

## BOOK REVIEWS

*Response to Disaster: Fact versus Fiction and Its Perpetuation*. 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition. Henry W. Fischer, III, 2008, Maryland: University Press of America. 238 pages.

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In *Response to Disaster* (3<sup>rd</sup> edition), Fischer examines our understandings of behavioral and organizational responses to disasters, myths associated with our understandings, and why we often believe in these myths, and the role of the media in shaping our understandings of responses to disasters. He begins by highlighting some of the challenges associated with defining disasters, a long-debated issue that is well documented in the disaster literature. He advances this debate by proposing a 10-category disaster scale, a new feature of this third edition, ranging from everyday emergencies to catastrophic and annihilating disasters. The disaster scale examines the degree in terms of scale, scope and duration to which disasters disrupt everyday social activity where communities and societies experience temporary or permanent social change. The greater the disruption, the greater the social structure is impacted. This tool would be useful for examining the knowledge base in the disaster literature, identifying research that fits the “all-hazards” approach, varying by scale, scope and duration, and creating a systematic inventory of the research literature. The scale would also be a beneficial tool for practitioners and government officials “in their mitigation, preparation, and response efforts in much the same way the Richter scale provides a construct for envisioning the severity of an earthquake’s impact” (p.7). He also presents the reader with an overview of disaster types, time periods, and phases of emergency management, and discusses the importance of sociological theory for understanding human response to disasters.

Next, Fischer explains that public perceptions of disaster response are often contrary to actual behavior. The common believe is that people will flee in panic, suffer psychological dependency and shock, respond with a mob mentality, loot, price gouge and behave in mostly selfish ways. He examines each of these assumptions and debunks these perceptions as disaster myths. Research actually shows that looting and price gouging are very rare, that survivors are generally calm and do not panic or suffer psychological dependency or shock, and are very altruistic.

Why do we believe these disaster myths? Fischer explains that as many people do not have direct experience with disasters, we often rely on the media to shape our perceptions of response behavior following the September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001 Terrorist Attacks, Hurricane Katrina, or virtually any other disaster. Furthermore, “the reality Americans perceive as the result of their use of the mass media is often incorrect, i.e., a misperception” (p.75).

Several factors contribute to the accuracy of media reporting, such as type of news coverage, the interview incidence, disaster period being reported on, amount of news space devoted to the disaster, and disaster type. For example, if the story is “human interest”, particularly an interview format, there is a higher likelihood that myths will be perpetuated. Also, if news stories focus on events in the immediate post-impact period or there is more space devoted to disaster news, myth reporting is much more likely. Finally, myth reporting is much more likely after natural disasters than technological disasters. When we rely on inaccurate media information as our primary source of disaster behavior, we are much more likely to believe people will engage in looting and price gouging, panic, suffer psychological dependency or shock, and behave in savage and selfish ways. Research shows that while looting and criminal activity does occur in some disasters, such as Hurricane Katrina, the incidence of looting and crime was very low in the New Orleans area. Yet, people may decide to dismiss evacuation orders and stay in their homes because they fear their homes being looted (p.56). Therefore, believing in disaster myths can have dire consequences for survivors and can influence emergency response.

Next, Fischer discusses organizational response to disasters. He states that “while the public often believes the behavioral response to disaster is deviant and chaotic, it tends to believe emergency organizations are prepared to respond fairly effectively” (p.115). Evidence suggests the contrary, that while behavioral response is altruistic and relatively crime free, organizational response is quite chaotic or might accurately be characterized as “organized disorganization” (p.116). And while emergency organizations are responsible for responding to emergencies and disasters, they often utilize the media (radio, television and print) as a source of information gathering, not unlike the public, and information dissemination. In one case study, Fischer found that following Hurricane Katrina, many emergency responders believed media accounts that widespread looting, chaos and crime were taking place and were afraid to go into disaster-affected areas to help. If emergency organizations succumb to disaster myths, they will have trouble responding effectively.

In the final chapter, Fischer challenges the researcher and practitioner communities to consider the social construction of disaster outcomes as they are derived from “elitist domination, labeling and prioritization” (p. 200). We often recreate social structures after disasters that mirror the organization of the social structures before the disaster, thus reconstructing inequities. As evidence, Fischer suggests that “the Katrina recovery is certainly conforming to the normal power-elite’s domination of limited wealth and power” (p.200). Many middle, working and lower class Katrina victims continue to be displaced and marginalized while much of the recovery has been expedited for the more advantaged. He also fears that “research provides more historical record than change in applied outcomes and practitioners simply function as the janitors of disaster history—left to clean up afterward” (p.199).

To resolve many of the aforementioned issues, Fischer suggests increased practitioner-researcher interaction; training, certification and education of a professional workforce; increased public education; incorporation of new information technologies; continued integration of theory into research and practice; utilization of a disaster scale; and continued evaluation of the potential for new threats. Fischer heeds his own advice of integrating theory into research and practice and evaluating the possibility for old and new threats in his final chapter. He predicts the behavioral and organizational response to a chemical or biological terrorist act using sociological research, concluding that victims and survivors will likely act in ways the media and emergency organizations will not expect. People will act altruistically and will not panic, loot, or price gouge en masse; the media will be both a help by disseminating critical information and a hindrance by perpetuating behavioral myths; emergency organizations will fear survivor behavior and respond according to the myths; and initial response will be characterized as organized chaos. Finally, he examines organizational response to September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001 and compares research findings to behaviors that were exhibited in the aftermath. He states that the terrorist attacks of September, 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001 serve as an unfortunate example of “organizational damage that can occur when mitigation, planning and response are not based upon a body of knowledge” (p.227).

There are several elements of great value in this book; I will only mention four. First, Fischer clearly outlines the continued need for debunking disaster myths, explains the consequences of acting on misperceptions, and offers suggestions for moving forward. Second, arguments set forth throughout the book are supported by many case studies grounded in solid, empirical research at the end of each chapter. Case studies of September 11, 2001, the 2004 Boxing Day South Asian Tsunami and Hurricane Katrina have been included in this third edition. Third, he has added a more concrete discussion of sociological theory and its application to disaster research and practice in this edition. Fourth, he proposes a disaster scale and argues that it will allow for a systematic inventory of the disaster research literature and become a useful tool for practitioners and government officials in mitigation, preparation and response efforts. This book is a must read for any disaster researcher, practitioner, or journalist, and is definitely appropriate for any upper-division undergraduate or graduate course.