

DISASTER THEORIES

Introduction and overview

This topic present different types of disaster theories and how they affect the community. A theory is a set of propositions about defined and related constructs that describe the relationships among the variables in order to systematically describe the phenomena of interest.

Learning Outcomes

At the end of this topic the learner is expected to:

1. Outline disaster theories
2. Describe each theory
3. Relate each disaster theory to the community development

Disaster Theories

This topic will discuss four theories of disaster namely:

1. Acts of God – or Fate
2. Act of Nature – Physical Event
3. Intersection of Society and Nature
4. Avoidable Human Constructions

Disaster as “Act of God”

Earliest (and continuing) usage suggests that Acts of God were viewed as divine retribution for human misdeeds and failings (White, et al., 2001).

Disaster as Divine Retribution: “If there is one voice louder than others in this terrible event it is that of God! Determined to guard his Sabbath with jealous care, God does not afflict except with good cause. The Sabbath of God has been dreadfully profaned by our great public companies. These wicked people are actually going to have the audacity to rebuild this bridge. Is it not awful to think that they (the passengers) must have been carried away when they were transgressing the law of God?” (Toft, 1992)

Act of God Later View:

Later, natural disasters as Acts of God came to be viewed as:

- Just the way things were.
- Part of God’s plan--could not be understood by humans.
- Need to just accept and get on with it.
- Disasters happen--people are the innocent victims.

Act of God as Excuse to Avoid Responsibility:

“Soon after the black wall of water and debris ground its way down Buffalo Creek, attorneys for the local coal company involved called the disaster an “act of God.” When asked what that meant, a spokesperson explained helpfully that the dam was simply „incapable of holding the water God poured into it. “ (Erikson 1989).

Act of God When We are spared: “Gov. Mike Foster said he’s convinced Louisiana was spared from major destruction from Hurricane Lili by “divine intervention.” (Hasten, 2002).

Bottom Line. . . Fate (the stars), God, or human sin is to blame for disasters.

1755 - A Turning Point: “The Lisbon earthquake can be identified as a turning point in human history which moved the consideration of such physical events as supernatural signals toward a more neutral or even a secular, proto-scientific causation.” (Dynes, 1997)

Dynes on State Responsibility: “The Lisbon earthquake was the first modern disaster in which the state accepted the responsibility for mobilizing the emergency response and for developing and implementing a collective effort for reconstruction and in order to accomplish that, traditional notions of supernatural causation were opposed, rather harshly.” (Dynes, 1997).

Disaster as Physical Agent: “The earliest workers in the area, including myself, with little conscious thought and accepting common sense views, initially accepted as a prototype model the notion that disasters were an outside attack upon social systems that “broke down” in the face of such an assault from outside.”

(Quarantelli, 1998b).

Disaster as Act of Nature

“The traditional view of natural hazards has ascribed all or almost all responsibility for them to the processes of the geophysical world. This approach has meant that the root cause of large-scale death and destruction has been attributed to the extremes of nature rather than encompassing the human world.” (Tobin and Montz, 1997).

Bottom Line. . . . Mother Nature is to blame.

Disaster as Intersection of Society and Hazards: “Not every windstorm, earthquake, or rush of water is a catastrophe. A catastrophe is known by its works; that is to say, by the occurrence of disaster. So long as the ship rides out the storm, so long as the city resists the earth-shocks, so long as the levees hold, there is no

Lecture four

disaster. It is the collapse of the cultural protections that constitutes the disaster proper.” (Carr, 1932).