

THE AMERICAN NATIONAL RED CROSS AND IMAGE MAINTENANCE: A RESEARCH NOTE*

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The sociological literature concerning disasters has typically indicated that members of the public with disaster experience hold a negative image of the Red Cross. For example, Barton (1970) notes that, "The recurring fact ... is the existence of a significant minority who express hostility toward the Red Cross and similarly professionalized relief agencies." (p. 297).

Moore (1958) in a study of two tornado disasters observes that the Red Cross was a major source of relief for families in both communities, but that respondents also ranked the Red Cross among the lowest in terms of its adequacy of performance. Of twelve organizations listed, the Red Cross was ranked twelfth in one community and eleventh in the other. This is a surprisingly negative evaluation for an organization which provided relief to more households in both communities than any other single agency.

Similarly, in the classic study of the Flint-Beecher tornado, Form and Nosow

(1958) found that the Red Cross suffered the greatest number and percentage of negative evaluations of any of the more than fifty organizations mentioned in interviews with victims. This pattern of negative responses was interpreted as being potentially due to the Red Cross' relatively long-term involvement in the rehabilitation process.

Quarantelli and Dynes (1972) summarized such findings. They state that "Townpeople often see the Red Cross and Governmental rescue teams as impersonal, unsympathetic, cold, and insensitive to local problems and issues." (p. 70). Thus while the Red Cross is typically viewed as *the* disaster relief agency, evidence has appeared to indicate that disaster experience tends to generate negative evaluations of the agency.

There are a number of factors which may account, in part, for the negative evaluations. First, the dual structure of professionals and volunteers utilized by the Red Cross has been offered as a source of local resentment. Disaster operations are generally directed by professional staff members whose actions, at times, may lead to conflict with local volunteers in the organization (Adams, 1970; p. 394–5). Second, regional officials typically inundate a community during a disaster. Unfamiliar with local social, economic, and cultural conditions, these "outsiders" are often resented. As Quarantelli and Dynes (1972) observed: "The victims feel that it is *their*

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disaster and they do not want outsiders coming in to take credit for the work done during the emergency period." (p. 70). Third, unlike other relief agencies, the Red Cross continues its operations into the period of long-range relief and restoration. As has been noted, it is during this period that social conflict tends to emerge in the disaster process. (Dynes and Quarantelli, 1971; Wenger, 1978). Fourth, not only are Red Cross officials frequently "outsiders," but in the past regulations governing the issuance of their assistance during the rehabilitation phase tended to conflict with the open, "no questions asked," aid given during the emergency period (Adams, p. 395). Whatever the reasons, however, the literature has traditionally been consistent in demonstrating that the Red Cross suffers from a negative image among disaster victims.

With respect to this literature, two observations can be made. First, although the traditional studies were consistent in their findings, recent research reported by Wright (1976) once again raises the question of the image of the Red Cross. Wright reports that following the Wilkes-Barre flood, the Red Cross when compared to other organisations, did not receive the consistently negative evaluations reported in the past. This study would seem to indicate that either the situation is changing, or that faulty generalizations may have been drawn from limited cases in the past. Inasmuch as the Red Cross has modified its regulations concerning long-range assistance, it may be that Wright's findings are more a reflection of a changing situation.

Second, all of these investigations were conducted with samples of disaster victims immediately or shortly after the impact of the disaster agent. As such they are indicative of immediate post-disaster observations by victims, but do not directly address the question of the long-term effect of disaster experience and other factors on the image of the Red Cross. The image of the Red Cross, or any other relief organization, is the

result of numerous disaster experiences that combine in an interactive manner to produce the agency's legacy. To examine this issue requires studying communities which have experienced repeated disasters at a point distant in time from the most recent impact.

It is with respect to these two issues that this paper examines the image of the Red Cross. Simply put, we are interested in considering the evaluation of the Red Cross in communities that have experienced disasters in the past. On the basis of prior investigations we would expect that the agency would be negatively evaluated by at least a significant minority of the residents of such communities. The extent to which such observations hold for the long-term image has not been investigated previously.

METHODOLOGY

Currently we are engaged in an investigation of disaster knowledge and planning in three mid-western communities. These communities were selected because they appeared to possess elements of "disaster subcultures". One community is a flood community that has experienced serious flooding on two occasions in the last decade, although no major flood has occurred since 1969. Another of the communities has experienced tornadoes. It has been hit twice in the last eight years, the most recent being in 1973. Finally, a community with extensive hurricane experience was selected. This community is located on the Gulf Coast and has experienced numerous impacts and threats over the years; its last major experience was in 1969.

Within each community a random sample of households was selected. In each community approximately 300 interviews were conducted by telephone with response rates varying by community from a low of 67 percent to a high of 85 percent. The respondents were queried about their knowledge of disaster be-

havior and hazards, their past disaster experience, and their expectations for emergency action on the part of local organizations.

Among the questions asked was the following: "Do you agree or disagree that the Red Cross has come to be regarded by disaster victims in the United States as a very helpful disaster-relief agency?" The answer to this question combined with information regarding the respondents' disaster experience constitute the data-base for this report.

Findings

Overall, 907 respondents answered the central question. Of these, 748 (82.6 percent) agreed, 131 (14.4 percent) disagreed, and 27 (3 percent) indicated they did not know. Initially this speaks very well for the image of the Red Cross. The overwhelming majority of these respondents in disaster communities apparently believe that the Red Cross is positively viewed by disaster victims.

However, breaking down the data by the previous disaster experience of the respondents yields results which would apparently support the previous literature. As can be seen in Table I, 16.6 percent of those with disaster experience disagreed with the statement, while only 9.5 percent of those without such prior experience disagreed. The differences in the two distributions is statistically significant (Chi Square = 9.8, $p \leq 0.01$).

It should be noted, however, that the statistical significance of the above finding rests on a difference of only 7.1 percent between the disagree responses of the two experience categories. Although the relationship is statistically significant, the difference of 7.1 percent is probably of marginal substantive importance.

Further analysis reveals that the relationship between perceived Red Cross image and disaster experience varies according to community. Table II displays the relationship

in each of the three communities. In two communities there is clearly no statistically significant relationship exhibited. In the flood community the Chi Square statistic does indicate statistical significance [1].

TABLE I

Crosstabulation of Responses to Red Cross Image Question by Respondents' Experience^a

Image Response ^b	Disaster Experience	
	Yes	No
Agree	81.0% (512)*	86.1% (236)
Disagree	16.6% (105)	9.5% (26)

*Numbers in parentheses indicate raw values. Chi Square = 7.3 ($p \leq 0.05$). ^aThe question posed was "Do you agree or disagree that the Red Cross has come to be regarded by disaster victims in the United States as a very helpful disaster relief agency." ^b"Don't Know" responses have been eliminated from the table.

TABLE II

Crosstabulation of Responses to Red Cross Image Question by Respondents' Disaster Experience and Community^c

Image Response ^d	Community					
	Hurricane ^a		Tornado ^b		Flood ^c	
	Experience	Experience	Experience	Experience	Experience	Experience
	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
Agree	78.3% (209)*	83.3 (30)	87.6 (184)	85.9 (79)	76.8 (119)	87.0 (127)
Disagree	19.5 (52)	11.1 (4)	11.0 (23)	9.8 (9)	19.4 (30)	8.9 (13)

*Numbers in parentheses indicate raw values. ^aChi Square = 0.82 (n.s.). ^bChi Square = 0.00 (n.s.). ^cChi Square = 5.88 ($p \leq 0.02$). ^d"Don't Know" responses have been eliminated from the table. ^eThe question posed was "Do you agree or disagree that the Red Cross has come to be regarded by disaster victims in the United States as a very helpful disaster relief agency."

DISCUSSION

Clearly, in some instances, disaster experience and presumed contact with the Red Cross will generate ill will, or the perception of negative evaluations by others, toward the Red Cross. However, it can reasonably be offered that this observation may apply to any organization involved in relief activities, even under the best of circumstances. Although the data presented would appear to statistically support this conclusion, and the findings are consistent with the bulk of previously reported research, the difference in the percentage of those who perceive a negative image in the experienced and inexperienced categories is relatively small. It is so small that it may not be of great importance.

One additional observation can be made from the data presented. Earlier it was mentioned that the Red Cross has altered its regulations regarding eligibility for and the amount of relief. This alteration involves a shift from decision criteria based on need to a system based on "across the board" or equal treatment. In the past the Red Cross has always proceeded on a "no questions asked" basis during the emergency period and then shifted to relief on the basis of need during the longer-term rehabilitation period. As Adams indicates, "The policy of meeting 'need and not loss' sometimes appears to victims of a disaster to be a program designed to reward persons who have not planned for an emergency and punish those who have" (p. 395).

Of course the sudden shift from the relatively open emergency regulations to the restrictive rehabilitation regulations did not aid the organization's image. However, since Hurricane Camille in 1969, the Red Cross has shifted toward a more equitable program of standardized relief during rehabilitation based on loss [2]. By chance, not design, two of the communities studied had their most recent major impacts in 1969 or prior

to this change in policy. One of the communities' (tornado) most recent impact was in 1973; after the policy change in 1971.

Comparing the responses of those with disaster experience, we find that 19.5 percent and 19.4 percent disagreed with the statement in the hurricane and flood communities. However, only 11.0 percent disagreed in the tornado community. It should also be noted that among those without disaster experience there appears to be no significant differences in the "disagree" percentages in each community.

Another way of looking at this is to compare the differences in percentage "disagree" responses between the experienced and inexperienced groups in each community. The tornado community shows a difference of only 1.2 percent, while the hurricane and flood communities show differences of 8.4 percent and 10.5 percent respectively. If this difference is interpreted as a "percentage loss in image," it is obvious that the Red Cross has fared better more recently.

In conclusion, it appears that the severe negative evaluations of the Red Cross reported in the short-run following disasters do not persist in the form of an organizational legacy over longer periods of time. There are, perhaps, three possible explanations for differences between short- and long-term perceptions. First, as noted, the change in regulations concerning rehabilitation relief and a resultant less apparent shift in regulations from the emergency to rehabilitation phases may have reduced even the short-term hostility among disaster victims. Although the evidence reported here does not directly address the question of the effects of changes in these regulations, it does suggest the hypothesis that the Red Cross has garnered some benefit in terms of its public image [3].

Second, it should not be forgotten that the Red Cross is an agency which has public contact continuously, not just during disaster periods. The agency provides numerous other

community services on a continuing basis. Over the long-run, these services might reasonably be expected to mitigate against any negative feelings generated in the midst of crisis situations.

Finally, the Red Cross' image is also manipulated through the mass media. The agencies relief efforts are faithfully reported when disaster strikes. Furthermore, it is not at all unusual to be reminded repeatedly of the agencies' services through public service messages or advertisements soliciting contributions. In all probability all of these factors contribute to the overall image of the Red Cross.

These findings clearly indicate that the previous literature, by concentrating on more immediate disaster reactions, may have misconstrued the Red Cross' true public image among disaster victims. The discrepancies between previous findings and ours would indicate that further research should proceed with the goal of investigating the process of image development for relief agencies. Perhaps then, in the professional literature, the agency's cross will be less of a burden to bear.

NOTES

- 1 In an analysis such as this the "Don't Know" response category may become of statistical importance and even alter the interpretation of the results. For this reason significance tests were performed both including and excluding that category. Since no difference in outcome was found only the agree and disagree categories are used in the Tables.
- 2 Information concerning the shift in Red Cross rehabilitation relief regulations was obtained in a conversation with Mr. Roy Popkin, Assistant National Director of Disaster Services for the American National Red Cross. The authors wish to thank Mr. Popkin for his kind assistance.
- 3 Additionally it should be noted that, concurrent with the change in regulations, the Red Cross has had a reduced involvement in long-term, high cost rehabilitation which cannot be standardized (e.g. replacement of structures) as direct federal moneys have become available. It could be suggested that the federal bureaucracy has, perhaps, absorbed some of the image problems involved in such projects.

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