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Disaster and deritualization: A re-interpretation of findings from early disaster research

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Abstract

This study investigates how ritual practices are disrupted in disasters and the ways people deal with those situations. We employ structural ritualization theory to conduct this investigation focusing on deritualization, which refers to the breakdown or loss of ritualized activities that occur in daily life. The thesis of this paper is that ritual practices are disrupted in a disaster leading to the breakdown of action and meaning. Data were collected from 19 seminal sociological studies from the National Academy of Sciences published first under the name of the Committee on Disaster Studies (1951–1957) and then under the rubric of the Disaster Research Group (1957–1962). A content analysis of these studies revealed many instances of deritualization. Deritualization is manifested or most evident through its effects on action and meaning in rituals. Examples were categorized according to the loss of action, meaning, or a combination of both.

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Ritual has been a significant area of study for sociologists over the years. From Goffman's (1967) analysis of interaction rituals to Collins (2004) more fully developed theory of interaction ritual chains, ritual has been understood to play an important role in social life. A recent approach, structural ritualization theory (Knottnerus, 1997) presents a more formal theory of ritual practices and applies it to various social situations. It identifies certain ways actors structure the social world through ritualized behaviors. This paper further develops this perspective by focusing on how ritual practices are disrupted in a particular social context, namely disasters, and the ways people deal with these events. The thesis of this research paper is that ritual practices are interrupted by disasters.

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1. Structural ritualization theory

Structural ritualization theory (Knottnerus, 1997) focuses on the role rituals play in groups and, more generally, social behavior. This perspective argues that rituals are a major part of everyday social life and are often involved in the structuring of social events regardless of cultural group membership, status or class position, and racial/ethnic background. The theory focuses on *ritualized symbolic practices* (RSPs). RSPs refer to action repertoires that are schema-driven. Schemas are cognitive frameworks. RSPs, therefore, involve regularly engaged in or standardized actions that possess meaning and express symbolic themes or meanings.

Particularly relevant to the present investigation is one line of research related to structural ritualization theory, which focuses on the basic presumption underlying this perspective: that ritualized practices play a significant role in providing meaning, focus and direction, and a sense of stability to social behavior (Knottnerus, 2002, 2005; Van de Poel-Knottnerus & Knottnerus, 2002, pp. 164–165). The research addresses this issue by examining different aspects of “disruption” and “deritualization” and the ways people respond to such experiences. Deritualization refers to the breakdown or loss of previously engaged in RSPs among actors and groups. Deritualization results from disruptive events and conditions. One such event is a disaster.

Defined as schema-driven action repertoires, ritualized practices contain two essential components: they involve human acts and cognitive or symbolic frameworks containing meaning. These components provide the fundamental elements of an RSP and the two key dimensions of a ritualized practice, which are subject to breakdown during deritualization. Deritualization is manifested or most evident through its effects on action and meaning in rituals. For this reason, we argue that by conceptualizing this phenomenon along these two dimensions we should be able to determine whether such evidence is more indicative of the loss of meaning, the breakdown of action, or both to an approximately equal degree. By thinking in terms of these two elements, which may be depicted as intersecting dimensions or coordinates, we are better able to visualize the three possibilities. In sum, this framework provides the basis for conducting a systematic investigation of data dealing with the disruptive effects of disasters.

2. Sociology and disaster research

Sociologists in the United States began systematically studying disasters in the late 1940s (Quarantelli, 1987, 1994). Funded primarily by the military, which was interested in the potential response of the civilian population to large-scale bombings, peace-time natural disasters were studied as proxies for war situations. In the early 1950s a Disaster Research Group was formed at the National Academy of Sciences’ National Research Council to further investigate the societal impacts of large-scale natural and technological crises. That group published a series of 19 reports on a variety of disaster-related issues, including emergency warnings, evacuation, sheltering of victims, and convergence behavior. We use these reports to examine the impacts of disasters on ritualized symbolic practices—or, more specifically, to describe the deritualization that follows social disruptions.

From the earliest to the most recent studies of disasters, it is clear that sociologists have regarded these events as social disruptions. However, there is substantial disagreement among

sociologists as to how those disruptions affect communities. On one side, there are those who argue that new and adaptive norms and structures emerge during the immediate response period to fill functional gaps and contribute to the resilience of social units (Fritz, 1961; Dynes, 1970). On the other side, there are those who argue that technological disasters in particular create long-term negative consequences for communities (Freudenburg, 1997). This paper does not resolve this ongoing debate, but suggests a new framework for analyzing the disruptive effects of disasters: by focusing on the impacts of disasters on ritualized symbolic practices, which provide meaning and order to social life.

3. Methodology

Data were collected from 19 seminal sociological studies from the National Academy of Sciences published first under the name of the Committee on Disaster Studies (1951–1957) and then under the rubric of the Disaster Research Group (1957–1962). These studies ranged from analysis of social behaviors before, during and after disasters to discussions of preparedness and evacuation. The reports reflected a wide range of different approaches in understanding disasters from first hand accounts to summaries to methodological challenges in disaster studies. The disasters studied included a flood, a fireworks explosion, a Coal Mine collapse, tornadoes, and hurricanes.

A qualitative content analysis of the studies was used to identify instances of deritualization. Conceptualized as the breakdown or loss of previously engaged in RSPs, we systematically examined all descriptions of actors' experiences following a disaster, giving particular attention to the effects of such a disruptive event on their personal and social lives.

The two categories were constructed in terms of the effects of deritualization on action or meaning (or combinations of both). Words, phrases, or sentences emphasizing a lack of orientation or focus for activity were identified along the dimension of action. Commentaries indicating a diminishment in actors' cognitive or symbolic capacities were placed in the category of meaning. Finally, terms inclusive of both dimensions were identified as encompassing both meaning/action. Each reference was analyzed, discussed and categorized by consensus of all the researchers.

Nine of the original studies (Disaster Studies (DS) 1, 3, 5, 6, 11, 13, 17, 18, 19) had at least one reference to the experience of deritualization with the majority of these having multiple references. Those studies that did not have any discussion of deritualization either focused on an aspect of disaster beyond the scope of this study and/or did not contain any specific descriptions of behavior following the disaster. What is striking in the content analysis is where there were direct references to people's specific behaviors following a disaster, examples of deritualization were easily identifiable. Moreover, when these studies included primary material from individuals in the disaster, invariably instances of deritualization were found.

4. Disaster and deritualization

RSPs are schema driven action repertoires containing two essential components. The first component involves action. When a person experiences deritualization they are confused about

where to direct their activity. Thus, in descriptions of this experience we would expect images not only of passivity but also of directionless behaviors.

First hand descriptions following a disaster describe people with words such as “apathy and unusual passivity” (DS 1); “sitting dazed and staring, aimless wandering, immobilized, stunned, passive, aimless puttering about, wandering around the grass not doing anything, just stand there or wander away and nod their heads and not do anything, not functioning, helpless, walking around there in a daze, random movement, lethargic, stunned, couldn’t seem to do anything, docility, rendered impotent, and one track mind” (DS 3). In other reports we are told that “One mother went completely to pieces and exhibited the following types of behavior: fainting, disorganized motor behavior, fugue states, and so forth” (DS 5).

Elsewhere, “apathetic, stunned, dazed, putter about doing inconsequential tasks, wander aimlessly, and docile” (DS 6) are the descriptors used to identify this condition. In a similar tone victims are described as “stunned, trance-like [and engaging in] helpless behavior with nonspecific requests for help, directed towards the environment at large” (DS 11). So too, “wives discussed the inactivity and sense of insecurity of waiting for days without knowing what to do” (DS 13). More dramatically another account states that “the people seemed stunned by the catastrophe and rushed around as jungle animals suddenly released from a cage” (DS 17) while in another study we are told about a “person left with nothing to do” (DS 18). All these descriptions of people following the impact of a disaster graphically illustrate the confused activity and oftentimes utter immobility of people following the sudden disruption of their daily ritualized lives. The evidence indicates ritual practices are a crucial component of human behavior, which fundamentally orients people’s actions towards the world. When these practices are disrupted, they lead either to a condition of immobility or directionless, unfocused behavior.

Also visible in the data are the ways rituals function in providing meaning to action. Ritual practices are grounded in symbolic frameworks that furnish significance to our actions. Evidence that meaning is lost in the disruption of ritual practices can be found among many of the studies. For instance in DS 1 we are informed that a victim is “anxious to assure himself that the whole supporting world has not collapsed” while in DS 3 various statements indicate a sense of cognitive breakdown and loss of meaning: “the end of the world, normal cognitive structures severely limited, walking around as if the world has ended, it seemed as though people felt themselves a very small part of something bigger themselves, lost in a vast human field, transient loss of individuality and identification with something else, withdrawal from self to something bigger than themselves, interpreted as destruction of the whole world, and the universe has been destroyed.” So too, in the same investigation other statements are made such as: “the objects with which he has identification and to which his behavior is normally tuned have been removed, shorn of much of the support and assistance of a culture and a society upon which he depends and from which he draws sustenance, separated from all sources of support, and without a sense of his own identity.”

We can extrapolate from these first hand accounts the necessity of ritual for meaningful and purposeful action. The descriptions of the ‘end of the world’ and the “world has become a nightmare” may certainly reflect the physical destruction surrounding individuals but there is clearly the sense that it is not only the physical world that has fallen apart but also the world of meaning for people. Without the “stable guideposts” (DS 18) that RSPs provide, individuals

struggle to make sense of the disaster and its impact on their environment. Their world has ended in a metaphorical way as well as literally. The disorientation that results involves not only action but also a very basic symbolic uncertainty.

Finally, while fewer in number and not formally categorized, there are a number of descriptive words and phrases that appear to be a combination of both action and meaning. These words and phrases highlight how action and meaning are intertwined and revealed in the disruption of ritual practices sometimes to an approximately equal degree. When investigating disruptions of ritual practices, we can analytically separate these two dimensions from each other, but it should be remembered that both are always present to varying degrees. The separation of action from meaning is an analytically useful device for understanding the impact of deritualization. Ritual practices are, however, comprised of both aspects, which are in a dynamic relationship.

The presence of both components and their relationship to each other is evident in certain data. Examples include statements such as: “cannot act coherently, blank, feelings of castration and being left naked and alone in the world” (DS 3); “went completely to pieces” (DS 5); “inability to deal realistically with the situation” (DS 6); “total disruption of social system” (DS 18); and “bizarre and illogical behavior” (DS 19). The inability to act coherently is an unequivocal reference to activity within a meaning context providing coherence to one’s deeds. Blankness describes both a lack of expressive activity and the meanings they convey. Castration is a description of feelings of impotence that can be interpreted both physically and symbolically. Nakedness and feelings of aloneness indicate how people feel stripped of the social contexts providing meaning to their behaviors and support for one’s very existence. A total disruption of the social system is a more abstract reference to the interruption of the social structures and processes leading to meaningful activity. And finally, to describe behavior as bizarre and illogical can be interpreted as practices that appear to be nonsensical.

These descriptive comments illustrate how action and meaning are so entwined that it may be conceptually difficult to separate them into distinct categories. For analytical purposes these components may be separately identified (as we have done) but in the real life of human beings they are more difficult to disconnect from each other. These observations reflect the fact that ritual practices are an integral part of meaningful social behavior. The evidence from this study demonstrates that when a disruption occurs, both meaning and action become problematic to varying degrees for actors.

5. Conclusion

Disasters can be described as an experience of deritualization. In this disruption of everyday ritual practices, people suffer a loss of orientation. They also experience a loss of meaning where the taken for granted symbolic structure providing meaning to behavior is disrupted. People often speak of their world coming to an end and being unable to comprehend what has happened to them and their community. While their post-disaster behavior may appear to be aimless and disorganized, disaster victims are actually doing the important work of reconstituting their social worlds. These examples of deritualization illustrate how ritual practices provide a framework for both action and meaning and while they may be analytically delineated, they should be understood as being intertwined together to varying degrees.

This study has important implications. We would emphasize that understanding disasters as instances of deritualization creates practical possibilities for responding to disasters. The theoretical perspective driving this study does not view efforts to recreate ritual practices subsequent to a disaster as pathological forms of retreatism or regressive behavior. Rather, it would see these behaviors as normal (or natural) human attempts to reconstitute the social world. Responders to disaster could directly facilitate this process by helping individuals and communities reconstitute ritual practices that structure social action.

In conclusion, further research on deritualization is called for. Empirical studies of the experience of disaster victims should be conducted specifically focusing on deritualization. Furthermore, studies should be developed addressing how ritual practices mitigate the psychological and social stresses of disasters and contribute to the resiliency of people in such situations. Researchers need to identify and categorize the specific ritual practices victims recreate to cope with disasters. This study highlights the need to understand disasters as an instance of deritualization.

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