

Chapter Two: Theory

Learning Objectives.

As a result of this chapter, students should be able to:

- Provide an overview of the major conceptual and theoretical perspectives used in disaster recovery research.
- Apply concepts and theories to understand how disaster recovery could be approached.
- Use concepts and theories to identify potential barriers to recovery.
- Demonstrate an understanding of key principles to promote a sustainable recovery.

Summary

To summarize these theoretical perspectives, consider their similarities and differences. Systems theory looks at large-scale units that serve as sub-components of an even larger system. Misfits between the systems results in disastrous consequences, particularly for the human environment. Vulnerability theory explains the disproportionate impact of disasters and points out those who might be vulnerable as those with less power, economic clout, political position or social privilege. Socio-political ecology theory frames the problem as resulting from inequitable power relationships with clear winners and losers. Feminist theory concentrates on the ways in which issues of gender, class, race and income compromise the life safety and livelihoods of women and their children. Emergent norm theory suggests that disaster recovery activities will occur without much pre-planning. Taken as a whole, these theoretical perspectives help us to understand and even to predict who is at risk and why those risks occur. Collectively, these theories point out the very human consequences of disasters and the challenges associated with recovery.

These theories also serve as guides to the kinds of activities that should be undertaken after disaster. Attention must be paid to balancing the effects of the various systems. By thinking in a holistic manner and integrating elements of the different system parts, we can build a stronger, more disaster-resilient whole. We must also pay attention to those at highest risk for a failed recovery and insure that those most vulnerable and least powerful can participate in and share benefits of a full recovery. We must understand that unmet needs will appear and be ready to handle them. Most importantly, these theories suggest that we must concentrate on preparing our communities and the households therein for disaster. If we build, or rebuild, with mitigation of future disasters in mind, we create a more disaster-resilient planet for our families and communities. For overviews of these theories, see Boxes 2.1 and 2.2. and the powerpoint prepared for this chapter.

Teaching Ideas

Theory can always be difficult to explain to students who may find it an awkward and useless exercise. Many of them either are or want to be practitioners – therefore they want practical content that directs them “how to” do a particular task. By taking the time to point out the value of theory, you will enhance their abilities and “how to” knowledge. To illustrate, how should a

recovery proceed? Whose viewpoints should be included, how and why? Or, how do you explain why some people suffered more than others or found the road home longer? Why do contentious groups appear after a disaster occurs, engaged in blaming behavior and litigation? This chapter helps to answer some of these questions.

To help them to grasp theory, sort the students into panels. Each panel should be assigned a particular theory. They can then dig further into the Haiti earthquake and explain its cause or take on a disaster they prefer. For the Haiti exercise, it is useful to have them compare and contrast the Haiti earthquake with the one that happened in Chile later that same year. The damage levels and deaths were dramatically different despite similar magnitudes. How might systems theory explain such differences? Vulnerability theory? To assist you, review the first chapter of Social Vulnerability to Disaster (Thomas et al., 2013, CRC Press) and the content included therein contrasting Haiti with Chile.

The vulnerability perspective can also be compared to the dominant perspective. For many people, the hazard caused the disaster such as when a flood swept through a village. However, the vulnerability perspective counters the dominant perspective by suggesting that people become vulnerable through other means. Governments fail to establish and enforce building codes. Low income families live in weaker structures and have less means to recover. By exploring these, you will enable the students to consider alternative views. Again, the first chapter of Social Vulnerability to Disaster (Thomas et al., 2013, CRC Press) contains useful, contrasting perspectives on the dominant versus vulnerability perspectives.

Feminist theory has historically been the most challenging for students to pursue, probably because students assume feminist theory is politicized or too liberal for their tastes. But, the reason for including it is to demonstrate the range of feminist theoretical perspectives and to provide multiple means to view a disaster. Students may be surprised to discover significant disagreements within feminist theories, particularly when multi-cultural feminists take on white female privilege.

Updates

Haiti continues to suffer half a decade after the earthquake. Updates can be read at www.usaid.gov (search Haiti earthquake) and at <http://www.unfoundation.org/who-we-are/impact/our-impact/health-data-disaster-relief/haiti-earthquake-response.html>.

Additional Resources

At the FEMA Higher Education mentioned earlier in the IM for chapter one, you will find reports on theoretical perspectives and the state of theory in the discipline of emergency management. Be sure to read this one: Jensen, J. 2012. Report of the Disciplinary Purview of Emergency Management Focus Group. Emmitsburg, MD: FEMA. In addition, add this to your professional library: McEntire, D. 2007. The Importance of Multi- and interdisciplinary Research on Disasters and for Emergency Management. Pp. 3-14 in *Disciplines, disasters and emergency management*. Ed. D. McEntire. Springfield, IL: Charles C. Thomas Publisher, Ltd.

To read a fuller account of how to apply feminist theory, read: Enarson, E., and B. Phillips. 2008. *Invitation to a New Feminist Disaster Sociology: integrating feminist theory and methods*. In *Women and disasters: from theory to practice*, edited by B. D. Phillips and B. H. Morrow. Philadelphia: Xlibris, International Research Committee on Disasters.

For ecological and feminist perspectives on the BP oil spill, view “BP Oil Spill, Fisherman, Grand Bayou Village, Port Sulphur, LA._01” and related videos at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fwsnEw0EuSk> and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nKtCpRfxaE8>.

End of Chapter Questions

Summary Questions

1. Can you describe each of the systems in systems theory? What is their relevance for approaching disaster recovery?
 - a. Students should identify the three main systems and why the misfit between the physical, built, and human environments result in a disaster. Ask them: if just the physical system creates a disaster without built or human environments impacted, is it a disaster?
2. How does vulnerability theory suggest that disaster recovery is not an equal opportunity event?
 - a. By pointing out that the dominant view fails to consider human causes of disasters. Racism, sexism, and differences between groups and nations cause suffering in the human system.
3. What is the essential core of socio-political ecology theory in terms of the availability of local resources?
 - a. That people often compete over scarce, divisible resources with winners and losers. Ask them why more women and children died in the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami than men.
4. Distinguish between the different strands of feminist theory, demonstrating how each points a different problem and solution to the problems of disaster recovery.
 - a. Have students take their time to sort through each of the feminist theories or standpoints. Where does each one place the cause of disaster? What is their solution?
5. Define emergence and explain how emergence might appear during a disaster recovery time period from an individual and from a group or collective level.
 - a. From the Haiti or another disaster, ask them to identify emergent groups that appeared to address unmet needs. For example: newly created amputees who needed equipment to become independent again. Or, patrols and additional lighting in relief camps to protect women and children from violence and human trafficking.
6. Define sustainability and the key elements that promote a sustainable recovery.
 - a. Invite them to discuss each of the six elements. For example, what does a quality of life mean to them? What do they like about where they live? If it was destroyed by a disaster, would they want it back? How might recovery enable them to restore something? For a sustainable approach, what would they like to

pass along to future generations? What would they fight for? To be inclusive, who in their community would they involve in recovery discussions? How would they do that?

Discussion Questions

1. Why should you use theory in a disaster recovery course?
 - a. To help understand causation and to explain variation. To find ways to look at a problem from a different point of view. To step outside one's own assumptions and consider alternative explanations.
2. Adopt the perspective of one of the feminist theories described in this chapter. How would you use each to sensitize workers and volunteers heading to a developing nation to "help"?
 - a. The boxed features should help with this. Try asking students in groups to apply each perspective to particular problems like: how to encourage participation; identifying unmet needs from the perspective of women, children, and marginalized populations; the role of the environment vis-à-vis the women and girls in a community; one's own perspective as an outsider and the assumptions we make about what works best.
3. Talk to social service agencies, faith-based representatives, and advocacy groups in your community. From their perspectives, who might be most vulnerable in a disaster? Homeless people? People living near a floodplain in mobile homes? Makeshift housing in a rapidly urbanizing area of a developing nation? Conversely, what strengths and insights might each of these populations bring to a post-disaster recovery effort?
 - a. Ask students to gather census demographic data on the population. Based on the theories in this chapter, which populations might be historically marginalized and/or have difficulty recovering from a disaster? How can knowing a population and its geographic location help with disaster recovery efforts?
4. From a systems theory perspective, how would you organize a disaster recovery planning team? Which systems would you want to use as the key foci of your effort?
 - a. Hopefully they say that human systems need to adapt to physical system realities – that we should not build in floodplains or on unstable slopes, or tempt fate on woodland urban interfaces. Given that we do, how might they reduce risk by intervening in the built and human systems?
5. Using socio-political ecology theory, look at your own community. What barriers to participation in recovery efforts would you anticipate? What kinds of competition might you find there in terms of jobs, housing, and other crucial resources?
 - a. In a disaster recovery, who might the winners and losers be? How can you level the playing field? For example, would you like to develop job programs that target people most likely to lose their jobs after a disaster? Could you take recovery planning initiatives into marginalized communities like bayou villages, urban enclaves, or high rise low income apartments? As a recovery leader, could you leverage volunteer efforts to overcome barriers to long term housing?
6. What are the essential ideas in emergent norm theory? Explain its utility for the practice of disaster recovery management. How can you anticipate and then respond to emergence?

- a. Emergence occurs when people believe that needs are unmet. Sometimes this occurs in a contentious fashion. Are those who argue needs are not met problems or solutions? If people can't get back to work because child care was lost, can recovery funds or organizations provide such support? If women and children are being taken into human trafficking after a disaster, how can emergent groups be used to combat such violence?
- 7. Form a discussion group and talk through what you each believe constitutes "quality of life" in your community. How might each of your perspectives influence what you would do if you had to launch a disaster recovery?
 - a. Get them to list their ideas on the board. Or, have them take photos of what they want to save and compile them into a slideshow. Perhaps groups could put together their own videos of what makes their university or community a special place to live. Ask them to focus on what they want to retain or create anew after a disaster.