CHAPTER 25

The Popular Culture of Disaster: Exploring a New Dimension of Disaster Research

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In January of 2002, just 4 months after the tragic terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in New York, the President of the United States delivered the annual State of the Union address. That speech contained chilling words about life in the post-9/11 era. Specifically, the President (2002) said, "The last time I spoke here, I expressed the hope that life would return to normal. In some ways, it has. In others, it never will."

Is it possible for a single event to permanently alter social life? And, if so, how has that event changed things? Does everybody perceive those changes in the same way? Is there agreement or disagreement on the desirability of those changes?

These questions point to an important, but not always appreciated, point about disasters—that they have a significant cultural dimension. Looking across the landscape of popular culture, disasters are everywhere. Television news media flock to the scenes of major disasters and provide around the clock coverage of human suffering. Film producers make millions of dollars on special effects-laden tales of man against nature. Investigative television shows look into the causes of a single disaster or attempt to rank the devastating impacts of numerous events. Cable networks allow those interested to keep continual tabs on weather developments and offer viewers periodic recollections of past storms. And apocalyptic video games give people the chance to save an entire city from complete and utter ruin.

Following catastrophic events, survivors and responders also engage in a wide range of cultural production. They tell jokes and share stories about the events. Buildings are spray-painted with graffiti to convey messages of hope, humor, or frustration. New rituals are enacted to provide order and meaning to their lives, including those surrounding the handling of the dead. Makeshift memorials are created to allow survivors the opportunity to share their emotions and remember those they lost. And poems and songs are written in efforts to make sense of what happened.

Clearly, disasters are important cultural events. But should social scientists spend their time studying movies, graffiti, and jokes? The assumption of this chapter is that they absolutely should study these things. Over the past 50 years, we have learned a great deal about

the structural aspects of disasters, but our knowledge of their cultural dimensions is far less developed and somewhat scattered.

Thus, the primary objective of this chapter is to make a case for exploring the cultural dimensions of disasters. In discussing what will be called the popular culture of disaster, this chapter reviews a range of studies from different disciplines, all of which deal in some way with culture. The chapter is organized into five sections: (1) a review of the structural bias in disaster research, (2) a discussion of the cultural strain of disaster research, (3) a conceptualization of the popular culture of disaster and a review of relevant studies, (4) a rationale for studying the topic, and (5) a discussion of future research possibilities in the area.

THE STRUCTURAL BIAS OF DISASTER RESEARCH

Social scientists in the United States first began systematically studying disasters in the 1950s (Quarantelli, 1987a, 1994). Findings from their studies have been summarized at various times over the past 50 years (Drabek, 1986; Fritz, 1961a; Kreps, 1984; Quarantelli & Dynes, 1977; Tierney, Lindell, & Perry, 2001). In sum, researchers argue that various conventional images of disasters—including chaos, panic, looting, and social breakdown—are stereotypes and myths (Fischer, 1998a; Quarantelli, 1960). Instead, empirical studies consistently demonstrate that human societies are remarkably resilient in response to large-scale crises.

In studying the social aspects of disasters, researchers have assumed that such events provide real-world laboratories for examining basic social processes (Fritz, 1961a). Specifically, they have explored the relationship between social structure and disaster (Kreps, 1989c). And in that equation they have for the most part treated social structure as a dependent variable—that is, they have examined the impacts of disasters on social arrangements. Dynes (1970), for example, developed a typology to capture the various ways in which organizations alter their structures and tasks to meet heightened demands created by disasters. Similarly, but at a different level of analysis, Kreps and Bosworth (1993) have documented the impacts of disasters on role systems.

The structural bias of disaster research makes sense when one considers the intellectual climate in which the field emerged. During the 1950s, structural functionalism dominated the discipline of sociology in the United States (Turner, 1986). That approach views society as a system in which various parts must work in concert to ensure the successful performance and survival of the larger system. According to this model, a disruption to one part has ripple effects throughout the entire system. Disasters, then, represent a type of disruption that has potentially debilitating effects on the social system. Reflecting on the pervasive influence of functionalism at the time, Fritz (1961a, p. 655) defined disasters as, "... an event, concentrated in time and space, in which a society ... incurs such losses ... that the social structure is disrupted and the fulfillment of all or some of the essential functions of the society is prevented." This definition, which views society as a system of interrelated and interdependent parts, is clearly derived from structural functionalism, and it continues to guide a substantial amount of research in the field today.

In recent years, disaster researchers have increasingly turned toward conflict and political economic perspectives to guide their work (Stallings, 2002c; Tierney, 1989), but even these studies tend to emphasize structure over culture. However, instead of treating social structure as a dependent variable, researchers are beginning to view social structure as a causal force—that is, an independent variable—behind disasters. They point out that organizations

play a significant role in creating disasters (Tierney, 1999) and that race, class, and gender stratification places some people at greater risk than others (Enarson & Morrow, 1998; Fothergill & Peek, 2004; Fothergill, Maestas, & Darlington, 1999).

Beyond the intellectual influences on disaster research, there are other factors that may help explain the structural bias of the field. Because the military funded the earliest studies, the area has had a strong applied orientation from the beginning. Early on that meant producing research that would improve the military's understanding of what might happen in the event of an enemy attack (Fritz, 1961a). Today, that means conducting research that helps various local, state, and federal agencies better respond to disasters. While this applied orientation is important and valuable, some critics contend that it has impeded theoretical development and resulted in a managerial bias—that is, a primary concern with improving the efficiency of response agencies (Bolin and Stanford, 1998).

On the basis of this discussion, it is clear that important intellectual and applied influences have shaped the field of disaster research. Those influences have combined to produce a structural bias, which has been both productive and limiting. On the positive side, we have learned a great deal about social system responses to disasters—namely, that those responses are organized, not chaotic. However, our understanding of the cultural dimensions of disasters is far less developed.

THE CULTURAL STRAIN OF DISASTER RESEARCH

Within the discipline of sociology, culture is beginning to occupy a more prominent position (Bonnell & Hunt, 1999). For example, rather than focusing on Durkheim's (1984) structural analysis in *The Division of Labor in Society*, scholars are paying much more attention to the role of culture and rituals highlighted in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1995). Neo-Marxists, such as Habermas (1975), argue that social change comes about not just from changes in the economic base but also from the cultural life world. And Weber's (1958) *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, which showed the powerful role of cultural beliefs in shaping human history, continues to be popular.

Various subfields in sociology have also taken cultural turns recently. For example, scholars in the field of social movements focused for years on organizational structures, resources, and political opportunities, but now they are more likely to emphasize symbols, cultural framing, and collective identity in their analyses of protest (Johnston & Klandermans, 1995; McAdam, McCarthy, & Zald, 1996; Tarrow, 1998). Similarly, sociologists who study organizations now talk about "organizational impression management" and other cultural dynamics (Giacalone & Rosenfeld, 1989).

While the field of disaster research has not fully made a cultural turn, it is moving in that direction. And there is a historical basis for that move. Indeed, there is an important, but to some extent ignored, cultural strain of disaster research. As Nigg (1994) points out, symbolic interactionism exerted a strong influence on the field's development. That perspective characterizes society as fluid and emergent, and it emphasizes the importance of symbols, meanings, and the definition of the situation. Given that symbolic interactionism has its roots at the University of Chicago and that the first field studies of disaster were conducted by researchers there, it is not surprising that this perspective has influenced the field.

Unlike the functionalist perspective, which emphasizes social structure, the symbolic interactionist view recognizes the importance of culture. Reflecting that concern, Fritz (1952,

p. 2), a pioneer of disaster research, wrote in an unpublished paper, "The folklore . . . of every society reflects the powerful role that disasters have played in the life of the people." He goes on to point out that in every society disasters have provided one of the most dominant themes in art, music, folk tales, and other cultural products. Thirty years later Quarantelli (1985, p. 32), a member of the first disaster field teams at Chicago, similarly observed, ". . . that another major source of beliefs about disasters is derived from popular culture." He then described popular culture as including television programs, films, novels, comic books, and other cultural products disseminated through the mass media.

Thus, although the field of disaster research has a strong structural bias, it also has a noticeable cultural strain running through it. And in recent years, a number of scholars have been adding to it. For example, a recent special issue of the *International Journal of Mass Emergencies and Disasters* was devoted to the popular culture of disaster (Webb, Wachtendorf, & Eyre, 2000). In addition, several books focusing on the cultural dimensions of disasters have been published in the last few years (Biel, 2001; Browne & Neal, 2001; Hoffman & Oliver-Smith, 2002; Webb & Quarantelli, 2006).

There is clearly something of a cultural turn occurring in disaster research. As the field makes that turn, it is important to get some grasp on what has already been done and develop conceptual tools to guide future research in this burgeoning area. Thus, the next section offers a conceptual view of the popular culture of disaster and reviews relevant empirical studies that have been published over the past few years.

CONCEPTUALIZING THE POPULAR CULTURE OF DISASTER

While most people are likely to have some sense of what the popular culture of disaster is, the boundaries of the new area are still somewhat unclear. For research purposes, though, it is important to develop some guiding ideas as to what should be considered under this topic. Because disaster themes are prevalent across a diffuse range of cultural products, it is difficult to frame specific research questions without at least a generic definition of the popular culture of disaster. To develop that definition both deductive and inductive approaches can be taken. In the former case, one would start by spelling out even in general terms what the popular culture of disaster is and then researchers would go out and conduct studies that fit into that framework. In the latter case, one would develop the concept on the basis of various studies that have already been done. Ultimately, perhaps the best way of getting a better grasp on the concept is to employ both deduction and induction.

Thus, from a deductive approach, we could begin developing an inventory of cultural products with disaster themes and delineating some specific dimensions along which those items vary. As Quarantelli observed in an e-mail message in 1998 (cited in Webb et al., 2000), the popular culture of disaster includes—but is certainly not limited to—such things as disaster jokes and humor, board games and puzzles with disaster themes, folk legends and beliefs about disasters, disaster calendars, songs and poems created at times of disasters, disaster predictions (e.g., the Iben Browning earthquake prediction) and reactions to them, disaster novels and films (including spoofs of the latter), disaster anniversary newspaper issues, Great Flood myths, on-site graffiti, memorial services of certain kinds, cartoons and comic strips with disaster themes, and disaster apparel (e.g., t-shirts, hats, and buttons).

While this type of inventory is an important preliminary step in defining the topic, the next step is to formulate a systematic definition. At a very general level, for example, we can distinguish between material (e.g., books and movies) and non-material (e.g., jokes and myths) products. We can also distinguish between the cultural products of disaster survivors (e.g., graffiti), and those things that are produced by mainstream cultural workers. Similarly, we can distinguish between those cultural items produced in the immediate aftermath of a disaster event and those that are produced, distributed, and consumed via more traditional means (e.g., disaster movies). Therefore, a formal definition of the popular culture of disaster must capture the following four dimensions: (1) a characterization of the product itself, (2) the identity of its producer(s), (3) the timing of its production, and (4) the means by which it is distributed and consumed.

An inductive approach to conceptualizing the popular culture of disaster begins with empirical observations. Based on that approach, it is necessary to survey the studies that have already been done on the topic. While the existing studies on the topic are varied and scattered, it is possible to separate them into at least two broad camps. One camp consists of those studies that assess the impacts of disaster events on some aspect of culture—that is, like the earlier work on social structure, they treat culture as a dependent variable. The other camp approaches culture as an independent variable, examining the role of cultural beliefs and practices in contributing to or exacerbating disasters.

Numerous studies in recent years have focused on the cultural impacts of disasters. For example, researchers have studied the emergence of humor in the wake of disasters (Couch & Wade, 2003) and its use as a coping strategy among emergency workers (Moran, 1990). They have assessed the impacts of disasters on collective memory (Bos, Ullberg, & Hart, 2005) and the emergence and meaning of post-disaster memorials (Eyre, 2006; Imai, 2002). Research has been conducted on the varieties of graffiti that often appear in disaster-stricken communities (Hagen, Ender, Tiemann, & Hagen, 1999). It has also looked at the role of women's quilting groups in making sense of disasters (Enarson, 2000b). And several studies have documented the broader cultural impacts of recent terrorist attacks (Abrams, Albright, & Panofsky, 2004; Stein, 1999; Turkel, 2002).

In addition to research on the impacts of disasters on culture, a growing body of work focuses on the ways in which culture puts people at risk. For example, research suggests that disaster movies perpetuate various myths that alter people's perceptions of risk and understanding of protective measures they should take (Bahk & Neuwirth, 2000; Mitchell, Thomas, Hill, & Cutter, 2000; Quarantelli, 1985). Research has also pointed out how cultural and religious beliefs sometimes impede communities from taking proactive steps to prevent future disasters (Schmuck, 2000). Importantly, several recent studies argue that cultures that exist in bureaucratic organizations produce mistakes and disasters (Adams & Balfour, 1998; Hopkins, 1999; Richardson, 1993; Vaughan, 1999). These organizations often value profit over safety, misperceive risk, and produce "fantasy documents" that give the public the sometimes misleading impression that things are under control (Clarke, 1999). Even "high reliability organizations" that are purported to have deeply entrenched safety cultures have serious shortcomings (Sagan, 1993).

Based on this discussion, it is clear that disasters have an important cultural dimension. Disasters impact culture, and culture contributes to disasters. It is also clear from this discussion that the field of disaster research has begun to take a cultural turn. While other fields of study have gone much further down that path, disaster research is building momentum. And, as the studies reviewed here demonstrate, the cultural path is worth pursuing. The next section provides a rationale for paying closer attention to the cultural side of disasters.

RATIONALE FOR STUDYING THE POPULAR CULTURE OF DISASTER

In terms of a rationale for studying the popular culture of disaster, there are important conceptual and applied reasons for this type of research. At a conceptual level, work in this area should sharpen our understanding of popular culture more generally and inform ongoing debates about the role of elitists and locals in the production of culture. In an applied sense, popular images of disaster are likely to shape people's knowledge about disasters and how they respond to them—not just members of the public but also those working in emergency management, law enforcement, and other governmental agencies. Thus, it seems worthwhile for those who study disasters to gain a thorough and systematic understanding of how disasters are interpreted in a variety of contexts.

The conceptual value of studying the popular culture of disaster may not be obvious to some, but it is substantial. In the broader areas of social and cultural theory, the concept of popular culture is treated in two vastly different ways (Mukerji & Schudson, 1991; Storey, 1998; Traube, 1996). Some theorists, on the one hand, consider popular culture to be synonymous with mass culture, and they view it in very negative terms. Drawing on the concept of hegemony (Gramsci, 1971) and the idea of a culture industry (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1996), they view popular culture as something that is produced by society's elitists to control and appease the masses. Control is exerted by influencing people's understanding of public issues, shaping the tastes and preferences of consumers, and silencing genuine political debate (Habermas, 1994; Mills, 1963). Appeasement is accomplished by using entertainment to divert people's attention away from important social problems and political concerns. In light of this rather cynical view, theorists in this tradition regard popular culture as a major threat to participatory democracy.

Some theorists, on the other hand, view popular culture as something that is produced by common people for themselves (Williams, 1983). This view, which emerged relatively recently, represents a major paradigm shift in the field of cultural studies. McGuigan (1992, p. 4), for example, refers to this new approach as cultural populism, defined as "the intellectual assumption, made by some students of popular culture, that the symbolic experiences and practices of ordinary people are more important analytically than Culture with a capital C." From the perspective of cultural populists, culture is produced from the bottom-up not top-down. While "mass society" models emphasize elite ideological control, populists view culture as something that is locally produced and empowering.

Since its inception disaster research has contributed to our understanding of basic theoretical issues (Fritz, 1961a; Kreps, 1985). In light of the two divergent views on popular culture summarized here, there is an opportunity for disaster researchers to contribute to an important and long-standing theoretical debate. While studies of the popular culture of disaster may not resolve the debate, they will certainly shed light on it.

On the one hand, for example, research on disaster movies affirms the cynical view of popular culture. These movies, which are very popular and generate millions of dollars, are produced by powerful and wealthy elitists who have vested interests in the status quo. And they often perpetuate harmful stereotypes about race, class, and gender. On the other hand, survivor-produced culture is very different and affirms the populist model. Disaster survivors often use graffiti, for example, to convey messages of hope and humor or express grievances about the official response. Unlike disaster movies, which are preplanned, carefully produced, and strategically distributed, graffiti is emergent, spontaneous, ephemeral, and publicly displayed.

Based on these examples, the popular culture of disaster can be interpreted from both mass society and populist perspectives.

There are also important applied reasons for studying the popular culture of disaster. Whether one is concerned with disaster preparedness, response, recovery, or mitigation, the role of culture must be understood. In some instances, such as in the case of "disaster subcultures," culture serves as a source of resilience for local communities (Wenger & Weller, 1973). However, in other situations culture contributes to disasters.

Arguably, the greatest impediment to effective disaster response in the United States is the perpetuation of disaster myths, even among those in the emergency management profession (Fischer, 1998a; Wenger, James, & Faupel, 1985). These myths suggest that disasters create chaos, panic, looting, and other antisocial behavior—that is, complete social breakdown. Of course, 50 years of social science research demonstrates that the opposite occurs in the wake of disaster—crime rates go down, solidarity increases, and pro-social behavior prevails. If communities are actually resilient under stress, why do so many people, including public officials, believe they are so fragile and susceptible to collapse?

Tierney (2003) argues that disaster myths have survived because powerful institutional interests benefit from them. In particular, the military–industrial complex, law enforcement agencies, and the growing information technology industry all stand to profit from the erroneous beliefs that civil society is vulnerable, that individuals faced with crisis are irrational and need to be controlled, and that the most effective way to respond to a disaster is by establishing a strong hierarchy of command and control. Tierney's assessment of the situation is particularly astute in light of recent changes at the national level in the area of emergency management. With the creation of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) after 9/11 and the placement of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) within it, critics feared that the move would undermine FEMA's autonomy and weaken its ability to respond to disasters in a timely and effective manner. Those fears proved valid in 2005 when Hurricane Katrina struck the Gulf Coast and left residents of New Orleans stranded on rooftops for days before the federal response reached adequate levels.

Culture is also an important factor in disaster preparedness. For example, research has long suggested that disaster warnings need to be clear and consistent, come from a credible source, provide clear instructions, and reach a diverse audience (Tierney et al., 2001). Yet, in response to the attacks of 9/11, one of the most devastating disasters in U.S. history, the federal government developed a warning system that is seriously flawed (Aguirre, 2004). Rather than clarifying the nature of the terrorist threat and providing citizens specific instructions to make themselves less vulnerable, the color-coded alert system has created substantial confusion and ambiguity.

Mitigation is another area in which culture plays a significant role. At the most general level, consider the competing and potentially contradictory values of safety and profit in capitalist societies. In making decisions about safety federal, state, and local governments make trade-offs in determining which measures are feasible and which are too costly. While some politicians may place a little more emphasis on safety, profit is a highly cherished value in capitalist societies. For communities to become safer, then, a change of values will have to occur. Thus, Mileti (1999) advocates a cultural shift in which sustainability, not merely profit, but becomes a guiding value. In a recent article about the 9/11 attacks, Mitchell (2003) identify another threat to disaster mitigation: terrorism. He describes a cultural shift after 9/11 in which preparedness and response to terrorism became top policy priorities at the national level, overshadowing mitigation for natural hazards. The consequences of this shift became apparent to everyone when Hurricane Katrina struck the Gulf Coast.

Based on this discussion, a case can easily be made for studying the popular culture of disaster. Conceptually, disaster researchers have an opportunity to contribute to important debates about the role of culture in society. And in an applied sense, research in this area provides insights that can be used to improve disaster preparedness, response, recovery, and mitigation. The next section discusses some possible areas of future research.

FUTURE RESEARCH ON THE POPULAR CULTURE OF DISASTER

Having discussed what the popular culture of disaster is and having provided a rationale for studying it, this section of the chapter suggests some possible directions for future research. As the field develops, it will surely benefit from studies on a diverse range of topics conducted by scholars from various disciplines. While there are numerous directions the field could go, this section will discuss five potentially fruitful areas of investigation. Specifically, future research should address: (1) prominent cultural symbols and their preservation, (2) the rhetoric or framing of disaster, (3) the persistence of disaster myths, (4) the production of culture in consensus and conflict events, and (5) the impact of cultural representations on disaster research.

Every society has prominent symbols in which great pride is taken because they embody core values and commemorate notable accomplishments. Capital buildings, monuments, skyscrapers, museums, and other cultural artifacts are highly valued and deeply cherished assets, but they are vulnerable. Tornadoes, hurricanes, and earthquakes are capable of destroying them. And, as the attacks on the World Trade Center revealed, they can become targets for terrorists. Despite the prominence and vulnerability of these cultural objects, very little social science research has been conducted in this area (Quarantelli, 2002). In the humanities, some important applied reports have been published on how to preserve books, photographs, and other collections (Norris, 1998; Ruzicka, 2002b). Social science research could further shed light on how to protect and preserve important cultural symbols by studying, for example, disaster preparedness levels among museums, libraries, and other repositories. In their studies, researchers could identify various factors associated with higher or lower levels of preparedness. Certainly, there is still a need for research on emergency management organizations, police and fire departments, and other response agencies, but we also need studies of those organizations that exist to protect and preserve important elements of culture.

When disasters occur, people interpret them in different ways. Some people view disasters as the result of divine intervention. Others regard them as failures of government. And still others see them strictly as natural phenomena. Given this diversity of views, it is clear that disasters are social constructs (Larabee, 2003; Stallings, 1995). The post-disaster time period is a contested terrain in which various groups (victims, the media, and public officials) attempt to make sense of the event. In some cases, there is agreement on what happened, and in other cases there is conflict and disagreement. As Dove and Khan (1995) suggest, the way a disaster is socially constructed matters. If an event is defined as unforeseeable or beyond human control, it is not likely that corrective measures will be taken to prevent future occurrences. Thus, future research should place a much greater emphasis on the rhetoric and framing of disasters.

Disaster myths persist despite 50 years of social science research. The myths suggest that disasters produce social breakdown, while research consistently points to the resilience of human societies. For years, researchers have argued that the most effective response to

disaster is one that is decentralized, flexible, and based on realistic assumptions of human behavior under stress. Yet, as Dynes (1993) points out, many public officials subscribe to a "command and control" ideology that promotes the centralization of authority, implements rigid structures, and makes inaccurate assumptions about how people respond to disasters. As discussed previously, Tierney (2003) argues that the perpetuation of disaster myths benefits certain powerful groups in society. It was also discussed previously that these myths have led to significant changes at the federal level with FEMA becoming a part of DHS. Clearly, disaster myths, an aspect of the popular culture of disaster, matter. Thus, it is time for researchers to take a fresh look at an old topic—namely, the sources, content, and consequences of disaster myths.

For many years, researchers have made a distinction between consensus and conflict events (Quarantelli & Dynes, 1977). On the one hand, natural and technological disasters are considered consensus events because there is general agreement that the impacts are undesirable and a response is necessary. On the other hand, wars, riots, and terrorism are considered conflict events because they create disunity. Importantly, some researchers argue that technological disasters are in fact conflict events because they have negative, corrosive impacts on communities (Couch & Kroll-Smith, 1985; Cuthbertson & Nigg, 1987; Erikson, 1976; Freudenburg, 1997; Picou, Marshall, & Gill, 2004). Thus, there is an important question to be asked: Do natural disasters, technological crises, wars, and terrorism produce similar cultural responses or do they differ in important ways? While some researchers argue that the response to the 9/11 terrorist attacks resembled a natural disaster in the immediate aftermath (Webb, 2002), others suggest that the longer-term impacts may be quite different (Marshall, Picou, & Gill, 2003). There is clearly a need for more research on the social and cultural impacts of various types of disaster events.

While it is important for researchers to examine how the popular culture of disaster has impacted society, they should also reflect on how it has impacted their own area of study. It has been established that disasters are social constructs—that is, the media, politicians, victims, and other groups decide what is and is not a disaster. With the emergence of national media conglomerates and the loss of many local outlets, the disasters typically covered today are those with national and international implications. Events that are smaller in scale with primarily local impacts simply do not get covered. The important question is: Do disaster researchers primarily study those larger events that are defined as disasters by the media? These questions are not abstract; rather, they are empirical. In every field of study, it is necessary to periodically reflect on what has been studied and what has been neglected. Disaster research is no exception.

Having described several possible areas for future research, something should be said about research methodology. In conducting studies on the topics described here and others, researchers have at their disposal a wide range of data sources and methodological techniques. As Phillips (2002) describes, disaster research has historically relied a great deal on qualitative research strategies, including observations, interviews, and document analysis. Because these approaches yield thick and rich descriptions of social reality and allow the researcher to better understand the worldviews of those being studied, they are essential to the study of the popular culture of disaster. However, as Bahk and Neuwirth (2000) demonstrate in their study of the impact of disaster movies on risk perception, quantitative methods can also be effectively employed to study the cultural dimensions of disaster.

As research in this area continues to grow, researchers should also consider the time dimension. For decades, disaster researchers have conducted "quick response" studies, in which they enter the field as soon as possible after an event occurs (Michaels, 2003). This is

a useful strategy because it enables researchers to gather important data that might perish or disappear quickly. Given the emergent and ephemeral nature of some disaster culture products, this type of research will continue to be important for the field. However, longitudinal research is also needed. As described earlier, the attacks of 9/11 have certainly impacted American culture, and they have resulted in significant policy changes at the national level in a variety of areas, including emergency management. It is possible that those changes will endure, or they may be reversed at some point. Longitudinal research is valuable because it enables researchers to track changes over time.

In studying the popular culture of disaster, researchers must embrace a cross-cultural perspective. Although globalization has resulted in some degree of cultural leveling or homogenization, there is still a great amount of cultural diversity across the globe. Both nonmaterial culture—that is, beliefs and values—and material culture—that is, tangible products—vary from society to society. Moreover, technological capabilities differ across societies. In developed societies, for example, the widespread use of cellular telephones, the internet, and electronic communications impacts the way in which culture is produced and the speed at which it is disseminated. Thus, the cultural impacts of disasters would be different in developed countries compared to other societies. The broader field of disaster research has been biased toward studying developed Western nations, but there is an opportunity here to correct that bias. By focusing explicitly on the cultural dimensions of disasters, researchers will find it necessary to think about their subject in a comparative, cross-cultural perspective.

This section of the chapter suggested some possible directions for future research on the popular culture of disaster and discussed some important methodological considerations. There are many ways in which the area may develop, so at this early stage it would be most beneficial if researchers proceeded with an open mind, adopting a flexible rather than rigid view of the topic. While we have already learned a fair amount about the cultural dimensions of disasters, there is still much work to be done.

CONCLUSION

Disaster movies, graffiti, and myths may seem trivial and inconsequential, but they are not. Rather, they are essential elements of cultural life. Culture shapes the way people view the world, how they live, what they value, and what they do. It is ubiquitous and pervasive. Therefore, it is impossible to study any aspect of social life without also studying the influence of culture.

The primary objective of this chapter has been to make a case for studying the popular culture of disaster. Social scientists have learned a great deal about human response to disaster over the past 50 years, particularly in terms of social structure. They have shown, for example, that societies are resilient to disasters in large part because elements of the social structure (e.g., organizations) become flexible and adaptive in responding to extreme events. They have also revealed ways in which stratification within the social structure (e.g., race, class, and gender) makes some groups more vulnerable to disasters than others.

However, researchers know far less about the cultural dimensions of disasters. There has always been a cultural strain running through the field, but it is less developed than the structural side. In an effort to promote further work on culture and disaster, this chapter provided some thoughts on what the popular culture of disaster is, a conceptual and applied rationale for pursuing the topic, and some suggested research directions.

In concluding this chapter, an important point needs to be made. To call for more research on the cultural dimensions of disasters is not to say that research on their structural aspects should be abandoned. Indeed, recent disasters, including the 2004 tsunami in Asia and Hurricane Katrina in 2005, have made it abundantly clear that much remains to be learned about effective organizational response to disasters and social vulnerability to them. The central point of this chapter is that the field of disaster research will greatly benefit from an approach that pays adequate attention to both social structure and culture.