

**International Relations and Disasters:
Illustrating the Relevance of the Discipline to the
Study and Profession of Emergency Management**

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Abstract

The following chapter explores why International Relations is a vital discipline for the study and profession of emergency management. It discusses past, current and potential contributions of this area of academic investigation, and describes its view of disasters and vulnerability. The chapter provides recommendations for future research and mentions how to improve the practice of emergency management from the standpoint of this discipline. Major challenges and opportunities identified in the chapter include the importance of understanding the threat of terrorism and the need for individuals, groups and nations to work together to resolve mutual disaster and development problems at the global level.

Introduction

International Relations, also known as International Politics or International Studies, is a discipline that investigates the political affairs of nations and the interactions among their multi-lateral institutions at the global level. The most common issue addressed by scholars in this discipline is interstate conflict. Dougherty and Pfaltzgraff (1990, p. 1) note, for example, that the central question to be addressed is the cause or causes of war. Others, including Wright (1942), Morgenthau (1948), Waltz (1959)

Bueno de Mesquita (1980) and Vasquez (1990) also agree that hostility and peace are the key subjects of this important field of study. The goal of these and other scholars of International Relations is to seek an understanding of the malady of war in order to find ways to prevent its occurrence.

However, it is worth noting that International Relations also incorporates topics other than interstate conflicts. Viotti and Kauppi (1993, p. 1) remind us:

despite the adjective international, the field is concerned with much more than relations between or among states. Other actors, such as international organizations, multinational corporations, and terrorist groups, are now all part of what could more correctly be termed world politics. Studies have also focused on factors internal to a state, such as bureaucratic governmental coalitions, interest groups, presidents, and politburos. The discipline ranges from balance of power politics and economic structures at the international level to the ideological and perceptual predispositions of individual leaders.

Related topics of study therefore include international regimes, epistemic communities and foreign policy. For these and additional reasons, International Relations has a close relation to Political Science, History, Comparative Politics and other disciplines in the social sciences.

Keeping the above in mind, some may question the relevance of International Relations to the study of disasters. And, it is certainly true that the theorists and researchers interested in global affairs have not traditionally been involved in Disaster Studies. In fact, with a few exceptions it is difficult to find explicit contributions on the topic from academicians in this field. In spite of this truism, it is worth pointing out that many emergency managers and disaster scholars have been educated in this area. Wayne

Blanchard,¹ Frances Edwards,² William L. Waugh Jr.,³ and Richard A. Bissell⁴ are only a few of the many examples that can be given. This begs the question: why would it be beneficial to have this type of background if one researches disasters or serves as an emergency manager?

The following chapter explores this question, and attempts to illustrate why International Relations is and must be an integral part of Disaster Studies. It discusses the potential contributions of this field and describes its view of disasters and vulnerability. The chapter concludes with recommendations for future research and mentions ways to improve the practice of emergency management.

The Link Between International Relations and Disasters

International Relations has a surprisingly close connection to catastrophic events and the emergency management profession. This proximity is evident on numerous grounds. First, Disaster Studies and emergency management are in many ways the outgrowth of global affairs (Drabek 1986, p. 2; Quarantelli 1987). Just as International Relations emerged as a result of the two World Wars at the beginning and mid-point of the 20th century, disasters likewise became more important to practitioners and scholars during the Cold War era.

After the Nazi and Fascist regimes were pushed back and dismantled in Europe, serious disagreements arose between the two former allies, the United States and Russia.

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There were mutual concerns about devastation on the European continent, and both parties wanted to avert a similar tragedy in the future. But there were significant differences about how this would be accomplished. The United States desired democratic governments and open economic markets, while Russia felt the need to establish communist political and economic systems. Adding to the fray, leaders in the East were fearful of the continued presence of Western military forces in Europe. These opposing viewpoints and misunderstandings became more pronounced, and the Cold War began. Even though this hostile relationship would not lead to direct and total confrontation, it did lead to small proxy skirmishes and long, drawn-out battles in countries throughout the world (e.g., Korea, Vietnam, Nicaragua, Afghanistan, etc.). Complicating the matter, the United States utilized nuclear weapons to end World War II in the Pacific, and Russia developed similar capabilities a few years later. The threat of “mutually assured destruction” reached a pinnacle in the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962.

It was during this period that civil defense, the pre-cursor to emergency management, was born (Drabek and Hoetmer 1991, pp. 9-16). The goal of civil defense was to protect - as far as possible - the government and citizens from the effects of nuclear war. War planners identified ways to evacuate public officials and the American population should missiles be launched from the Soviet Union. Shelter and mass care arrangements were also developed at this time. The proximity of these functions to disasters is readily apparent, and civil defense has had a profound impact on the direction of emergency management in the United States (Quarantelli 1987; Dynes 1994). Interestingly, other countries including Russia were influenced in a similar manner during the Cold War (Porfiriev 1999).

While civil defense was being ingrained in the institutional fiber of the American government, military leaders wondered how the populace would react after a nuclear exchange. Because it would obviously be impossible and unethical to run a test on the humans,⁵ the government looked to scholars for assistance. Millions of dollars were poured into the social sciences (particularly Sociology) and academic institutions (such as the well-known Disaster Research Center) were created to answer the inquiry. Although people's responses to hazards had been studied years before (Prince 1920), scholars were now able to utilize these events to illustrate that victims generally exhibited rational behavior in natural disasters (Fritz and Marks 1954). These findings were shared with military officials, but there has been some reluctance to accept the academic conclusions. For instance, disaster planning and emergency responses have often been based on false assumptions and myths about human behavior (Dynes 1994). Regardless, emergency management and Disaster Studies owe their existence to international affairs (and the positive and negative impacts have been profound and long-lasting).

A second link between International Relations and disasters lies in the area of international organizations. Scholars in this discipline have tried to understand global institutions (such as the League of Nations and United Nations) as well as non-government organizations (NGOs)⁶ involved at the global level. Although the overriding concern of the former institutions has again been the aversion of interstate conflict, these and the later organizations have also focused on issues such as development, trade, education, public health and the environment. There have also been some notable examples of such collectivities operating in the disaster area throughout history. For

⁵ The government did test the performance and physical impact of nuclear weapons on uninhabited ranges in Nevada and on deserted islands in the Pacific.

⁶ NGOs are also known as voluntary agencies (VOLAGs) and private voluntary organizations (PVOs).

instance, the International Relief Union was founded in Italy in 1921 and the United Nations Disaster Relief Organization was established in 1971. Both organizations had the goal of coordinating international assistance to disaster-stricken countries. The Red Cross was initially created to deal with the suffering of soldiers on the battlefield, but this organization has expanded its operations to include disaster services. Today, there are literally thousands of voluntary agencies attempting to prevent and respond to disasters (see <http://www.interaction.org> for examples).

Scholars interested and educated in International Relations have studied the impact of these organizations and have made recommendations to improve their operations. Green (1977), for instance, noted some major shortcomings of the international disaster relief system and offered suggestions for their resolution. Brown (1979) provided a very good initial examination of what the United Nations was doing to deal with disasters and recommended several measures for increased preparedness. MaCalister-Smith (1985) explored the relation of international law to humanitarian assistance. Individual scholars (Kent 1987) and various committees (UNA-USA 1977; CIDA 1979) also described how international actors worked together and suggested what could be done differently to facilitate more timely and effective responses. More recently, there has been a considerable amount of attention given to the difficulty of dealing with complex emergencies⁷ (Minear and Weiss 1995). International Relations thus provides a general picture of international organizations and describes how they may overcome their weaknesses when confronting disasters around the world.

⁷ A complex emergency is multi-dimensional disaster that includes political (e.g., failed state governments), economic (e.g., poverty), social (e.g., ethnic tensions), physical (e.g., drought/famine) and other (e.g., refugee) dimensions. Examples have been evident in Rwanda, Yugoslavia, Afghanistan and Sudan.

Research on security indicates a third relationship between International Relations and disasters. In the past, a great deal of emphasis in International Relations was given to arms control, particularly as it relates to nuclear weapons (Sagan and Waltz 1995). The belief was that international anti-proliferation laws and organizations would do much to avert the negative aspects of nuclear war (e.g., a nuclear winter). In the 1990s, the definition of security expanded, and it was suggested that a nation cannot be totally secure unless it takes into account other issues including natural and other types of disasters (Jacobsen 1994). Today, the focus of many governments has shifted to an almost exclusive view on terrorism (White 2003; Kegley 2003; Pillar 2001; Simonsen and Spindlove 2000). Homeland security, as it is now labeled, incorporates intelligence gathering, anti-proliferation campaigns, border control, infrastructure protection, emergency management and other areas (CPAI 2002). Homeland security is therefore similar in many respects to civil defense (Alexander 2002). But, homeland security focuses on many different enemies (e.g., individuals, groups and states), and covers a much broader spectrum of threats than nuclear war (e.g., dirty bombs, bio-terrorism, agro-terrorism, cyber-terrorism, etc.).

A fourth affiliation of International Relations to disasters is that catastrophic events affect all countries around the world (McEntire 1997). All nations are confronted by hazards, although the range of incidents may be dramatically different in various parts of the world (e.g., tornadoes in the United States, major droughts in African nations, and consistent terrorist attacks in the Middle East). Furthermore, a disaster in one nation may have a devastating impact on other countries. The Chernobyl nuclear accident spread radiation around the world. The Kobe earthquake affected the computer market in the

United States and in other countries. The complex emergency in Rwanda created severe refugee problems in surrounding states. Disasters are consequently problems of international magnitude.

This brings us to the final connection between disasters and International Relations: these disruptive incidents require a global approach (McEntire 1997; Mileti 1999). Scholars have illustrated that the activities in one nation or emanating from the global economic system may increase risk in other countries (Oliver-Smith 1994). For instance, Union Carbide (a corporation based in the United States) was to blame for the chemical release in Bhopal, India that killed at least 5,000 people. And, since most disasters occur in developing nations and because these countries are least able to deal with their adverse consequences, collaborative efforts must be made toward disaster reduction (McEntire 1997; McEntire 2002; McEntire 2003a). This is especially true in terms of the environmental and development challenges that are jeopardizing the survival of humanity on our planet.

Contributions of the Discipline

If we accept the premise that International Relations is related to disasters, it follows that we should inquire about the actual or potential contributions of this field in this area. It can be easily argued that International Relations has the potential to provide a number of lessons for Disaster Studies. First, students interested in International Relations have spent a great deal of time investigating decision making in times of crisis. Starting with Allison's thorough exposition (1971) on the Cuban Missile Crisis, there has been a long legacy of research in this area. Other excellent examples of this type of

research have been provided by Janis (1972) and Jervis (1976). Obviously, the findings about rational decision making, bureaucratic politics/procedures, groupthink and misperception are equally applicable to natural disasters. Decision making is a major problem in disasters, but the lessons from International Relations have yet to be fully applied in emergency management.

A second finding in International Relations that could be applied to disasters is from the study of regimes and epistemic communities. In the late 1980s, International Relations theorists began to counter the assumption that cooperation is impossible in our “anarchic” world. It was illustrated that countries could work together to resolve mutual concerns and challenges (Krasner 1983). The positive impact of international organizations, as well as scholars and policy experts, was uncovered in various subject areas (e.g., arms control, trade, environment). Toward the end of the 1980s, a group of scholars and practitioners met to discuss the disturbing rise in the occurrence and impact of disasters. As a result, the 1990s was dedicated as the United Nations International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction. Although progress was constrained during the first half of the decade because of its technocratic approach to disasters,⁸ there can be little doubt that this recently created regime has brought more attention to a growing problem. Progress has been made in many areas, but there is undoubtedly much more that needs to be done within this circle of policy experts. Ironically, Disaster Studies has not yet grasped the impact of this epistemic community on international disaster management.

⁸ The Yokohama Strategy and International Strategy for Disaster Reduction have corrected the mistakes and limitations evident in earlier international disaster reduction policies.

A third potential area of contribution is from International Relations' recent discussions about epistemology (see Lapid 1989; McEntire and Marshall 2003). International Relations is a relatively young discipline, and Disaster Studies may glean important insight about theory development from this newly established field of investigation. When scholars started to dedicate time and energy to International Relations, there was a heated debate about realist and idealist explanations of global affairs. Many scholars assumed that war was an inevitable feature of the international system, but others disagreed with this set of dismal assumptions. A few decades later, attention shifted to methodological strategies. Some researchers preferred a rigid and quantitative approach while others relied on historical interpretations and in-depth explanations of unique case studies. In recent years, professors of International Relations have critically examined the merit of theoretical values, hypothetical assumptions, and academic conclusions. Disaster Studies is undergoing a similar, but unrecognized and dramatically compressed transition. It has radically shifted its explanation of disaster causes, moving from "acts of God" to the "social construction of disasters" (McEntire 2001). A recent book has initiated discussion about advantages and disadvantages of various methodologies (Stallings 2003). And, there are now works that compare the values, assumptions and recommendations of different disaster paradigms (McEntire et. al. 2002). One of the best examples of such epistemological work is a book that bears the title "What is a Disaster?"⁹ (Quarantelli 1998). Much more of this type of critical reflection needs to be given to other dilemmas such as:

- What hazards should be studied?
- What phases of disaster should be given priority?

⁹ A second and follow-up volume is to be published shortly.

- What actors should be included in academic investigations?
- What variables should be incorporated into current research?
- How can different disciplines integrate findings on disasters?
- To what extent are humans able to eliminate calamities?
- What concepts and policies are most likely to improve understanding and the reduction of catastrophic incidents (McEntire and Marshall 2003).

International Relations should therefore be viewed as a resource as scholars in Disaster Studies tackle these difficult enigmas.

A final contribution of International Relations to Disaster Studies relates to the concept of the “security dilemma.” Theorists such as Jervis (1978) have shown that efforts to enhance security might actually produce the opposite result. For instance, as the United States sought produce larger and more accurate warheads, the Soviet Union undertook similar measures. When one side placed nuclear weapons on submarines, the other quickly followed suit. As communists and pro-Western factions took over governments in Asia and Latin America, the Soviet Union and America sent in troops to repel the enemy. The net result of these escalating activities is that security became more fragile during the Cold War. This same lesson could be applied to homeland security. If not approached with forethought, homeland security can increase terrorist threats to the United States from both external and internal sources. Counter-terrorist operations in other countries may generate additional hostility to the United States, and further encroachments on privacy and rights may add to some American’s fear of the government. The net result is that certain steps to counter terrorism may actually aggravate the situation. It is surprising that this lesson has also not been sufficiently integrated into recent research in Disaster Studies.

Perspectives on Disasters and Vulnerability

In light of the events taking place around the world, International Relations would likely be inclined to define disasters in terms of a homeland security focus. Although scholars in the field would concede that natural disasters are more common around the world, the consequences of hijackings, bombings, and weapons of mass destruction (nuclear, biological and chemical) are simply too great to ignore or downplay (Falkenrath, Newman and Thayer 1998). In keeping with its academic roots, International Relations would therefore point out the potential disruption and devastation of modern terrorism and give priority to civil hazards. This, of course, would create some major conflicts with other disciplines including Geography, Meteorology, and Sociology.

Nevertheless, International Relations would converge with other disciplines in respect to disaster terminology. Many disciplines give preference to the concept of vulnerability (see McEntire 2003b), and International Relations is no exception. Important works such as *America's Achilles Heel* repeatedly mention this term in discussions about homeland security (Falkenrath, Newman and Thayer 1998). Falkenrath, Newman and Thayer (1998, p. 97) define vulnerability as “a function an adversary’s access to a particular weapon type, its ability to use the weapon in an offensive mode, the target’s ability to defend itself against this attack, and the consequences of a successful attack.” They also go to great length to discuss the need to improve medical and disaster response operations/systems in order to reduce vulnerability. Such findings on vulnerability were reiterated in the National Commission Report on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States (2004). International Relations would therefore view vulnerability reduction as a vital step for homeland security.

Future Areas of Investigation

In the future, it will be imperative that International Relations scholars engage in additional research for Disaster Studies. The lessons from research on decision making can be easily applied to disaster situations, and there is a great need to improve our thought processes during these types of crisis events. More attention also needs to be given to the impact of epistemic communities on global disaster policies. It is ironic, for example, that Disaster Studies has not fully comprehended the activities of scholars and experts to launch the International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction. Scholars of International Relations can also help to generate additional knowledge about those international governmental organizations, regional governmental organizations, and non-governmental organizations involved in disasters. We do not have sufficient information about the United Nations Strategy for Disaster Reduction, the Pan American Health Organization's role in disasters, and the International Committee of the Red Cross.

International Relations must also help to generate knowledge about ways to integrate national efforts for disaster reduction, and find methods to improve response operations to calamities around the world. Because complex emergencies are conflict-based events that have far-reaching effects on many nations, scholars in this field seem well-suited to conduct research on these types of disasters. Academicians in International Relations must add to the understanding of terrorism too, as this has been a major focus area in the field and as these intentional disasters are likely to become more frequent and deadly in the future.

Researchers in Disaster Studies should likewise look at International Relations in order to resolve some of the epistemological dilemmas being faced currently. International Relations has already undergone many of the challenges facing disaster scholars, and lessons about explanatory perspectives, methodological strategies, and theoretical values and assumptions can be integrated into research about disasters. It is vitally imperative that disaster scholars give increased attention to “reflexivity” or future theory development will be hindered (McEntire and Marshall 2003).

A final and crucial topic for future investigation concerns the study of cultures around the world. If we do not understand Islamic terrorism, we will be unable to effectively confront it at the local, national and international levels. Research should therefore be dedicated to uncovering where this ideology comes from, what the movement desires, and how radical Muslims should be dealt with. Unless we increase our understanding of these types of religious beliefs, there will be little hope that terrorism will be prevented and that we will respond to these attacks in a successful manner.

Recommendations for Emergency Management

International Relations has three recommendations for the emergency management profession. First, this discipline would assert that the broadening of the emergency management profession to include homeland security (or the expansion of homeland security to incorporate emergency management) is imperative due to the growing threat of international terrorism. If life, well-being and freedoms cannot be

guaranteed by governments around the world, other goals such as education, health care, environmental protection and economic development have no meaning.

Second, International Relations would recommend further collaboration to seek a global solution to disaster problems. If natural, technological and civil disasters are caused by and adversely affect all nations, it is vital that an international approach be pursued by all individuals, groups, countries, multi-national corporations, and international organizations. The possibility and/or increasingly devastating impact of climate change, bio-hazards (SARS, AIDS, Mad-Cow, West Nile, etc.), technological disasters, population growth, urban development, scarcity of resources, environmental degradation, and other similar problems necessitate a concerted international effort.

The last recommendation for emergency managers is to find ways to properly balance counter-terrorism activities with methods to reduce all types of other disasters. The war on terrorism requires innumerable resources and, if not carefully approached, may preclude actions to foster development and mitigate natural, technological, biological and environmental disasters. On the other hand, if we only concentrate attention and resources on disasters other than terrorism we will be ignoring the very real and present threat posed by Islamic fundamentalism. Those involved in emergency management are faced with extremely difficult choices; there are no simple solutions to the complex problems facing the global community. Accordingly, what is clear is that all types of disaster and development problems must be addressed simultaneously. One-sided and linear solutions are bound to fail in light of the challenges facing us today and in the future.

Conclusion

International Relations is a discipline in the social sciences that investigates the causes and consequences of interstate conflict as well as a myriad of other topics. Although scholars in this field have not contributed significantly to Disaster Studies, there are obvious links between this discipline and disaster phenomena. International Relations offers numerous advantages for the study of disaster, and it has traditionally given preference to security issues and now concentrates heavily on the concept of vulnerability. There is still much that we do not know about all types of disasters at the international level. A particular weakness that must be overcome is the lack of understanding about Islamic fundamentalism. Even though International Relations encourages more emphasis on the threat of terrorism, we must not let this overshadow the need to give additional attention to broader, global approaches to promote development and reduce all types of disasters. It is for these reasons that International Relations is closely related to Disaster Studies, and must contribute to and be integrated into the same.

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