Terrorism and Community Resilience – A UK Perspective

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This paper argues that policy-makers and emergency planners must learn from the literature examining human behaviour in disasters. The relevant research shows that professionals should incorporate community responses to particular crises within their actions, rather than seeking to supplant these because they consider them ill-informed or less productive. Emergencies offer society a means to reaffirm human bonds that have been corroded over recent times. Actions to enhance the benefits of spontaneous association, as well as to develop a sense of purpose and trust across society are, at such times, just as important as effective technical responses.

Cultural meaning and social resilience

How society responds to a crisis is only partly dependent on the nature of that crisis, or the agent causing it. There are cultural and social dimensions that explain our varied, and evolving, attitudes to disaster across time and in different societies. Why is it that at certain times and in certain cultures widespread losses of life – such as during the London smog of 1952 or everyday road fatalities – fail to become a point of discussion, while at others even limited losses – such as the loss of seven lives aboard the Challenger spacecraft in 1986 or the four lives lost as a consequence of the Hatfield train crash in the UK in 2000 – become key cultural reference points?

Evolving social contexts and frameworks of cultural meaning can explain such variation. Emergencies take on a different role depending upon what they represent to particular societies at particular times, rather than solely on the basis of objective indicators, such as real costs and lives lost. The loss of the Challenger spacecraft symbolized a low point in our assessment of human technological capabilities. It was a blow to assumptions of steady scientific progress that no number of car accidents could replicate. Hatfield was interpreted as evidence of why not to trust politicians and 'profit-seeking' corporations. Both examples suggest a growing disconnection between ordinary people and professional elites – whether political, corporate or scientific – in the world today. This reveals the extent to which social bonds and affiliations, once taken for granted, have been eroded in the course of little more than a generation.

An incoherent cultural outlook is a significant problem in developing responses to the possibility of terrorist attacks and other disasters. How the public respond to events can be shaped far more by underlying assumptions and allegiances prior to an emergency than by the specific aspects of the emergency itself. Yet the standard way of dealing with disaster is one that prioritizes pushing the public out, beyond the yellow perimeter-tape, and subsuming their initial actions to those of professionally trained emergency responders. This is despite the fact that the public themselves are the true first responders in such situations. Effectively, people are denied the opportunity to assume responsibility over their own situation at such times. Yet an examination of the literature on human behaviour in disasters points to the central importance of ordinary human actions. People tend to be at their most cooperative and focused in a crisis. This should be encouraged and developed rather than discouraged and undermined.

Disasters – including terrorist attacks – destroy physical and economic capital. On the other hand, they present a rare, if unfortunate, opportunity to create and enhance social capital. It is this that the authorities and professionals should be alert to and wary of displacing in their haste to put forward what they consider to be more meticulous and technically competent solutions.

In the aftermath of the Sarin gas attack on the Tokyo subway in 1995, many of those affected were ferried to hospital in private cars. As it was a chemical attack, professionals might argue that this presented a risk of further contamination, but in the event it did not, and only eleven people lost their lives. This was thanks, in part, to the spontaneous actions of concerned citizens who acted when ambulances were not available. A similar scenario occurred at the end of the hostage crisis in Beslan in 2004. When the siege was eventually broken, the authorities were largely unprepared. Many survivors were taken to hospital by car. After a recent episode of flooding in Boscastle, Cornwall – as with the Lynmouth flood disaster in Devon of 1952 – it was ordinary people who inevitably were first on the scene and first to take appropriate and supportive action.

After the Bali bombing of October 2002, many steps were taken by local responders to deal with the injured and to begin the process of having them flown to special burns units in Australian hospitals. When the professional emergency responders arrived much of this work was well in hand. In fact, the disaster plan actually created problems as many of the injured were then ferried to hospitals where there were no specialist units. Similar stories of ordinary human action, courage, cooperation and even sacrifice can readily be found in relation to the Southeast Asian tsunami of December 2004. Hence, immediate human responses at such times remain largely admirable, although the contemporary mood of alienation is readily re-manifested.

The point to note is the extent to which pushing people out at such times may appear logical and professional but in actuality is counter-productive and