

PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

On Sociological Theory and the Sociology of Disasters:

Moving from Periphery to Center

by

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Prepared for presentation at the IRCD Business Meeting, World Congress of Sociology,
Durban, South Africa, 25 July 2006.

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ABSTRACT

I believe that the sociology of disaster has had too little impact on the discipline of sociology. I further believe that findings from disaster research are invaluable for developing general sociological theory. To move disaster sociology from the margins to the core of the discipline, I argue for publishing theoretical papers utilizing disaster research in mainline sociological journals. Some impediments to doing this are identified as are steps that the research committee could take to address them. I conclude by asserting that the benefits of “doing theory” in the course of our research are worth the effort.

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Some years ago at another World Congress of Sociology, I overheard two conferees complaining that the IRCD session they had just attended had had “too much sociology in it.” Since I had been one of the participants in that session, I was disturbed by the comment, although I said nothing at the time. I have thought about that remark often over the years. I now have a response to it.

First, I appreciate the fact that, from the beginning, the IRCD has been an multidisciplinary body. It should remain so. At the same time, I make no apologies for papers written from a sociological perspective being presented at the meetings of any sociological organization, whether it be the International Sociological Association, the European Sociological Association, or the American Sociological Association. No, this is not about disciplinary chauvinism. It reflects what I think is a serious shortcoming in the subfield of disaster sociology specifically, as well as in the social science of disaster in general, after more than half a century of work. That shortcoming is that, despite solid empirical contributions that have had notable impact on public policies and on emergency management practices, this subfield has had considerably less impact on sociology itself. More sociology, not less, is needed at meetings such as this, in my opinion. Before those of you whose academic degrees are in disciplines other than sociology start heading for the nearest exit, let me take a few minutes to explain myself. You may recognize a similar situation in your own discipline.

Following Hurricane Katrina, the hierarchy of American sociology felt compelled to initiate a formal response of some sort. If sociology is relevant, it surely had a role to play in the aftermath of such a mega-disaster. So the president of the American Sociological Association formed a task force to explore what sort of things should be done. Members appointed to the original task force were “big-name” sociologists who had written notable books more or less related to the topic of disasters. Unfortunately, the ASA president was unaware of the field of disaster sociology, of the substantial body of literature in it built up over fifty years, of the people who have made significant contributions to it, and of the research centers and professional training programs around the U.S. that sustain it. In what should have been its finest hour, the field of disaster sociology was invisible to the hierarchy of its own professional organization.

You might point to the regular presence of panels such as these that Joe Scanlon and Andrew Coghlan have put together for this congress or similar panels at other conferences as proof to the contrary, namely, that the sociology of disasters is a well-established specialty within the discipline. It also is increasingly likely to be represented in sociological handbooks, dictionaries, and encyclopedias (see, for example, Quarantelli 2000; Stallings 2006; see especially Rodríguez, Quarantelli, and Dynes 2006). There is no doubt about this. Disaster sociology is now accepted in the same way as are other specialties such as the sociology of emotions, mathematical sociology, and the sociology of mental health. (These would have been called “the little sociologies” in the doctoral orientation seminar that I took in the 1960s.) However, this is recognition at the margin, not at the core. I fear that this constitutes what might be called “institutionalized marginality.”

We who identify ourselves as sociologists should not be content with this. We should aspire to move the sociology of disasters into the core of the discipline. To the extent that such a core exists, it exists in the theories, schools of thought, or—get ready for the dreaded “p” word—paradigms that loosely identify the boundaries of the discipline and mark its internal divisions. I use plural nouns here to signify that I agree with George Ritzer’s (1975) description of sociology as a multi-paradigm—there’s that word again—discipline.

Most sociologists who study disasters have taken axioms and premises from the theoretical schools in which they were trained into their research. What we collectively have failed to do, or at least have not done consistently and systematically, is to use our empirical findings to evaluate, discredit, or refine those theoretical axioms and premises. We have failed to consistently use disaster research to challenge and advance the central theories and dominant paradigms (ugh!) in sociology. We need to close the loop, complete the circle. What we need to do, in other words, is to integrate insights from our research with the core concerns of the discipline.

In my judgment, making contributions to the further development of general sociological theory is a way to do this, maybe the only way. On a practical level, this will mean publishing papers that are consciously written to be contributions to theory in general-interest journals such as the *American Sociological Review* and the *American Journal of Sociology*. The last person to do this, if my far-from-perfect memory serves me, was Gary Kreps along with his colleague, Susan Bosworth (Bosworth and Kreps 1984; Kreps and Bosworth 1993; see also Kreps 1985). Their case is instructive. Gary (1985, p. 49) opens one of his papers by posing the following question in the very first

sentence: “How are disaster and social structure related?” This places the subject matter of disaster sociology at the very core of general sociological theory. In their two empirically-based articles (Bosworth and Kreps 1984; Kreps and Bosworth 1993), Susan and Gary identify the minimal requirements of social organization in four structural elements: domains, tasks, resources, and activities (the so-called D-T-R-A model). Their articles are not merely reports of research. Rather, they are papers that use disaster research to theorize about social structure, one of the fundamental components of sociological discourse. (How well they succeed is not the issue; see, for example, David Gillespie’s [1996] criticisms in his review of Gary and Susan’s 1994 book.)

In order to publish theory, we first have to “do” theory. This means making conscious use of theory in our research. I do not mean by this that we should develop a specialized theory of disasters or a theory of evacuation or of recovery or whatever. The precedent was established long ago for resisting the urge to create such “little theories.” Henry Quarantelli (1987, 1994) has chronicled the conscious use of existing theory in framing disaster research in its early stages. All of us more or less, consciously or unconsciously, use some sort of theoretical framework in our work. If we were to become more theory-conscious, we would not only introduce more general theory into our research (which I believe would be a good thing in itself) but we might also begin to ask whether that theory was any good—whether it had gaps that need filling, inconsistencies that need resolving, axioms that need restating, premises that need to be made explicit and refined, and so forth. Reporting such “discoveries” to a wider audience of sociologists who are *not* interested in disasters but who use the same theory in their own work in other areas is what I have in mind.

You can think of overarching theoretical issues to which your research relates without any prompting from me. Perhaps because of the era in which I received my graduate training, what comes to my mind is the dialectic between the spontaneity of our daily lives and the continuity of existence over time and space captured by the term “social structure.” This fundamental theoretical issue has been associated with the study of disasters and catastrophes for nearly a century. Spontaneity and continuity have had many synonyms during that time, from social stability and social change (Thomas 1909; see also Sorokin 1942) as well as social organization and social disorganization (Queen and Mann 1925) at the macro-level to institutionalized and emergent behavior at the meso-level (Dynes and Quarantelli 1968; Dynes 1970) to the micro-macro work of a few decades ago (Collins 1981; Alexander, et al., 1987). It also underlies more recent interest in role structures based upon gender or age and in structures of power and inequality. Why end our research with a description of how these social structures shape people’s encounters with disaster? Why not go one step farther and ask how people’s encounters with disaster reshape these social structures—and if they don’t, why they are resistant to change? The first question brings theory to the study of disasters. The second question that takes the study of disasters back to theory.

It is easy to think of all the impediments to doing theory while studying disasters. Neither the agencies that fund our research nor the practitioners that use it are likely to be sympathetic. Employers may or may not be impressed with such efforts, depending on how they themselves value general theory. For us, it means working three jobs: our regular teaching and service duties; our research and all that that entails (proposal writing, report preparation, and carrying out the research itself); and finally becoming a

theorist engaged in the process of theory construction. Unfortunately, there is no guarantee that mainline journals will welcome our theoretical contributions. These journals seem to have an informal quota on theory pieces, and referees of theory submissions seem to guard their theoretical turf with religious zeal.

Still, the benefits outweigh the costs. For example, immersing oneself in reading general sociological theory—perhaps for the first time since graduate school—is a reinvigorating way to spend a sabbatical leave. Incorporating theory more consciously and more systematically into one’s research can only improve its sociological relevance. Doing so also should have the unintended consequence of allowing one to view disaster in larger perspective, as a subclass of life’s turning-points that challenge the taken-for-granted world of our daily existence (from Garfinkel 1967). Incidentally, this also opens up possibilities of bringing disaster research in contact with theories in areas such as the sociology of knowledge and the social construction of reality (Berger and Luckmann 1967), the sociology of everyday life (Douglas 1970; Goffman 1959, 1986 [1974]), and so forth. Having traveled down this road a little way myself, I can tell you that it also brings you to the boundaries of sociology as a social science. Philosophical questions quickly appear in one’s path, and the process of sorting out to which questions empirical disaster research can and cannot contribute answers is educational in itself.

In concluding, let me suggest some steps that we sociologists can take to increase the use of general theory in disaster research and thereby improve the chances that such research will find its way into the mainstream of the discipline. On a conceptual level, I believe that a two-step process is necessary. The first step is well underway. This is to be more clear about what constitutes a “disaster,” about how disasters differ from other

seemingly-similar phenomena, and about what they have in common with phenomena not usually thought of as disasters. Excellent starting points were provided in 1998 by Henry Quarantelli (1998) and last year by Ron Perry and Quarantelli (2005). My personal approach to tackling the “What is a disaster?” question has evolved from, at the micro-level, locating them among other types of disruptions of routines (Stallings 1998) to, at the macro-level, treating them as one type of crisis (Stallings 2001, 2005). The latter approach facilitates the second stage of this two-step process. I believe that “disaster” must be subsumed under a more abstract construct that in turn either already is or can be integrated into a general theory. Allen Barton (1963, 1969) was traveling along this path in the 1960s when he located disasters as one type of collective stress situation (see especially Barton 1969, p. 40–47). Robert Merton (1969) showed how Barton’s work contributed to a “middle-range” theory of social systems in his lengthy forward to Barton’s well-known book. Barton himself turned his attention to the second stage in his lecture upon receiving the E. L. Quarantelli Theory Award (Barton 2003). Clarifying the phenomenon of “disaster” paves the way for finding a workable link to an element of general theory that will make possible the incorporation of empirical work on disasters.

On a practical level, there are things that we can do to promote the theoretical use of disaster research. An obvious one would be to organize panels on “General Sociological Theory and Disaster Research” at a future world congress and other sociological meetings. These could either be traditional paper-presentation panels or, perhaps better, open forums for discussion (including discussion of whether the attempt to utilize disaster research findings in elaborating general theory is worth the effort). Second, a special issue of the *IJMED (International Journal of Mass Emergencies and*

Disasters) could be organized on this topic. Papers that linked disaster research with general theory would be solicited. Third, we could promote the ELQ Theory Award and its recipients, including Allen Barton, Russell Dynes, and, in 2006, Tom Drabek, as exemplars of work that is consciously grounded in theories transcending the field. We should promote this award more than we do in any case, but we should do it in a way that highlights the work for which the award was given. Finally, as we choose our future research topics, analyze our data, and prepare to write for publication, all of us could ask ourselves what fundamental theoretical issues our work addresses. Each of us could create exemplars of work that strives to be as relevant to the discipline to which we belong as other aspects of our work are intended to be relevant to practitioners and the public-at-large.

To summarize, I believe that the field of disaster research would benefit from the use of more general sociological theory. I believe that the discipline of sociology would benefit if insights from disaster research were integrated into its core theories. And I believe that disaster researchers such as you would benefit from seeing your work as part of a centuries-old curiosity about the ebb and flow of social life.

POSTSCRIPT: I want to thank _____ very much for agreeing to undertake the awkward task of publicly presenting someone else's paper. I also want to apologize for my inability to be there with you in Durban. If you find anything worthwhile in what I have written—or if you simply want to have a complete set of papers from this congress for your files—you may download a copy of these remarks from my web site, www.rstallings.com. Should you feel like commenting, positively or negatively, I welcome your e-mails to rstallin@usc.edu. Thank you very much for the

time, effort, and expense you devoted to attend these meetings. Enjoy the remainder of the sessions, and have a safe journey home.

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