
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

fails to capitalize upon the spontaneous social bonds and behaviour that emerge in such situations.

Technical focus vs cultural resilience

Research shows that – in addition to the need for technical means to protect oneself in an emergency – by far the most useful tool is to have a clear sense of mission, purpose and direction. If we were to caricature resilience as the ability to pick oneself up after a shock or emergency and to keep on going, then the primary task is to have some clarity as to who we are, what we stand for and where we were heading in the first place.

Yet a political debate as to cultural values and social direction is noticeable by its absence. Instead, counter-terrorist measures put in place since 2001 can at best be described as technical in character. These include more surveillance, better intelligence, new protective clothing for so-called ‘first responders’, along with gadgets to detect chemical, biological or radiological agents, concrete blocks and fences around public buildings, endless checks at airports and stockpiles of vaccines.

The problem with these is that, in seeking to secure society from the outside, we fail simultaneously to engage society from the inside with a view to winning a debate as to what we actually stand for. Ironically, the purported solutions – for we have yet to see whether many of these truly work – can end up encouraging a sense of social suspicion and mistrust. We are asked to be ‘alert’ as to the activity of our neighbours, or those seated opposite us on public transport. Rather than bringing people together as the times demand, this serves to push people further apart. In that sense at least, we truly are ‘doing the terrorists’ job for them’.

Solutions

Handling social concerns as to the possibility of a terrorist attack is no easy feat. In part, this is because social fears today have little to do with the actuality, or even possibility, of the presumed threats that confront us. Rather, they are often a reflection of social isolation, political cynicism and mistrust. Hence any purported solution must be conscious of the need to build up social bonds, rather than undermining them. The public need to be included and engaged. But they need to be included and engaged well before any particular crisis, and they need to be included and engaged in matters pertaining to far broader strategic social issues than mere tactical measures for responding to terrorism.

The starting point to developing an effective solution is to put the actual threat posed by terrorism into an appropriate context. We should remind ourselves that there have been few significant terrorist attacks in the developed world. To suggest otherwise is both alarmist and disingenuous. Moreover, what attacks and supposed plots there have been consistently fail to point to any serious threat by terrorists in the areas of chemical, biological and radiological weaponry the public fear most. Yet to read the debate over the last three years one could be forgiven for thinking otherwise. Some terrorists might

wish to develop and deploy such weapons but, given their current capabilities, this remains very much an aspiration rather than a possibility.

Above all, if as a society we are to ascribe an appropriate meaning to the events of 2001 – one that does not enhance fear domestically or encourage us to become dependent on professional experts who tell us how to lead our lives at such times – then we need to promote a political debate as to our aims and purposes as a society. Surely, those who risk their lives fighting fires or fighting wars do so not so that their children can grow up to do the same, but rather because they believe that there is something more important to life worth fighting for. It is that ‘something more’ that contemporary society appears to have lost sight of. And it is a loss we ignore at our peril.
