

Whither the Emergency Manager?*

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The invitation to comment on Thomas E. Drabek's (1986) *Human System Responses to Disaster: An Inventory of Sociological Findings* provides an opportunity to reflect on the practice of emergency management and the evolving role of the emergency manager. This focus is timely. The past decade has brought disaster into sharp relief for many; several large-scale impacts have occurred, and disaster costs (in lives and property damage) have escalated. The links between community growth, land-use management practices, and vulnerability have become more apparent. These issues have taken place at a time when the clarion call is for smaller government and more fiscal constraint. This combination is prompting questions, particularly from central government, about the function and value of emergency management arrangements.

It is also appropriate to re-think the emergency manager's role in contemporary society. Much has changed in 10 years, ranging from the

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burgeoning of relevant information to the need to develop integrated management programs for responders. This is leading to a re-definition of the task-set and a re-evaluation of the emergency manager's job parameters. College-level programs and other knowledge-based accreditation courses are rapidly becoming a prerequisite. These developments are enhancing the image of emergency management and helping it progress to being a distinctive professional sector.

This essay uses Drabek's 1986 publication, *Human System Responses to Disaster*, as a vehicle to reflect on major developments influencing emergency management practice. It begins by locating *Human System Responses to Disaster* within the disaster sociology literature, and argues that the book makes two major contributions to disaster study. From here, the focus of the essay shifts from Drabek's work to identifying elements that characterized emergency management practice at the time when Drabek wrote his text. The essay moves on to look at some current issues pertaining to emergency management and leads into a discussion of where practice might be heading in the coming decade. A brief return to *Human System Responses to Disaster* completes the discussion.

The views expressed in this essay and the conclusions drawn are a personal perspective, largely drawn from my own experience of almost 20 years in the disaster research and practitioner business. Not all the statements are referenced. In reaching my decisions, however, I have sometimes been able to find comfort in the writings of others, and these have been acknowledged accordingly.

Putting *Human System Responses to Disaster* into Context

Every now and then, a sociological textbook on disaster research is produced that helps build the foundation upon which the field moves forward. Twelve seminal works that track the progress of disaster sociology over its 80-year existence are: Prince's *Catastrophe and Social Change* (1920); Sorokin's *Man and Society in Calamity* (1942); Form and Nosow's *Community in Disaster* (1958); Baker and Chapman's edited book, *Man and Society in Disaster* (1962); Barton's *Communities in Disaster* (1969); Dynes' *Organized Behavior in Disaster* (1970); Quarantelli and colleagues *Disasters: Theory and Research* (1978); Turner's *Man-Made Disasters* (1978); Dynes and others' edited collec-

tion, *Sociology of Disasters* (1987); Kreps' volume, *Social Structure and Disaster* (1989); and more recently Quarantelli's edited text, *What Is a Disaster?* (1998); and Mileti and others, *Disasters by Design* (1999).

Thomas E. Drabek's *Human System Responses to Disaster: An Inventory of Sociological Findings* (1986) is also a disaster sociology milestone. Drabek produced a "codified summary of key sociological findings regarding human response to disaster events" (Drabek 1986, p. 6). In doing so, Drabek makes two major contributions to disaster research. Going beyond the earlier social science compilation he produced with colleagues Dennis Mileti and Gene Haas (1975), *Human System Responses to Disaster* is a comprehensive assembly of disaster-relevant literature. Hence, the first major contribution the text makes to the disaster studies field is the bringing together of conclusions from 1000 formally published studies that reported empirical results and which span 65 years (1920-1985) of sociological research.

However, Drabek goes further than providing a codified summary of key sociological findings. He nests the codifications within a framework that disaggregates the complexity of disaster and allows the reader to view the phenomenon from a combination of temporal (disaster phases) and structural (social systems levels) dimensions. The second major contribution of *Human System Responses to Disasters*, therefore, is its organizing framework. The significance of this framework should not be underestimated. By separating research findings into eight phases of disaster time by six different system levels, the reader is able to gain a detailed understanding of the characteristics of disaster from a social organizational perspective. The disaster time phases Drabek employs, expanding on earlier work by Powell (1954), are: Preparedness—(i) planning and (ii) warning; Response—(iii) pre-impact mobilization and (iv) post-impact emergency actions; Recovery—(v) restoration six months or less post-impact and (vi) reconstruction six months or more post-impact; and Mitigation—(vii) hazard perceptions and (viii) hazard adjustments. The six system levels are: (i) individual, (ii) group, (iii) organizational, (iv) community, (v) society, and (vi) international.

Through *Human System Responses to Disaster*, the reader gains a significant insight into what is known about how humans and their social systems function under different circumstances. From this the reader can learn about how society organizes itself to deal with large-scale uncertainty and risk, in what situations society's resources may

(and may not) be available, and how they might be best used to develop risk reduction and response measures.

This organizing framework and the information provided by Drabek's codified summaries is extremely beneficial to the emergency manager, since it is the emergency manager's job to coordinate community actions that will achieve greater resilience in the face of disaster impact. It is also the emergency manager's task to understand the conditions that might produce major disruptions for a given community; to know what resources are available and the circumstances within which they may not be available; to develop appropriate organizing frameworks that bring resources together to reduce the likelihood of disruption and limit the effect of hazards; and to effectively coordinate the response and recovery efforts following impact. These "position descriptors" are all canvassed in the codified summaries found in *Human System Responses to Disaster*.

Past Context: What Is the Legacy?

During the late 1970s and early 1980s, around the time Drabek was commissioned to produce his inventory, some serious questions about the practice of emergency management were being raised. The U.S. National Governors' Association (1979), for instance, expressed concern about the lack of comprehensive management at both policy and operational levels; about the lack of understanding of the relationship between preparedness and response on the one hand and recovery and mitigation on the other; about the limited talent pool available to manage all four phases; and about the narrow focus on quick-onset natural hazards and the concomitant lack of planning for technological hazards, energy and material shortages, and long-onset natural disasters. Perry (1982) raised issues about the appropriateness of the "dual use" policy connecting civil defense and emergency management. Dynes (1983) queried the relevance of the dominant "command and control" practice model.

Other issues ranged from the narrow frame of reference within which hazards and disasters were viewed (Hewitt 1983), to emergency management's tenuous links with hazard management (Burton, Kates, and White 1978; White 1974) and planning practices (Kartez 1984), and the relative lack of understanding within the emergency management community of mental health issues in the disaster context (Parad,

Resnick, and Parad 1976; Raphael 1986).

Attempts to bring practice into line produced the Comprehensive Emergency Management (CEM) approach. CEM referred to the responsibility and capability of a political unit (nation, state, local area) to manage all types of emergencies and disasters by coordinating the actions of all the players involved. The "comprehensive" aspect included all four phases of an emergency activity: mitigation, preparedness, response and recovery. Stemming from this came the Integrated Emergency Management System (IEMS) which would help form partnerships between the different levels of resource owners, both vertically (between levels of government) and horizontally (between different agencies and the public-private sector). CEM dominated emergency management practice for the next two decades.

In this context, *Human System Responses to Disaster* would have been an ideal classroom text. However, emergency management training was more attuned to hands-on, skills-based training for emergency response activities, and few college-level programs were available in which *Human System Responses to Disaster* would naturally be used.

Present Context: What Is Emergency Management?

The practice of emergency management is still evolving and growing. It has been at a cross-road for several years and will continue to be for several more. There are a number of closely-related initiatives showing the way ahead, indicating the sector is responsive to change. On the other hand, there are still some out-moded practices holding it back.

Six Positive Developments in Emergency Management

1. *A more realistic context for emergency management:* One of the most important developments is the effort to locate emergency management within a wider frame of reference. Rather than emergency management being regarded as an exclusive preparedness- and response-oriented resource, recent efforts have been made to integrate emergency management into a wider policy framework. With it is a growing acceptance that emergency management is an integral part of community decision-making. Recent developments in New Zealand, for example, where government is reestablishing

- local-central government arrangements that nest emergency management firmly within the context of environmental stewardship and community planning is an example of this initiative.
2. *Knowledge-based education programs*: Effective emergency management is reliant on expertise through knowledge, augmented by expertise through skill and experience. However, for decades conventional emergency management practice has turned these prerequisites upside-down and focused almost exclusively on skills-based training.
 3. *Effective links between research and practice*: The introduction of university-level knowledge-based programs is encouraging a more systematic introduction and treatment of risk, hazard, emergency, and organizational management theory. It has enabled research findings to directly aid practice. In some countries (the U.S. is the prime example), this development has enabled emergency management to be taken as a university/college-level subject in its own right. Many emergency management agencies are also realizing that there are distinct advantages to link operational effectiveness with empirical research. Moreover, many decision-makers are seeing the benefit of recruiting people who are academically trained and familiar with the research literature that underpins risk, hazard, and emergency management.
 4. *Heightened interest in uncertainty*: A fourth positive development is the increased interest in risk management in many areas of the public and private sectors. This interest has helped legitimize emergency management and hazard management considerations. It has also enabled emergency practitioners to access a greater range of relevant information, to seek advice from wider quarters, and to expand their own perspectives.
 5. *Systematization*: There is a noticeable increase in the number and type of areas now being systematically investigated and which are considered essential to the wider safety of the community. Recent studies on business disaster preparedness and response and on interdependencies in lifeline management are examples. Environmental pollution and ecological damage are other areas that have direct links to emergency management. Developing linkages between areas is enabling the emergency manager to gain a better understanding of community vulnerability, risk assessment practices, and hazardscape management.

6. *Multidisciplinary orientation*: Disaster research and its close companions (hazard research and risk research) and their application in the emergency management context is becoming more multidisciplinary and multinational. There is now a greater likelihood that research and practice can better capture the reality of relevant issues and their particular social contexts. The field is gaining confidence that it can identify relevant universals pertaining to disaster as a phenomenon and, with it, developing more appropriate methods for managing them.

There are also, however, six counter-balancing issues still to be resolved.

Six Major Issues Still to Be Resolved

1. *Response orientation*: Many practitioners still regard their business as only preparing for and responding to crisis events. Moreover, many politicians, other policy- and decision-makers, and the public-at-large still consider that response is the emergency manager's only business-at-hand.
2. *Focused recruitment*: In spite of the CEM approach, which includes hazard mitigation and risk reduction, emergency management still draws heavily on the "can-do" macho male. This is affecting the pick-up rate of nonresponse activities such as emergency managers being directly involved in land-use management decisions, undertaking vulnerability assessments, and pursuing public risk management programs.
3. *Open season on the all-hazards approach*: Recent moves by some national emergency management agencies to include terrorism within the "all-hazards" approach could perpetuate old problems. There is a need to carefully consider the message being sent to practitioners. Introducing terrorism into the mandate of the emergency management office could re-ignite old response-focused "command and control" habits that CEM and public risk management approaches are weaning practitioners from.
4. *Information sensitivity*: It is not uncommon for emergency managers to deny researchers access to some hazard-threatened or disaster-impacted areas. While there are often very good reasons for this, such as health and safety issues and a concern to protect the rights

of victims, some deliberate gatekeeping to ensure specific information is not gathered is still practiced. This illustrates a failure on behalf of some managers to appreciate the value of impact investigations and can limit opportunities to learn from disaster.

5. *Lack of accepted terms*: People in emergency management have yet to find common ground with respect to the language that is used to define and articulate the field. This problem is holding back many interdisciplinary developments, and it is a major cause for confusion and distancing between the researcher and the practitioner. Not having accepted terminology is also a problem for the practitioner when dealing with the community-at-large.
6. *Quality control*: Systematic college-level education programs in most countries are recent developments, and many have proceeded ahead of the establishment of a governing body charged with developing and monitoring course standards and content criteria. This has resulted in cases where curricula are piecemeal and superficial. The universals being developed by the research community are slow to be incorporated.

Developing an emergency management curricula is perhaps the most pressing current issue, since the future role of the emergency manager will be defined by this. This issue is being addressed. At the annual Natural Hazards Workshop in Boulder, Colorado, held in August 1998, for instance, participants attending a session on the professionalization of emergency management listened to panel session presenters agree that the attributes needed by the contemporary emergency manager were more diverse than has hitherto been commonly assumed. Similarly, at another workshop, also in August 1998, sponsored by the Federal Emergency Management Agency's teaching arm, the Emergency Management Institute in Emmitsburg, Maryland, academics interested in teaching emergency management courses were asked by a participant, "What is an emergency manager?" He answered his own question by stating: "An emergency manager is a person who is trained in classical management and who focuses this body of knowledge on to the disaster-relevant context."

These two examples indicate a feeling that has been evident for some time, that the practice of emergency management would be better served if skills-based emergency response training was incorporated into a wider

set of knowledge-based programs to provide emergency managers with a range of understandings canvassing areas such as: (i) management and organization studies; (ii) public policy and administration; (iii) hazard profiling, assessment, and analysis; (iv) community profiling; (v) land-use planning and management; (vi) risk assessment and risk management; (vii) emergency response and EOC management; (viii) disaster psychology and stress management; (ix) project management; and (x) disaster impact field investigation techniques and research methods.

Future Context: Where Is Emergency Management Heading?

External to the hazard and emergency management field, a major influence has dominated international scientific thinking since the late 1980s. A United Nations report (World Commission on Environment and Development 1987), examined the critical social and economic problems facing the earth and formulated proposals to solve them in ways that ensured sustained human progress without depleting the resources of future generations. This report, subsequently referred to as the Brundtland Report, introduced the term "sustainable development" which it defined as "meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs."

The goal of sustainable development, according to the Commission, is to create a new era of economic growth as a way of eliminating poverty and extending to all people the opportunity to fulfill their aspirations for a better life. In the 1990s, the concept of sustainable development started to exert itself on emergency management, and it will undoubtedly be a major influence for the foreseeable future.

Among other things, a focus on sustainable development issues prompted some policy makers and researchers to realize that the application of CEM is, by itself, not providing sufficient community protection from natural or technological hazard. In the context of emergency management, the concept of sustainable hazard mitigation (Mileti et. al. 1998) refers to creating places that are less vulnerable to natural and technological hazards and which are resilient to those events. Sustainable hazard mitigation has five elements: environmental quality; quality of life; disaster resilience; economic vitality; and inter- and intragenerational equity. In this context, reducing the risk from hazards, reducing losses from disasters and working

toward sustainable communities go hand-in-hand and require an open-system orientation which is characterized by a public risk management process.¹ Against this backdrop CEM is perceived as having too narrow frame of reference.

By incorporating sustainable hazard mitigation and public risk management into the theory-in-use of the emergency manager, the likelihood of achieving community resilience and effectiveness in overcoming the problems presented by disaster impact is greater. Amongst other attributes, sustainability recognizes a time dimension to the management of hazards. In like manner, public risk management enables emergency management to be contextualized into a wider arena of relevant actions and activities. Both time and context dimensions are important, because an effective emergency management approach needs to be problem-focused as well as process-oriented. It also has to be interdisciplinary and intergovernmental, as well as allowing private- and public-sector input and be flexible enough for members of the wider community to have input. And, at the same time, solutions need to be applied for the present as well as the future.

These factors, point a direction to where emergency management should be heading. There are six interlinking areas of future activity that emergency managers should assume responsibility for:

1. Emergency managers should assist in the creation and management of community resilience, development, and growth by being able to recognize resources and risks, and help communities choose a level of risk appropriate to their circumstances.
2. Emergency managers should help manage communities as sustainable entities, with the understanding that reducing losses from disasters alone is too narrow a goal.
3. Emergency managers should link emergency management concepts and practices with sustainability through long-term hazard and loss reduction and through employing risk management processes.
4. Emergency managers should not only help reduce community losses, but they will also assist in the process of enhancing the long-term equilibrium between human and natural environmental interactions.
5. Emergency managers should help ensure that appropriate emergency management mechanisms are in place, are operable, and are capable of responding to the overall risk environment.

6. Emergency managers should link emergency management concepts and practices with wider community management practices and processes.

A Final Word on *Human System Responses to Disaster*

All these initiatives have to be incorporated into a knowledge base that understands the reality of mass emergencies and disaster. This is where *Human System Responses to Disaster* is useful. The information it contains provides a link between where we are now and where we want to go. When used carefully, as Drabek advises, *Human System Responses to Disaster* provides a significant understanding of the context within which emergency managers can build their CEM links to the new sustainability and public risk management frameworks. In effect, Drabek's work helps to set the context within which a risk management approach to emergency management can be pursued. To my mind at least, when combined with other relevant teaching texts (Burby 1998; Drabek 1990; Drabek and Hoetmer 1991; Lindell and Perry 1992; Mileti et al. 1998), *Human System Responses to Disaster* remains one the most significant reading sources for the practicing emergency manager.

Note

1. Public risk management is a process that is used to decide what to do where a risk has been determined to exist. It involves identifying the level of tolerance the community has for a specific risk or set of risks and determines what risk assessment options are acceptable within a social, economic, cultural, and political context. To achieve this, the process must be open since it has to factor in benefits, costs of control, and any statutory or socially approved requirements needed to manage the risk. Hence, it requires communicating and consulting with the public-at-large, either directly or through appropriate representation as well as with specialists.

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