of these kinds of organizations, and people given those responsibilities probably felt justified in not taking them too seriously. Starting around the early 80s, that situation began to change, and the notion of emergency management as a specialized discipline, significant responsibility within government, and important organizational activity began to emerge.

Although circumstances vary around the country, there is no question that today the field of emergency management is well on the way toward professionalization and that the prestige of the field has grown. At the Federal level, the Director of FEMA has been given cabinet rank. Locally, the emergency manager now tends to report directly to the Mayor or the City Manager, rather than finding herself buried somewhere down in the organizational chart. Instead of having to make do in an office in the basement of the Fire Department, today's big-city emergency manager is likely to find himself presiding over a state-of-the-art emergency operations center and a sizeable staff. It is now possible for a bright, well-trained, talented, and politically savvy individual to have a very good career in emergency management.

This trend toward greater prestige and professionalization has been accompanied by

higher educational expectations for emergency management practitioners. Emergency managers are much more likely than before to have baccalaureate or advanced degrees, and emergency management is a growing area of specialization within fields like public administration. Disaster professional also continue their training and education by participating in professional associations such as the Emergency Management Section of the American Society of Public Administration and National Coordinating Council on Emergency Management and by attending courses at FEMA's Emergency Management Institute AMD speciality conferences like the annual National Hurricane Conference and the Natural Hazards Workshop.

Through these kinds of activities, emergency managers have become more familiar not only with research on disasters but also with members of the research community. Today's emergency managers appreciate and use research, and they are accustomed to interacting with researchers in the course of their work. It is becoming routine for emergency managers to ask researchers to serve as consultants, advisors, or staff on projects they are undertaking, or for their agencies directly fund research. For their part, researchers also have more of an opportunity to get to know emergency managers on both a professional and personal level. As researchers and practitioners serve together on panels and meet in both professional and social situations, the opportunities for dialogue are expanded.

These kinds of changes obviously help disaster researchers in the conduct of their work. If those who are being asked to provide access and information understand the research process, support the need for research, and know (or at least know something about) the people who are carrying out the work, this clearly helps field operations run more smoothly. Mutual trust and respect encourage disaster professionals to assist researchers with their work and at the same time help researchers gain a deeper understanding of the people they are studying.

Concluding Comments

Like all other social activities, disaster field work is situated in a larger social context. That social context has changed greatly over the decades, and those changes are reflected in the way we operate in the field today. In reviewing the ways in which social and organizational change has affected the conduct of disaster research, I have also tried to show that change brings both challenges and opportunities. Our task is to devise more creative ways of overcoming the challenges while exploiting the opportunities the new research environment provides.

The recent explosion of interest in field methods and qualitative research generally is leading to a closer examination of what social scientists know--or think we know--about the process of field work (for a good overview of the state of the art, see Denzin and Lincoln, 1994). As the Phillips chapter in this volume suggests, disaster researchers should try to make the most of these methodological advances and research lessons in their work. At the same time, because of the unique nature of the work we do, we are also in a position to make a real contribution to the methodological literature. As I've tried to show in this essay, doing disaster field work means grappling not only with all the issues field workers have traditionally had to face, but with an entirely new set of complications. Researchers in other fields will benefit from our experience as we go about working out those puzzles.

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