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Psychosocial Aspects of Disaster

Edited by

RICHARD GIST

BERNARD LUBIN



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*To the memory of Rene A. Ruiz,
whose friendship and insight
remain a part of all we do*

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Series Preface

This series of books is addressed to behavioral scientists interested in the nature of human personality. Its scope should prove pertinent to personality theorists and researchers as well as to clinicians concerned with applying an understanding of personality processes to the amelioration of emotional difficulties in living. To this end, the series provides a scholarly integration of theoretical formulations, empirical data, and practical recommendations.

Six major aspects of studying and learning about human personality can be designated: personality theory, personality structure and dynamics, personality development, personality assessment, personality change, and personality adjustment. In exploring these aspects of personality, the books in the series discuss a number of distinct but related subject areas: the nature and implications of various theories of personality; personality characteristics that account for consistencies and variations in human behavior; the emergence of personality processes in children and adolescents; the use of interviewing and testing procedures to evaluate individual differences in personality; efforts to modify personality styles through psychotherapy, counseling, behavior therapy, and other methods of influence; and patterns of abnormal personality functioning that impair individual competence.

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Preface

Disasters, by definition, are castastrophic events that disrupt entire communities. It should not be surprising, then, that community psychologists have taken particular interest in researching, evaluating, and attempting to ameliorate their effects. But disaster intervention represents more than just a specific area of inquiry and application; in many respects, the development of mental health responses to disaster reflects the discipline's evolution from a collection of loosely aggregated activities into an integrated body of theory and practice.

The history of community psychology might easily serve as a case study in the evolution of social movements. Born of the spirit of radical change and charismatic consensus that typified the community mental health ideology of the 1960s, its initial phases were marked in part by an egalitarian notion that almost any undertaking might appropriately fall under its aegis—provided, of course, that it was of a suitably nontraditional nature.

A quarter century of maturation has brought a variety of changes to the discipline. Perhaps most significant has been a series of subtle shifts from the characteristics of a social cause to those of a social science. There is now a clearer understanding of how and where particular viewpoints best fit in the broader picture of psychology and human services. Community psychologists have learned, both from successes and failures, what it is they do well and what is better done by others.

Such lessons from the field, many learned in communities recovering from disaster, have contributed to the development of a more focused body of research and practice. Significant strides have been made in identifying the factors that differentiate strengths from failings, and in molding from this knowledge the constructs of a cogent interactionist viewpoint. An ecological framework has also emerged to provide a contextual model for the operation of those constructs. These developments hold significant promise for organizing and directing future endeavors.

This volume brings together observations from a number of active researchers and practitioners in disaster intervention and presents their current thinking along lines drawn by the editors' ecological perspectives. Credit for the quality of the work and thought reflected in these chapters belongs exclusively to the contributors; all responsibility for the organization and presentation of the material—always a difficult chore, and never one that

does justice to the components—must be placed squarely at the feet of the editors.

We do, however, owe several outstanding debts to persons whose unique contributions have done so much to shape these and other efforts we have undertaken, both individually and together. To Shirley McKnight and Alice Lubin we owe the gratitude consistently earned by the spouses of “Type A” academics, but too rarely expressed by their task-driven partners. To our colleagues at the University of Missouri, Kansas City, and the Kansas City, Missouri, Health Department, we owe thanks, for both the direct contributions involved in review and discussion of our work and the daily interaction that has helped shape our direction and commitment to the field. Tricia Falk and Sally Conrad, loyal friends and able assistants for many years, have rescued us time and again from assorted faults and foibles.

The most specific debt of scholars and academics, however, is owed to students. By preventing the basic questions of any discipline from slipping away, students keep the process of inquiry alive and grounded. As editors of this volume we are the students of the contributors; we hope our product proves worthy of their tutelage.

RICHARD GIST
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Kansas City, Missouri
December 1988

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INTRODUCTION

Ecological and Community Perspectives on Disaster Intervention

RICHARD GIST AND BERNARD LUBIN

Probably no single statement is as often quoted, by psychologists in general and by community psychologists in particular, as the maxim first attributed to Kurt Lewin: "There's nothing so practical as good theory." Good theory serves first to frame and focus systematic inquiry; it leads to recognition of the salient features of observations and to derivation of prudent and fruitful hypotheses from observed relationships. Good theory guides the examination of those hypotheses through objective evaluation of their adequacy in predicting, inventing, preventing, explaining, and comprehending the actual events of the empirical world. Good theory also provides a self-correcting vehicle through which the results of inquiry refine in turn the theory that directed it.

Any sound attempt to examine the psychosocial aspects of disaster must therefore begin, implicitly or explicitly, with at least a general set of assumptions about the nature of human behavior and some notions about the principles that influence human behavior under the conditions disaster may impose. The framework reflected in this volume is an ecological viewpoint with an explicitly community-based orientation (O'Connor & Lubin, 1984). Although the major focus of the text is on the practical application of intervention principles by mental health personnel in the field, it begins with a basic discussion of the viewpoint that binds the material and guides its organization.

THE EVOLUTION OF PSYCHOLOGICAL THEORY

Many of the central issues in contemporary study of human behavior might best be described as matters of context. Humans are, first and foremost, complex biological entities; human behavior may be accordingly expected to be both limited and directed by the biological heritage of the species. But just as the expression of the biological possibilities afforded an organism

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through its genetic inheritance will be controlled in large measure by the nature of the environment within which that organism develops and functions, so also will the expressions of human behavior be largely determined by environmental contexts.

Traditional viewpoints in psychology—biological, behavioral, psychodynamic—have concentrated primarily on individual-level variables in their attempts to uncover and explain the mechanisms of behavior. The organism has been seen primarily as a reactive element within its environment, its behavior comprised of determined responses to events and experiences. Much as physical sciences have sought to decipher the processes governing inanimate behavior through examination of the systematic reactions of matter to forces and conditions acting upon it, these approaches to psychological inquiry have sought to uncover similar types of processes governing the behavior of organisms.

Gergen (1982, 1985) has termed this epistemological disposition an *exogenic perspective*, descriptive of models derived from logical empiricist assumptions regarding the structure of nature and the meanings of knowledge concerning that structure. These assumptions hold the essential determinants of knowledge and behavior to exist independently of any apprehension by or assertion of the organism, leading to attempts to explain human behavior as the necessary and sufficient consequences of invariant external processes. This line of construction leaves such critical issues as volition and cultural relativity—irrelevant to the explanation of inanimate behavior but potentially crucial in the determination of human activity—difficult to reconcile (cf. Howard & Conway, 1986).

As an opposite epistemological pole, Gergen described an *endogenic perspective*, derived from rationalist traditions and typified in approaches such as the field theories of Kurt Lewin (cf. Lewin, 1951). Contemporary directions in social psychology, particularly in the areas of social cognition and social perception, suggest the ascendance of viewpoints that hold human actions to depend more on beliefs about the nature of one's world than on direct knowledge of its empirical structure. These constructions face limitations at least equal in consequence to the ones confronted by exogenic orientations, their logical extension yielding an unfortunate solipsism that must struggle to accommodate such critical issues as the evolution of complex cognitive behavior or its developmental emergence within the individual (Gergen, 1985).

Theoretical Imperatives in Community Psychology

Psychology's seeming inability to reconcile its disparate epistemological frameworks has led to an enduring schism with far-reaching implications. Kimble (1984) has described the result as the emergence of separate cultures, one characterized by the more deterministic exogenic viewpoints, the other characterized by a more endogenic phenomenological humanism. The former

viewpoint has provided the tradition for much of scientific and academic psychology, leading often to theoretical positions that may appear conceptually divorced from the pragmatic world of the practitioner. In contrast, traditions of the practitioner have been more strongly influenced by the endogenic orientation, a framework generally eschewed by academics and scientists.

Despite the pervasiveness of a scientist-practitioner archetype crafted with the intent of diminishing such divisions, the gap between these traditions has continued to grow. Community psychology, generated as the discipline's response to the imperatives of the community mental health movement of the mid-1960s, was steeped in a tradition encompassing social action through the scientist-practitioner ethic. Originally a subfield geared more toward method and context than toward development of unique theoretical viewpoints, many of the crucial activities its early practitioners elected to pursue forced them to address the implications of the endogenic-exogenic dichotomy.

Needs assessment and program development activities, for example, require the application of systematic approaches to the diagnosis of problems at both individual and community levels, the establishment of priorities among identified issues, and the selection of intervention approaches that hold promise for solution of priority issues (Stewart, 1979). Attempts to describe such problems by objective, exogenic standards alone have consistently proven problematic, particularly to the extent that subjective and/or sociocultural decisions regarding deviance comprise major aspects of their contextual definitions (cf. Schact, 1985). Furthermore, the establishment of intervention priorities demands the effective blending of social, cultural, political, and economic agendas with the more familiar clinical imperatives. Community psychology's orientation toward preventive and consultative approaches drives the community practitioner toward modes of intervention that, because they must usually be executed within the constraints of a delivery system dominated by explicitly exogenic medical models, tend to keep these epistemological conflicts in sharpened focus (cf. Rappaport & Chinsky, 1974).

Program evaluation presents another example. This activity was initially conceived as entailing somewhat atheoretical post hoc assessments of programmatic efficacy, intended to provide patently objective information for administrative and political decision making (Weiss, 1972). It soon became apparent, however, that the nature and goals of evaluation research gave the enterprise a character profoundly different from typical academic inquiry. The conduct of evaluation studies proved to be inextricably intertwined with the social and political contexts in which they were conceived and executed. Evaluation activities were repeatedly shown to be strongly shaped by a number of contextual variables; their findings, however, rarely seemed to exert substantial influence on the social and political systems they were intended to guide (Weiss, 1975).

The process of evaluation, before it could achieve any level of coherent

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utility, had to be reconceptualized within an interactive framework that could encompass the disparate conventions of the evaluator's competing constituencies. Building a productive role for evaluation research in political decision making, for example, required translating a substantial portion of the conceptual models from strictly academic paradigms to ones that could address the values and imperatives of the political system while maintaining the analytic integrity of traditional approaches to research (Chelimsky, 1987). Frequently, however, objective analyses of social issues have resulted in disaffirmation of entrenched views, leaving the evaluator—who often thought his or her objective data would provide clear and welcome solutions—an equally disenfranchised outsider among colleagues, constituents, and consumers (Rossi, 1987).

In Search of Cogency

Resolution of these functional dilemmas has taken community psychology through a series of methodological and epistemological metamorphoses. The early effort by Caplan (1964) to transport certain concepts of public health into the community mental health arena provided a useful starting point, but its reliance upon implicitly exogenic medical metaphors failed to provide an adequate structure through which to accommodate the broad range of interactive behavioral phenomena it sought to encompass. Barker's (1968) ecological concepts provided an alternative schema for the interactive analysis of community functioning, whereas Rappaport's (1981) concept of empowerment supplied an alternative to the disease-based notion of prevention.

Definitions of community psychology, initially dominated by descriptions of its component activities, began to reflect interactionist imperatives. Heller and Monahan (1977), for example, organized their community psychology text along a model that described points and types of intervention in accordance with discrete ecological levels. Gottfredson (1984) advanced the principle that program evaluation should be used to generate and empirically validate hypotheses relating to the theoretical underpinnings of the interventions under scrutiny. Yet despite the accumulation of applied examples, articulation of a cogent theoretical position was slow to appear.

Emergence of an Interactionist Framework

Bry (1985) cited the emergence of a coherent interactionist viewpoint in O'Connor and Lubin (1984) as "a watershed in community psychology" (p. 951). She summarized the major elements of consensus among its contributors as entailing a series of assumptions about person-environment interactions as the most salient locus of analysis, with the ecological or systems perspective on those interactions being the most productive approach to their explanation and study. Much like Bandura's (1977) concept of reciprocal determinism, these assumptions posit that the construction of reality

an individual employs to guide his or her behavior is both a consequence of that individual's apprehensions and experiences and a determinant of the future behavior of that individual and others. The social and environmental contexts of these determinants establish the norms and settings for individual and community behavior, thereby defining both accepted and pathological patterns of individual action (Marsella, 1984).

Cronkite, Moos, and Finney (1984) and Bechtel (1984) have presented complementary discussions of the mechanisms through which these factors exert their influences on behavior. Each construction argued that certain role expectations and behavioral norms exist as a part of an individual's comprehension of a given setting, and that those norms and expectations prescribe behavioral possibilities afforded the individual by participation in that setting. The reinforcements directed toward behavior emitted in a given setting in turn dictate the probability that specific behavioral possibilities will be enacted or repeated, usually based upon the actors' and observers' cognitive evaluations of those environmental reactions. In this fashion, the social constructionist perspective advanced by Gergen (1985) sees some realization, in that the individual's endogenic construction of reality is given a primary role in determining behavior but is said to be formed through exogenically describable principles of social learning. It is these elements *acting together* that are posited to ultimately yield observable behavior.

COMMUNITIES IN DISASTER

Disaster, by almost any of its essential definitions, is a community-level event, but it is also an event with profound implications for functioning at all subordinate levels of analysis. The disruption of regular environments and normal social networks can place extraordinary stress upon victims (cf. Pattison & Hurd, 1984) and can exert substantial pathognomonic influences on the perceived quality of life in a community (Goodhart & Zautra, 1984).

Clearly, the majority of persons impacted by disaster will not suffer long-term catastrophic or pathological responses, though most may experience some symptoms related to situational stress (Helzer, Robins, & McEvoy, 1987). Efforts to intervene with these populations may therefore be more productively guided by models that employ ecological concepts of dysfunction and intervention.

Ecological Perspectives in Disaster Intervention

Gist and Stolz (1982) described one such circumstance in which community adjustment following a major building collapse was enhanced through a series of interventions designed to identify and augment natural helping systems. Anticipatory guidance and mutual support mechanisms formed the major components of the intervention, with mental health personnel serving pri-

marily as informational resources working through vehicles as diverse and diffuse as broadcast media and self-selected support group participants.

Such approaches contrast sharply with traditional “waiting modes” of intervention (Rappaport & Chinsky, 1974). They are in essence preventive models, seeking both to strengthen the capacity of individuals to withstand the inevitable stresses of cataclysmic life events and to improve the capacity of both the natural and the structured helping systems that assist those endeavors. The distress experienced by disaster victims is viewed as a normal reaction to abnormal circumstances, rather than as a manifestation of dispositional pathology. Crisis intervention, rather than protracted therapeutic engagement, dominates the kind of direct service approaches that may evolve.

BUILDING AN UNDERSTANDING

The first effort in the design of this text is to provide a framework for the examination and discussion of the major issues to be addressed. Consistent with the focus on ecological perspectives, the volume begins by framing the nature of disaster and responses to it in terms of communities and the systems they embody.

Disasters, of course, do not represent any singular type of phenomenon. In marked contrast to natural disasters, the proverbial “acts of God,” stand mass transportation accidents, technological catastrophes, and deliberate acts of violence or terrorism. It is clear that the nature of these various events will profoundly influence the social construction of the disaster and its impact and hence yield substantially different imperatives for the planning and execution of interventions. Accordingly, typologies for the study of disaster are examined next.

Much can be learned from the experience of researchers and practitioners in addressing various types of disaster. Part Two reviews several major categories of cataclysmic events a community might face—natural disasters, airline accidents, technological failures, and criminal acts, violence, or terrorism. It is possible to draw from these reviews some insight into both the features common across all responses to disaster and the distinctive features of reactions to each.

Ecological approaches, as established earlier, prescribe multilevel strategies for preventive and supportive activity. Part Three explores a model of help seeking in disaster and considers models for both the prevention and remediation of crisis-engendered reactions to situational stress. It also describes the organizational aspects of planning and executing disaster responses.

The final section returns the focus to more theoretical issues. The growing knowledge of human responses to disaster has also generated a new arena for litigation; Part Four considers first, then, the legal implications of disaster-induced reactions. An extensive review of current research directions in the study of psychosocial responses to disaster follows, and the volume con-