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CARING FOR THE COMMUNITY IN DISASTER SITUATIONS: THE SHORT-TERM ASPECTS

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This paper is concerned with community responses to sudden disaster. It is divided into three main sections. In the first it examines the nature and pattern of community response to the Brisbane flood which occurred over the Australia Day weekend in 1974, and some of the consequences for the flood affected persons of this response. The second section looks at the community response to Cyclone Tracy, and again at some of the consequences for the cyclone affected persons of this response. Finally, it considers some of the assumptions about both "victims" and "helpers" in a disaster situation held by those providing relief and consequences of these assumptions for the strategies employed in the relief operation.

The Brisbane Floods of January 1974

In January 1974 severe flooding occurred in the Brisbane River and its major tributary, the Bremer, causing great damage to the cities of Brisbane and Ipswich with some loss of life. This natural disaster generated a number of studies by members of different disciplines. This paper is in part based on one of those studies conducted by the Departments of Anthropology and Sociology and Social Work at the University of Queensland, with financial support from the one time Australian Government Social Welfare Commission (Chamberlain *et al.*, 1979).

The general aim of the study was to assess the effects of the flood on households directly affected by it, and to evaluate the organizational relief activity which was undertaken in an endeavour to help flood affected persons resume their normal lives. Today I will be particularly concerned with the latter aspect of the study. In order to gain some understanding of the nature and patterning of relief activity, data were collected by interview and from documentary sources. Those who were interviewed were helpers who were attached to specific relief centres either on a regular or full-time basis, helpers involved in unattached relief work which was possible at several centres, paid helpers who were employed by existing welfare organizations, and those involved in the administration of the relief operation. Documentary sources included press reports, radio and television transcripts, Hansard Reports of parliamentary debates and the records of welfare organizations.

Two broad classes of groups provided the community response to the Brisbane flood. We have referred to these as existent and emergent groups. Existent groups were those which operated in some assistance or relief capacity during the disaster and aftermath, within an existing or 'before flood' organizational framework. Many of these groups operated in extended or expanded capacities. For example, some organizations operated with a small internal nucleus swelled by a large number of volunteer workers. Others changed their normal roles and functions drastically to respond to the impact and aftermath needs of flood affected persons to the extent that normal day-to-day tasks were set aside in favour of flood relief activities.

Emergent groups were those formed in direct response to the disaster impact with the specific intention of meeting flood affected persons' needs. In some instances emergent bodies arose spontaneously, while on other occasions their formation was more or less carefully planned. Some were initiated and co-ordinated by existent bodies, others mainly comprised individuals seconded from existing formal bureaucracies. The major emergent welfare body – The Queensland Disaster Welfare Committee (QDWC) – affords an example of this. Most emergent bodies were disbanded within a relatively short period of time, although some were reconstituted as permanent groups with aims and functions oriented to meet future disaster situations. I would like to trace now, from the data we collected, the nature of the community response through the initial stages of the disaster.

From mid December to 24 January much of Queensland was subjected to unsettled weather patterns and extensive cyclonic depression which produced very heavy falls of rain and resultant flooding of rivers in the northern part of the State. Heavy summer rain and flooding in the tropical north were not unusual occurrences but probably few people in and around Brisbane and Ipswich would have given any serious thought to the possibility that similar weather patterns might soon affect their own areas.

The actual pre-crisis phase in the southeast was in fact very brief. On 24 January the region came under the influence of a severe cyclonic depression bringing heavy falls of rain. By the next day the upper Brisbane and Bremer Rivers and Lockyer Creek experienced catchment area saturation. This was accompanied by significant run-off in all three catchment areas.

On the morning of Saturday 26 January a major crisis situation had arisen with major flooding forecasted in the Bremer and Brisbane Rivers and Lockyer Creek. By Monday 28 January large areas of the city and suburbs of Brisbane were inundated and the damage to property and disruption to the lives of the residents were on an unprecedented scale. Wednesday 30 and Thursday 31 January brought substantial dissipation of the disaster threat. Flood levels fell appreciably in both the Bremer

and Brisbane Rivers. Inundated areas slowly emerged from receding water. By 1 February the disaster crisis was seen to be over, and further flood threat virtually gone.

The community response to the disaster can be traced over this period. I will start with what we can call the emergency phase, which probably coincided with the entire sequential period of the disaster itself. The dominating elements of the emergency response phase were ad hocracy, chaos, and general confusion. Having regard to the lack of pre-planning for emergency services to cope with natural disasters in Queensland, chaos and confusion in attempts to mobilise relief services were almost inevitable. Lack of co-ordination was yet another factor in evidence in this early phase. In this phase too almost total response to the plight of victims centred on their present immediate needs. Immediate, spontaneous, mostly unplanned action was taken to effect safety, search, rescue and removal services. Provision of basic material resources for victim survival followed; again in a largely unplanned, *ad hoc*, confused and frequently duplicated manner.

During the emergency phase the response exemplified what has been described as a utopian reaction to the crisis phase of the disaster – utopian used in the sense of dedicated, collective, but not necessarily practical responsibility. This involved spontaneous convergence on flood affected areas. The convergence was individual rather than organizational during the crisis phase. It involved massive and spontaneous offering of first human and then material resources to aid flood victims.

At the organizational level, the Brisbane City Council was off the mark quickly to organize financial assistance. This action was followed closely by Australian Government initiatives to provide social workers. The third, the State Government level, was much slower in marshalling its potentially substantial resources. This last statement is restricted of course to comment on non-emergency relief resources. In terms of pure emergency mobilization the State Government input was major, involving as it did the potentially substantial resources of the Civil Defence Network and the police force.

Civil Defence volunteers constituted the advance guard of organizational response in the emergency phase. They were in action as early as Friday, 25 January, and were backed up by police both individually and organizationally. On a co-ordinating level the Civil Defence Organization, theoretically at least, directed all emergency resources including armed forces units released by the Australian Government.

Meanwhile in the early emergency phase widespread community response was mobilized at grassroots level. The main organizational input here came from existent

religious, community service and welfare bodies, with the church and welfare groups taking leading roles. In the initial period chaos and confusion resulted from complete lack of preparation for a disaster of the magnitude being experienced. At that time it was these grassroots existent bodies which rallied most effectively to meet safety and survival needs of flood victims. Other existent bodies mobilized locally, for the most part without external direction or support. Their main work involved provision of shelter, food and clothing. Organizational premises were used as emergency relief centres. Later these provided a focal mobilization and distribution point, in what James Taylor (1972) has described as the cornucopia phenomenon of disaster emergency phases.

In this phase of social response to the physical crisis group behaviour, even under the most difficult conditions of emotional and physical stress, and mobilization chaos, could be seen as intrinsically altruistic, as individuals suspended normal activities and roles to respond to flood victims' needs; organizations re-oriented similarly. Response of this nature was part and parcel of utopian reactions in the emergency phase. This utopian reaction is also clearly evident in the widespread formation of emergent bodies which frequently dissolved as rapidly as they formed. The dissipation of these bodies was directly related to the formation of relief centres. Those established in private homes and on commercial premises were the soonest dissolved.

The next social response phase, that of reclamation was in essence a transitional phase. Here a considerable winding down of utopian and associated convergence response and activity could be identified. The reclamation phase was also marked by changing priorities in meeting needs. By February just eight days after flooding began resource mobilization no longer concentrated on meeting basic survival needs of flood victims. With the emergency phase over attention was directed to needs caused by the physical and material disaster impact. This was the phase where victims could reclaim property and begin to assess loss.

In this phase were sown the seeds of long-term adverse effects on flood victims. It was the phase from the victims' viewpoint where delayed shock would begin to take effect. This delayed shock was heightened by a lessening and eventual disintegration of utopian reactions characteristic of the emergency response phase. Flood victims returned to homes either partially or totally destroyed by flood waters. The sense of community spirit, the emotional "high" of rescue and evacuation drama vanished. Non-victims tended to return to normal occupations and self-interest. The initial cornucopian supply of kindly helpers and material resources dwindled. Victims came face to face with the practical personal effects of the disaster. With this unpleasant reality came a host of new emotional and financial problems.

In this phase the first clear evidence of planning and organization of resource mobilization and distribution can be identified. At this point the organizational response was one of pausing to take breath. By this time formal relief centres had been established by both State and Local Governments. The State Government centres were primarily intended to facilitate financial relief while the Local Government centres were a co-operative establishment effort wth an emergent organization known initially as the Central Flood Relief Unit. It later reformed and re-organized as the Queensland Disaster Welfare Committee. Relief centres established under the joint co-operation of the existent government and emergent representative bodies provided a whole range of relief services. These began to assume definite structure and direction after February.

The third social response phase we can describe as the rehabilitation phase. By the beginning of this phase, from about 15 February, the utopian reaction to the disaster crisis at grassroots community level had virtually disappeared. This is evident from the findings that a significant percentage of helper group operations had disbanded by mid-February. This included all State Government relief centres leaving only those jointly established by the Brisbane City Council, and the emergent body the QDWC to provide relief centre and outreach services to flood victims.

Many emergent relief centres had also closed, usually by withdrawal of permission for use of premises in relief centre capacities. Cornucopian response had been reduced from a tidal outpouring to a trickle. Volunteer relief workers associated with both existent and emergent organizations had been forced to withdraw relief services through other commitments to normal occupation and families.

Notwithstanding, many organizations continued to provide assistance in the post-crisis phase. This is true of government bodies which loaned, contracted, or seconded social welfare personnel to work under the direction and employment of the QDWC. Here, however, employer organizations of social and welfare workers exhibited activites that at times worked directly against effective utilization of the services of the seconded workers.

Supervision by seconding organizations was frequently exercised over seconded employees — an exercise of supervisory authority which produced conflicting loyalties within emergent organizations. In this context conflict or at best lack of co-operation between existent and emergent bodies seriously jeopardized the effectiveness of mid to long term relief centre services. Since seconded social and welfare workers could be withdrawn from a particular location at a moment's notice by their normal employers, continuity of services was impossible; in a number of instances this clearly affected the quality of the services provided. Outgoing seconded personnel frequently did not have time even to brief incoming workers. Changes in the manner

in which QDWC policy was implemented were frequent. These in turn rebounded adversely on ongoing attempts to foster self-help programmes in liaison with specific community groups and their leaders. By contrast with the insistence on the part of some organizations for continuing jurisdiction over their seconded staff, there were voluntary welfare bodies which continued to support QDWC co-ordination of relief centre activities in the rehabilitation phase by no strings attached secondment of social and welfare workers to QDWC.

A very brief outline of the nature and pattern of community response to the Brisbane flood has been provided. We have seen that both existent and emergent groups acted to provide assistance for flood affected persons. I have suggested, on the basis of the data we collected, that there was a considerable degree of confusion, lack of co-ordination, and a relatively transient air about much of what was done, to such an extent that a number of groups disappeared or changed function shortly after the crisis phase of the disaster had passed.

In general, we need to ask how effective was the overall disaster relief effort in the 1974 flood situation. It is easy of course to be wise after the event. There is perhaps not always time in the stress of a disaster situation to weigh up issues and make rational and careful decisions, but it is clear from our interviews and examination of documentary material that a more effective response to the flood situation might have been possible.

Politics has been described as the art of the possible. Had this theory been translated into practice during the Brisbane flood, we might not have found that lack of co-ordination and direction were the major problems in providing disaster relief. It is our considered opinion that the most glaring co-ordination problems stemmed directly from non-co-operation of the various echelons of government. Lack of co-ordination, direction, and co-operation was rife on both inter- and intra-government levels. There is evidence to suggest that left to their own devices individual ministers and departmental representatives of the three levels of government might have fostered and maintained co-ordination and co-operation.

There were initial grounds for optimism that co-ordination would be extensive and continuous across the entire body politic. In the early stages of the disaster Australian Government ministers and departmental representatives acted promptly to mobilize emergency welfare services and direct financial resources. National personnel were placed at the disposal of Queensland authorities, both State and Local. It seemed that every effort was being made to minimise potential areas of political conflict and propaganda. However, co-operation was to be short lived.

Problems arose at the penultimate level of political power structures. Day-to-day relationships between the various government leaders had been, to put it mildly, sensitive for some time before the flood. And in the post-crisis reclamation phase the short-lived co-operation was seriously disrupted. What went wrong?

On 31 January volunteers, the Army, State Government and Brisbane City Council were co-operating in a massive clean up operation. Resources were co-ordinated at State Police headquarters with the help of the Armed Services. But a few days later at the start of the post-crisis reclamation phase disaster relief co-ordination had begun to assume distinctly political overtones. This was reflected in a major meeting to discuss flood relief. Held in the Brisbane City Hall, it was attended by three ministers of the Australian Government, the Lord Mayor of Brisbane and Vice Mayor. The Queensland Government was not represented, nor did any member of the ruling coalition parties from the State parliament attend. The opposition leader and two other ALP members were present.

Thus at all levels of government the only elected representatives of the people to attend this important meeting were from the one political party. A strange state of affairs in the face of a great natural disaster which had affected the lives of people in all ranks of society and assuredly of all political persuasions. A week later the disintegration of the fragile peace between State and Local Government was complete, and the State Government formally withdrew from City Hall based relief activities.

Paradoxically on the same day, the Prime Minister, the Deputy Prime Minister, the State Premier, the Treasurer, and the Lord Mayor met to discuss flood relief co-ordination. According to newspaper reports, both the Lord Mayor and the Premier expressed satisfaction at co-ordination between their respective governments, the National Government ministries and agencies. Hansard Reports of the March 1974 flood debate in State parliament, however, tell a very different story.

Chaos and conflict may be understandable in a crisis emergency phase of a disaster. Once the disaster impact has peaked however, it is perhaps surprising to find a major co-ordinated relief effort still absent. In Brisbane we saw the establishment of separate unco-ordinated relief centres almost in opposition to one another by the State and Local Governments. In some instances State and Local relief centres operated almost side by side in the one area. Duplication of damage and need assessment and the presence of competing relief funds caused conflict and confusion.

Despite the political overtones of much of the community response which clearly caused major problems in effectively delivering assistance to flood affected persons, the overall community response, as our analysis of the material reveals, was

massive. But what of the other side of the coin? To what extent did flood affected persons see themselves as assisted by, and being in a position to make use of, services that were provided by both existent and emergent organizations?

A separate survey we conducted of flood affected persons enables some answers to be provided to these questions. We were concerned in part of the interview with flood affected persons to determine the nature of the assistance they had received and where it came from.

In the immediate post-impact period when first leaving their homes, people typically went to friends, neighbours or relatives. Less than ten percent reported going to a relief centre. For the most part people found temporary accommodation in their own or in a neighbouring suburb. Very few people went to their particular post-evacuation accommodation because they had nowhere else to go. Most exercised a choice; they appeared to have made their decision about where to go after consideration of factors of compatibility with their hosts, and proximity to their own homes.

During the period in temporary accommodation about half the people surveyed experienced problems of a variety of kinds. Most commonly reported were difficulties encountered in trying to manage without personal belongings, toiletries and medical health problems, which people associated with the flood. They dealt with these problems with assistance from others, again mainly relatives and friends. About half the sample reported that they did not seek assistance from an emergency relief centre. The most common reason among those who did contact a relief centre was to obtain application forms for financial assistance. Some went to the centres for food, grocery items, and about a tenth obtained clothing from them.

For most people clean up began within five days of the flood peak in their area. Still in temporary accommodation, they returned to their flooded homes with friends and relatives to help them. Many were also helped at this stage by members of various existent organizations such as the Salvation Army, church groups, service clubs and by other people from the emergent organizations whom they did not know.

It is worth noting that although one third of the sample said that they had been helped by members of organizations such as the above, when asked whom they found most helpful, only eight percent mentioned organizations; a much greater proportion, over one quarter, mentioned friends and relatives. Relief centres did not loom large in the perceptions of flood affected persons. In both Brisbane and Ipswich around 20 percent of those interviewed did not know the location of any emergency relief centre in their area. These figures are somewhat surprising since in all areas in which

our interviews were conducted, except Jindalee, at least one, and in some cases several, public relief centres were set up in immediate response to the perceived needs of affected people.

Our data reveal a clear picture of flood affected people seeking assistance especially in the immediate post-impact stage, from people they knew well, in this sense from relatives and friends. Knowing that familiar relationships were intensified provides a key to understanding the observed under-utilization of public sources of help, those specifically disaster oriented services such as relief centres.

In contrast with turning to relatives or friends for help, people seeking assistance from a relief centre are confronted with yet another aspect of an unfamiliar and disrupted environment. Such structures are in themselves clear indicators of society's definition of the situation as an abnormal one. This crucial difference between the reassuring familiar environment and the unfamiliar public help giving environment accounts importantly for the differential utilization of sources of help, and points to the possible need for attempting to restructure ways of giving public help to disaster victims.

The challenge for emergency welfare planners is how to provide the necessary services in ways that can be utilized by affected people as a matter of course as they go about restructuring for themselves a familiar social and physical environment.

Cyclone Tracy in Darwin

A little less than 12 months after the Brisbane flood the city of Darwin at the top end of Australia was to experience a natural disaster of at least equal magnitude. In the early hours of Christmas Day 1974 Darwin was devastated by Cyclone Tracy, in what was probably the worst natural disaster this country has every known. It has been estimated that of more than 8,000 homes in Darwin approximately 5,000 were destroyed or damaged beyond repair. Oniy about 500 remained intact, and continuously inhabitable.

Many thousands of people were denied proper shelter from the tropical down-pours which persisted during the wet season. There was no water, power, or sanitation, and for a time Darwin's inhabitants because of the breakdown in communications systems were unable to make contact with the outside world.

Literally, within a matter of hours there commenced the most extensive evacuation process ever carried out in Australia. Begun by spontaneous departure of families in private vehicles, it got into full swing as a gigantic air lift which lasted from

dawn on Boxing Day until New Year's Eve. During this period the population of Darwin plummeted from 45,000 to 11,000. About 23,000 people were flown to the various Australian capital cities, the nearest of which was Adelaide, about 3,000 kilometres to the south.

The decision to evacuate the population was prompted by the authorities' concern over the magnitude of the problem with which they were confronted. There was the necessity to house and feed thousands of homeless people, to provide care for the sick, and to anticipate the possible consequences of interrupted sewerage facilities and water and electric power supplies. In addition, there was the task of cleaning up and re-establishing normal social activities. A partial solution to these problems was seen in massive evacuation.

However, one of the effects of the evacuation was to introduce a whole class of factors which could be expected to aggravate the personal, that is the psychological and social, effects of the primary impact of the cyclone. Those evacuated within five days of the cyclone were dispersed into the larger communities of other Australian cities. A little less than two thirds of those we surveyed went straight from Darwin to family or friends, but many found it difficult to maintain contact either with people in Darwin or with other evacuees.

The evacuation almost invariably involved splitting family groups. Women with children, elderly, pregnant and sick people were evacuated, and able-bodied men were left behind. It also removed the vast majority of the population from the benefits of the therapeutic community in the aftermath of the disaster. Evacuation imposed hardships on people who remained in Darwin as well as on the evacuees. There was less man power to effect cleaning up and rebuilding, many stayers were also separated from family and friends, and the amount of community support they received for their tasks was markedly reduced. In all, both evacuees and stayers suffered a severe disintegration of their social networks.

Social and psychological effects of Cyclone Tracy and of the evacuation which followed it were the subjects of a study undertaken by members of the Anthropology and Sociology and Social Work Departments at the University of Queensland. The study was funded again by the Australian Government through the one time Social Welfare Commission. (Chamberlain, *et al.,* 1979).

In an early report of that study presented at a symposium on natural hazards in Canberra in May 1976, (Western and Milne, 1979) I argued that the conclusion seemed inescapable, that across the board one effect of the evacuation was to reinforce and increase the levels of stress and anxiety Darwin residents already experienced as a result of their confrontation with Cyclone Tracy. Removed from familiar

surroundings, with social relations disrupted, suffering considerable physical loss, transported to areas with which they were quite unfamiliar, and frequently housed in barrack-like quarters, it is not surprising that those who were evacuated suffered more severely than those who remained in familiar surroundings no matter the extent of this latter group's loss. It might have been concluded from these findings that the community's proposed cure was worse than the complaint.

Further analyses of the data since that time have enabled some elaboration of the initial findings to be made (Western and Doube, 1979). It is clear that the most important direct contributor to the stress experienced by those exposed to Cyclone Tracy was the disruption of a familiar and valued social environment, or its complement being separated from immediate family and friends and from the easy going social and leisure activites which were such a valued part of life in Darwin before the cyclone. This pattern of results applied both to those who stayed and those who were evacuated, however the degree of disruption was far greater for evacuees, especially those who did not return to Darwin, than it was for stayers. We would expect evacuees, therefore, to have suffered more stress than the stayers on this account. And indeed the data supported this expectation.

To the extent that familiar elements of the social environment are lacking following exposure to natural disaster stress is likely to be experienced. Cyclone Tracy disrupted the physical environment and also the social environment to the extent that normal functions could not continue, but evacuation caused a far greater disruption for both evacuees and stayers by separating family and friends. The evacuation also removed people from Darwin where there remained familiar elements of the environment to re-orient towards. That this re-orientation was successful in reducing or obviating stress is witnessed by the consistently lower scores of the stayers on most of the stress causing agents we included in our interview schedule.

That some scale of evacuation was needed is not being questioned, but the question which has to be asked is whether the indiscriminate methods of evacuating residents vast distance with the sole aim of population reduction might not in a similar future disaster be modified by some form of selection. That a number of those who left in the emergency might safely have been retained is suggested by the convergence effect which followed, controlled as it was by an entry permit system, resulting in an influx of southern newcomers mainly attracted by the prospect of high wages.

Whether to evacuate natural hazard victims clearly remains a problem. In Darwin evacuation was seen as urgent and necessary at the time, but since that time questions have been raised about its consequences. Short-term emergency needs and longer-term consequences both for individual well being and the continuation of the community

need to be weighed against each other more carefully than they have in the past when decisions have to be made about evacuation. The operation may be successful, but it is unfortunate if the patient dies.

Victims and Helpers

I would want to argue that in both the cases considered we see reflected very similar views about the nature of disaster affected individuals, and those who are to provide them with assistance. These views markedly influence the strategies that are employed in the provision of relief measures. Essentially, victims are seen as bewildered, dependent, resourceless people, without possessions or homes, and in desperate need of help from others. On the other hand, helpers are portrayed as capable, sensible, resourceful and well organized persons, unhindered by emotional distress but showing considerable compassion for the victims.

In the 1976 Canberra Conference Patricia Short spelled out these images in her paper "Victims and Helpers" very clearly (Short, 1979). These images colour community response to disaster and inform the strategies to disaster relief that are employed. These strategies and the images of victims and helpers which underlie them were probably most finely sketched in Darwin with the decision to evacuate the bulk of the population. But they also informed the strategies that were developed in Brisbane to provide relief in the flood situation.

Our data from both studies reveal quite clearly that victims are not resourceless. The initial moves for rehabilitation and recovery were made, among a significant proportion of both groups (over 50 percent in each case), either independently of outside sources or with the assistance of friends and relatives. Existence or emergent groups were clearly significant in the initial phases of recovery but the disaster affected person displayed a resourcefulness that the images held of him in the wider community would deny.

Short makes another important point in arguing that a victim oriented approach to planning disaster recovery is not sufficient. She argues that if the total social setting is taken into account it must be realised that firstly the needs of directly affected victims should be met, and there will be no quarrel with this, clearly. But she also suggests that the motives of other affected persons – those who converge on the impact area – should also be taken into account in planning for disaster relief. She suggests that in some instances it may be accurate to judge the helping process as having been reversed, with the victim, helper, and the helper, victim.

Data from the surveys also raised questions about the functions of relief centres. A great deal of energy and time was spent on running the relief centres. We gained the impression that they were hives of activity, and yet it is clear that they were under-utilized by flood affected people. One of their main functions might have been therefore to organize convergence on the impact areas by centralizing and institutionalizing it, thus meeting the needs of helpers to be engaged in activities which they saw to be relevant to helping flood affected persons, irrespective of whether or not their services were utilized by this group.

Data from both studies revealed that at times those providing relief suffered from severe physical exhaustion, emotional involvement in the disaster, and felt that their judgment was often impaired. Yet curiously in a large number of instances they refused to relinquish the positions they were holding to others who were physically fresher and in many ways more able to make relevant and appropriate decisions.

It is clear from our data that helpers and victims alike suffer trauma and stress as a consequence of the impact of a natural hazard, and planning effective strategies in this situation must take the needs of both into account, recognizing that victims are seldom resourceless, and helpers seldom entirely resourceful.

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