

Hurricane Andrew: Ethnicity, gender, and the sociology of disasters

The authors examine “community” from a socio-political ecology perspective, defining it as a network of groups, organizations, and intervening coordinating bodies. Community relationships are not necessarily cooperative: instead, they are contingent and characterized by conflict and competition.

Competition for scarce resources (physical capital, housing, services) means that some households may be better off, and some may be worse off, than before the disaster. Existing inequalities and social differentiation by race, gender, and class influence access to resources and shape disaster outcomes for individuals. The authors note that the US market-based approach to disaster recovery is particularly guilty of creating competition and conflict between individuals. The authors also point out that community links can mitigate some of the costs of lack of access to loans of insurance.

The US system is also characterized by conflict, competition, and lack of coordination between groups aiding in recovery efforts, creating waste and inefficiencies. Coordination failures arise because the government is not accustomed to working alongside non-profits, because private contractors view non-profits as competition, and because of competition between local and national non-profit or voluntary organizations.

I think the competition and conflict model is useful for looking at post-disaster community dynamics, particularly because it recognizes the reality of severe resource scarcity and is trying to get at the distribution of those resources. I’d like to see more data on poverty rates pre- and post-disaster for different sub-groups and examine how that data compares to social networks in the sub-groups.

Social Capital: A Missing Link to Disaster Recovery

The authors argue that the post-disaster process should be seen as a development opportunity, rather than simply focusing on restoration. Using case studies from the Kobe and Gujarat earthquakes, they find that social capital and community leadership were the most important factors aiding recovery and collective action. The authors define social capital as trust, social norms, participation, and networks; and that social capital is facilitate and enforced by a community leader.

In the Kobe earthquake, the authors use the town of Mano to illustrate the importance of social capital in all phases of the disaster cycle. In Mano, the authors argue the competition and self-interest that typically characterize rehabilitation phases didn’t occur, largely because of the bonding, bridging, and linking capital present, as well as the well-developed leadership. In Gujarat, the community with the greatest level of social capital recovered faster than the other groups, despite having a lower income level.

What steps can be taken to strengthen social capital, post crisis? I thought the paper started off very strong—I would have liked to know more on how the post-disaster process can be embraced as a development opportunity.

Political Responses to Natural Disasters

The authors claim there has been insufficient attention to social movements that have arisen in response to natural hazards. In the community examined, the activism arose because the citizens believe the city failed to protect them from a preventable hazard. The division between “natural” external disasters which don’t generate protest movements, and “man made” disasters for which people demand accountability is breaking down: since we are able to shape and control our environment, people no longer see acts of nature as uncontrollable.

The paper examines why people with similar interests did or did not protest; some of their key findings are that protest is directly related to self interest, there must be a “target” to protest, and most importantly, solidarity is essential for mobilizing action. Is there any research on how social groups in relatively wealthy countries (like the US) mobilize for technologies to minimize disaster impacts in the first place? Is participation in the social action still a function of self interest, a target to protest, and solidarity? Or are different factors at play?