

On Vulnerability and Coping

The reductionist view of disasters, that is defining disasters in the context of the natural hazards, has been quite pervasive for such a long time. Add to this the notion that “natural” disasters are acts of God and as such there is very little that can be done to prevent and stop them and the result is a myriad of so-called “solutions” that either attempts to predict when natural disasters will happen and provide early warning or those that provide “protection” through infrastructural feats and technological creations that are supposed to guard people from the wrath of nature. Blaikie et al breaks down these long-held notions and concepts of disasters and puts forward two frameworks – pressure and release and access models – that illustrate how the interaction between hazards and vulnerability is what creates a disaster and an understanding of both these factors and how they relate both linearly or statically (as in the PAR model) or dynamically (as in the access model). Blaikie et al puts emphasis on both the macro and micro factors and underlying root causes of vulnerability such as political and ideological systems, power structures and access to resources and illustrate how these interact dynamically to create vulnerability. In as much as Blaikie et al showed the intertwined web by which these factors come into play, the focus was put almost entirely on the vulnerability side of the equation and the factors that drive that equation forward to produce a disaster in conjunction with an identified hazard. But, more and more we realize that even on the hazard end of the equation, the very notion of a “natural” hazard is becoming more and more vague and untrue given the fact that the root causes and dynamic causes identified to cause vulnerability are themselves culprits of the hazards that are present. Current research and knowledge about global environmental change, most noted of which is that of climate change, is a case in point in terms of the production of “natural” hazards through the same factors identified to cause vulnerability. Thus, the model should look more circular or cyclical and the cliché of a vicious cycle is applicable.

An interesting point that Blaikie et al makes is that of using the household or hearth-hold as a unit of analysis for their framework. This in comparison to the use of “family”, which Morrow in her piece uses, though, defines it much the same way as Blaikie et al does. This concept brings forward and illuminates the role of social networks, in this case, that of kinships and kindred ties in the political economy of disasters prior to the event, as it unfolds and soon thereafter. Blaikie et al and Morrow illustrate how the macro-level factors of such as race, gender, socioeconomic status, power relations and structures play out in the micro-level of the families or households. Also, they both illustrate how interventions through this unit (that is, the more expansive definition of it that includes extended families and multi-generation households) should be given very close attention and sensitive implementation.

Lastly, Tierney et al in their piece once again disentangles for us the web of causations and factors that Blaikie et al put forward by showing the evidence and literature that is available for each of the macro and micro-level factors that have been identified. They argue the utility of knowing the exact mechanisms of how each of these factors contributes singly to the creation of disasters and uses varied sources to show this point. What is very useful with this article is that it proves how crucial a context-specific approach to vulnerability and disaster is, as the evidence does not support a “stereotypical” profile of vulnerability and disasters. Thus, while an appreciation of these different factors is important, sensitivity and keenness on how they play out in the actual context of a disaster is of the greatest value.