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Disaster Sociologists Study What Went Wrong in the Response to the Hurricanes, but Will Policy Makers Listen?

By [DAVID GLENN](#)

In mid-September, John A. Barnshaw, a graduate student at the University of Delaware's Disaster Research Center, made his way to Houston and spent five days in the shelters in and around the Astrodome. He wanted to learn how families from New Orleans were making decisions about whether to return to their city.

It was not a pleasant week. Some of the 46 families Mr. Barnshaw interviewed had been through miserable experiences, and told stories of being forced by floodwaters into their attics or onto their rooftops. Almost all of them were still trying to locate missing friends or relatives. "It was emotionally labor-intensive," he said. "These people had lost their communities, lost their possessions, and were assuming the worst."

Mr. Barnshaw began his research just two weeks after Hurricane Katrina struck. His university accelerated its usual

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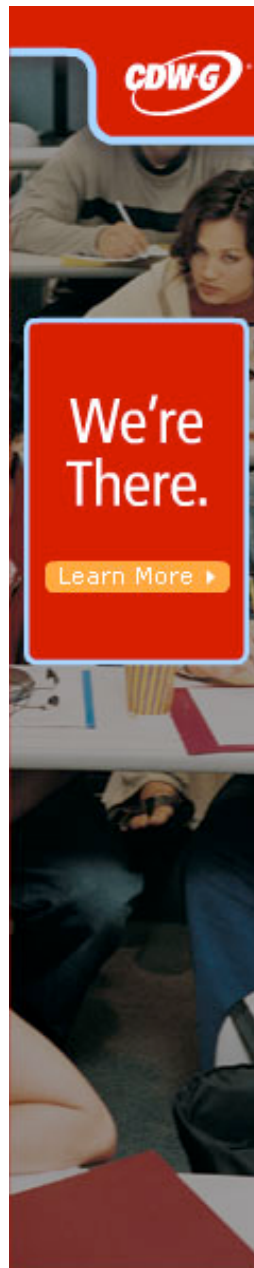
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review process for research involving human subjects. He also took advantage of the University of Colorado at Boulder's quick-response program, which provides small travel grants to researchers who want to gather "perishable data" in the wake of a disaster.

At least 20 other scholars have also received grants from Colorado to study Katrina's aftermath. And they are only the advance scouts of what promises to be an army of social scientists in the regions hit by Katrina and Rita. (The day after Mr. Barnshaw returned from Houston, seven of his Delaware colleagues flew to Louisiana.)

Like surfers who wait for storm swells, sociologists of disaster need to take advantage of rare moments. Some of the lessons sociologists hope to learn on the Gulf Coast this fall are practical ones -- first and foremost, how to avoid the abysmal organizational failures that apparently cost so many lives in New Orleans.

But some scholars also hope to provide insights into fundamental questions of cooperation, social order, and human resilience. As government agencies sort through the chaos that struck New Orleans and Houston this month, some disaster sociologists fear that the agencies will draw exactly the wrong lessons from the catastrophes.

Chaos or Cracked Lens?

One of the central tenets of disaster sociology is that most communities can, to a large degree, spontaneously heal themselves. People affected by disaster obviously often need resources from the outside world -- food, water, shelter. But that does not mean that disaster victims also need outside direction and coordination, most scholars in the field say.

A prime example of spontaneous cooperation was the extraordinarily successful evacuation of Lower Manhattan during the September 11 attacks. James M. Kendra, an assistant professor of emergency administration and planning at the University of North Texas, estimates that nearly half a million people fled Manhattan on boats -- and he emphasizes that the waterborne evacuation was a self-organized volunteer process that could probably never have been planned on a government official's clipboard.

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"Various kinds of private companies, dinner-cruise boats, people with their own personal watercraft, the Coast Guard, the harbor pilots -- in very short order, they managed to organize this evacuation," Mr. Kendra said.

The evacuation in New Orleans, of course, was not so smooth. Disaster sociologists say that they are eager to determine how much chaos and looting actually occurred there, and how much was conjured through rumor and news-media exaggeration.

"The panic myth is a consistent one," said Russell R. Dynes, a professor emeritus of sociology at Delaware, who was among the founders, in 1963, of the Disaster Research Center at Ohio State University. (The center moved to Delaware in 1985.) "The idea of social breakdown -- I'm even pretty damn skeptical of that," he said. "One of the problems here is TV. If you take a film clip and you run it for five hours, you create a notion that something's happening."

In 40 years of disaster research, Mr. Dynes said, he and his colleagues have found very few instances of true social breakdown.

The false idea of postdisaster panic grows partly from simple semantic confusion, said Michael K. Lindell, a psychologist who directs the Hazard Reduction and Recovery Center at Texas A&M University at College Station. "A reporter will stick a microphone in someone's face and ask, 'Well, what did you do when the explosion went off?' And the person will answer, 'I panicked.' And then they'll proceed to describe a very logical, rational action in which they protected themselves and looked out for people around them. What they mean by 'panic' is just 'I got very frightened.' But when you say 'I panicked,' it reinforces this idea that there's a thin veneer of civilization, which vanishes after a disaster, and that you need outside authorities and the military to restore order. But really, people usually do very well for themselves, thank you."

At least one scholar, however, tentatively believes that there actually was serious social breakdown in some parts of New Orleans. "One possible explanation," said John H. Sorensen, a sociologist who serves as a senior researcher at the Oak Ridge National Laboratory, "is that this is perhaps the first American disaster since the 1906 [San Francisco] earthquake where a whole urban area has been severely damaged." The sheer scale of the destruction of physical infrastructure, he suggests, might have made it impossible for the usual sorts of spontaneous cooperative behavior to emerge.

"It gives one pause," Mr. Sorensen said. "The sum of social-science knowledge about disasters is really based on a number of smaller events. Whether or not that extant knowledge is really

applicable to large-scale regional disasters is certainly something that I've been thinking about during the last few weeks."

A related question is whether some police officers and rescue workers in Louisiana abandoned their posts, as local officials and some news accounts have suggested. Gary A. Kreps, a professor emeritus of sociology at the College of William and Mary, wonders whether that might have occurred because some workers were concerned with protecting their own families. "I'm skeptical that, over all, role abandonment was a major problem," Mr. Kreps said, "but let's see what we learn from more systematic research."

Patterns of Breakdown

Although scholars disagree about whether social breakdown occurred during Katrina, they are unanimous about the question of organizational breakdown. It will take months to determine, however, exactly how and why Louisiana's local and federal preparedness plans collapsed.

Havidán Rodríguez, director of the Delaware center, led a group of scholars who spent several days this month at the Federal Emergency Management Agency's Joint Field Office in Baton Rouge, La. "More than 2,000 FEMA employees have been relocated there," he said. "It's a massive operation. We were able to get access to the building and to ask questions about the evacuation, warning, and preparedness plans." The group will take the raw data back to the Delaware center and start looking for patterns. In a few months, when the floodwaters have receded and the Baton Rouge command center is less stressed, the scholars plan to return to conduct more-formal interviews.

The fieldwork was not easy to arrange, said Joseph Trainor, a Ph.D. candidate in sociology at Delaware. "The area is inundated right now," he said. "There are no hotel rooms, no camping sites, no RV-parking spaces for a hundred-mile radius around Baton Rouge." Mr. Trainor and three of his colleagues stayed with a professor at Louisiana State University; three other Delaware students slept on the floor of a Baptist church in Mississippi.

The Delaware team's study will not report any conclusions for quite some time. But some other disaster scholars say that they already have a strong suspicion of what went wrong in Louisiana. It was a mistake, they say, for the Federal Emergency Management Agency to be folded into the Department of Homeland Security. (FEMA is one of 22 agencies that were incorporated into the new department in 2003. Proponents of the merger argued that the new structure would create better coordination and oversight.)

"The structure of the Department of Homeland Security is not conducive to good emergency management," said William L.

Waugh Jr., a professor of public policy at Georgia State University. "It isn't even conducive to homeland security." Within the department, Mr. Waugh said, FEMA and other small agencies have not successfully competed for money and attention because they do not mix well with what he calls the "gun-toting" culture of the intelligence and law-enforcement agencies that dominate the department. "They have a propensity to have small groups of loyalists in a room making decisions, closed off from everyone else. No experts on what they're actually making decisions about."

Beyond that insular culture, some critics say, the department is also hamstrung by a "command and control" mentality that is ill suited to the realities of disasters.

"One of the things that's very consistently found," said Delaware's Mr. Dynes, "is that in a disaster, decisions are made at lower levels than they are made normally because you're confronted with a situation, and you can't get 10 of your colleagues to have a staff meeting to decide what to do. You've got to make a decision. So any decision in any organization is going to be made at lower levels than in normal times. And so the idea that anyone at the top could command and control all this activity is idiotic."

Mr. Lindell, of Texas A&M, agreed, saying he feared that policy makers in Washington had taken the wrong lessons from Katrina. The employees of the Department of Homeland Security, he said, "are mostly drawn from the Department of Defense, the Department of Justice, and from police departments. They're firmly committed to a command-and-control model." (Just a few days ago, President Bush may have pushed the process one step further: He suggested that the Department of Defense take control of relief efforts after major natural disasters.)

The habits of mind cultivated by military and law-enforcement personnel have their virtues, Mr. Lindell said, but they don't always fit disaster situations. "They come from organizations where they're dealing with an intelligent adversary. So they want to keep information secret -- it's only shared on a need-to-know basis. But emergency managers and medical personnel want information shared as widely as possible because they have to rely on persuasion to get people to cooperate. The problem with putting FEMA into the Department of Homeland Security is that it's like an organ transplant. What we've seen over the past four years is basically organ rejection."

Mr. Sorensen cautioned, however, that as they criticize the federal government's errors, scholars should not lose sight of local officials' follies. "Evacuation requires good planning, and also good implementation of plans," the Oak Ridge scientist said. "It seems like the latter was the major reason why more attention wasn't paid to evacuating people who did not have access to transportation. This should not have been a surprise. The problem

of evacuating New Orleans has been a known problem for some time."

Static and Traffic

One of the oldest and thickest branches of disaster research is "warning-response theory" -- the study of how people react to public announcements about potential threats. In 1990 Mr. Sorensen and a colleague developed a six-stage model of warning response: First, vulnerable people must hear the warning; second, they must understand its contents; third, they must believe that it is credible and accurate; fourth, they must personalize the warning as applying to themselves; fifth, they will observe whether their friends and neighbors are taking protective action; and, finally, they will take protective action themselves.

As Katrina made its way across the Gulf of Mexico, government agencies and the news media did not put those scholarly insights into practice adequately, Mr. Sorensen said. "My guess is that they really did not do a good job of conveying to people what a flood in New Orleans would mean," he said. "Like: 'You will be in your attic for five days.' Or: 'The only safe place may be on the roof of your house.' And I really didn't hear that coming out of the national coverage."

Mr. Lindell said that Katrina was only the latest of several government failures to make use of warning-response scholarship. In 2002 he participated in a workshop that was intended to suggest improvements to the Office of Homeland Security's color-coded alert system, which many disaster researchers believe is hopelessly vague. "The panel included the principal university researchers on warnings, and also people from local-, state-, and federal-government agencies that had years and years of experience with warnings," Mr. Lindell said. "And we spent three days working really hard, recognizing that they'd already come out with their color system, but trying to suggest ways to make it more directly useful to people. And in the end they basically said, Nah, we're not going to change our minds. We're going to stick with what we've got."

Another problem is that evacuation models have often suffered from false assumptions, he said. Traffic engineers often assume that people will depart at a steady rate, 24 hours a day. But when people actually flee hurricanes -- just as when they leave for vacations -- they are much more likely to leave in the morning or early evening, Mr. Lindell said.

For several years, he has been working on a computer program designed to help traffic engineers and emergency managers handle mass evacuations. His program would allow emergency managers to track a hurricane as it moved and recalculate evacuation times based on current conditions. Unfortunately for

people who found themselves stuck on Interstate 10 outside of Houston as Hurricane Rita approached, the software is still being tested and refined.

Scenario Versus Reality

The grim events in New York and New Orleans have given new impetus to disaster research. "When I was in graduate school, my mentor wanted me to downplay the fact that I was a disaster sociologist," said Alice Fothergill, an assistant professor of sociology at the University of Vermont who is preparing to study the recent hurricanes' effects on children in Louisiana. "There was a sort of feeling that it wasn't so well respected. But today I don't feel that way at all." Administrators and colleagues at Vermont, Ms. Fothergill said, have been highly supportive of her interest in disaster zones.

Even as the field gains new respect, however, some scholars worry that too many post-September 11 resources are being poured into "scenario" research at the expense of studies of real-world disasters. "I think a lot of the work that's being funded to do scenario-based research to elicit people's intended behaviors in a host of possible terrorist scenarios is largely a waste of money," Mr. Sorensen said. Far more valuable, he said, are studies of actual disaster behavior, like Mr. Kendra's examination of the waterborne evacuations on September 11.

Mr. Lindell said that a former student of his recently observed a major federal drill that imagined a chemical attack in Connecticut. "On the first day of the incident, the authorities told people to shelter in place" -- that is, to stay in their homes, offices, or schools. "And by the third day of the incident, they still had not provided any new information. The assumption was that people would put themselves into suspended animation until they were told to reactivate themselves. And my student kept saying -- he was only an observer, but he kept tapping people on the shoulder and saying, Don't you think you ought to do something about this? If you've had any experience with people in disasters, you know that they're not going to sit there and wait for three days. And he couldn't get anyone's attention."

Some government agencies pay close attention to scholarly studies of disaster, Mr. Sorensen said, but others do not. "Research doesn't routinely get translated into practical guidance," he said. "In fact, we know that a lot of the guidance that is produced by the federal government is often at odds with the social-science literature. That's because it's done by consulting firms that don't have people who are academically trained. But it's variable -- there are some good folks out there who function as translators to the public sector, and then you have your hacks out to make money. And there's no mechanism to regulate it."

"All of the money is going into homeland security," Mr. Lindell said. "The solution to the problem in the levees in New Orleans would have been to take all the chemical-protection suits that have been purchased for little tiny towns that are too small to be targets and too far away to assist, and fill those chemical-protection suits with sand, and use those to fill the levees. It would have been a better use."

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