

Disasters or social catastrophes? On social psychological reactions of communities coping with natural and human-induced disasters

The capacity of a collective to triumph over shared adversities is based on maintaining and augmenting social cohesion, mutual social support, cooperation and a sense of belonging to a valued social group and community. Empirical work with victims of various disasters strongly suggests that individuals' functioning in the aftermath of potentially traumatic life events does not only depend on their own resources and losses but on the resources and losses of their community. Many disasters initially mobilize affected communities into a heroic and altruistic struggle to fulfill immediate needs, and to shield victims from an overwhelming sense of loss. However, this heroic stage inevitably ceases and may not be sufficient to conquer the slowly evolving deterioration of social relationships routinely experienced by post-disaster communities. Thus, in the long run, failure or success in coping with shared trauma depends to a large extent on social functioning. One way of deterring lasting negative psychological consequences of disasters should be through protecting and maintaining communal resilience, defined as the ability to deter insidious erosion of communal connections in the aftermath of collective upheavals.