

Sue A. Blanshan. *Hospitals in "Rough Waters"*  
*The Effects of a Flood Disaster on Organizational Change*. Ph.D. Dissertation. Department of Sociology, Ohio State University, 1975.

One of the recurring problems in disaster research, at least from a sociological perspective, is the problem of analyzing the effects of a major disaster and its aftermath in terms of changes brought about in organizations impacted by the disaster. Damage to property, loss of life, physical dislocation of populations are all fairly obvious effects; however, more subtle and infinitely more difficult to ascertain is whether or not significant change occurs in key organizations under the stress of a disaster situation.

This study attempts to determine if, in fact, change did take place in four general hospitals in Luzerne County, Pennsylvania, in the wake

of Hurricane Agnes and the ensuing flood which ravaged a large area of the county. The author documents changes in the hospitals' organizational structures within a period of two-and-a-half years after the initial flood impact. An important aspect of this research is that it moves beyond the early post-disaster period (on which most disaster research focuses) into the period of organizational rehabilitation and consolidation leading to a new "steady state" in a time of relative "normalcy". The extended time line utilized for analysis raises a critical and vexatious issue: where changes occur in organizational structures beyond a brief time subsequent to a disaster impact, can the disaster be designated as the causal agent of change? Or, would the changes have occurred whether or not a disaster intervened?

In order to deal with this issue, and to determine if changes, in fact, developed in the

hospitals' structures, the author utilizes what she designates as a "structuralist perspective and an open-system perspective." The advantage of the open-system framework is that it highlights the significance of changes in the organization's environment — obviously critical if one is attempting to analyze the effects of a disaster on organizations. She states that, "change is conceptualized as an alteration of an organizational structure in response to a system problem." The author develops a typology of change in four dimensions: source, impetus, scope, and duration, and relates these to structural areas in which change will take place: power, demand, ecological, personnel, and interorganizational structure. Borrowing from organizational theorists, she looks at organizational problem-solving processes: allocation, coordination, integration, adaptation, maintenance, and output.

This complex analytical framework is skillfully superimposed on carefully gathered empirical data related to the hospitals. Essentially, her conclusion is that the disaster *influenced* change along all structural dimensions of the hospitals' organizations (in some areas more than in others, and differentially between hospitals that were actually flooded and those that escaped physical damage). However, the changes that the author documents are relatively minor, considering the impact of a major disaster which disrupted almost all facets of community life. She deals with this by distinguishing between changes *in* organizations and changes *of* organizations. Despite this somewhat artificial distinction, the conclusion remains that the hospitals were not transformed, but continued to function essentially as they did prior to the flood. My own research in Luzerne County points up how little the infrastructure of organizations has changed. Especially, the overall patterns of pre-flood health care delivery in the area has persisted into the post-flood period.

Is the analytical framework utilized in this study helpful in determining the extent of

organizational change in the aftermath of a disaster? I believe the answer is yes with certain qualifications. The tools of analysis utilized by the author are developed from the open-system approach, which views organizational change from the perspective of problem-solving occurring on an ongoing basis. Equally to the point, the open-system approach introduces the environment into analysis in order to relate it to the problem of the system as a whole, and in disasters this is critical since the environment is so drastically affected. In recent years a great deal of organizational research has tended to concentrate on the external sources of change, arguing that such factors are always the most critical. This is hardly surprising since the proponents of open-system analysis assume that organizations have an inherent strain towards internal equilibrium which is only halted by disturbances generated from outside.

An organization is seen as seeking to adapt, and the frequency and nature of its change is to be explained as the outcome of an impersonal process through which it attempts to satisfy its needs in the face of an often recalcitrant environment. Now clearly one would not seek to deny that the society in which an organization is located plays a crucial part in change. Nevertheless, it is necessary to point out that the relationship between organizational structure and a changing environment will not be mechanical but will be governed by the definitions of the situations used by the participants. The physical character of the environment only sets limits, but within these limits the environment may be interpreted in widely different ways, and the reaction of members of different organizations is likely to vary. It is a danger in disaster research that the overwhelming impact of a disaster agent will cause analysis to be heavily weighted toward environmental factors without considering the input of organizational members in determining change. Change arises out of the interaction of actors. For the action that occurs confirms certain expectations of the actors and refutes others. It also involves the

attainment of certain ends, while suggesting to the actors that other ends are unattainable. They eventually reorient their actions in the light of the new definition of the situation. This does not imply that what the actors subjectively want to happen as a result of their acts will necessarily occur: it is important, in other words, to take account of both the intended and unintended consequences of action.

The present study does not deal with the actors in as meaningfully a way as it deals with environmental forces and the hospitals' organ-

izational structures. As a result, the significance or lack of significance of change is not as sharply drawn as it might have been. Nevertheless, this is an important work that will greatly assist researchers attempting to deal with the issue of organizational change in future disaster situations, as well as in more normal periods.

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