What Can a Social Repair Orientation to Disaster Recovery Offer Policy and Programming?

Policy Brief

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This policy brief presents a social repair orientation to disaster recovery. It locates the concept of social repair in the literature to identify two distinct understandings of repair: resumption of everyday life and re-humanization/reconstituting the self. The brief then conceptualizes memory, hope and resistance as strategic tools for achieving social repair. The lens of social learning is also presented to further ground these discussions. Finally, the differences between a social repair orientation to disaster recovery and existing disaster recovery practice are offered to guide policy makers and programmers.

WHAT’S AT STAKE?

Natural disasters are forms of collective violence, which disrupt the lives of large numbers of people and are intensified by prevailing political, social and economic conditions. Like mass violence, disasters too can erode “societal structures, social and economic institutions, and networks of familial and intimate relationships that provide the foundations of a functional community” (Fletcher and Weinstein 2002, p. 576). Similar to experiences of violence, natural disasters force survivors to confront questions about their continued place in the world, desired ways to inhabit it and work towards a life of meaning. However, these broader processes remain unnamed and unexplored within policy and practice.
TOOLS FOR SOCIAL REPAIR: MEMORY, HOPE AND RESISTANCE

The act of remembering as a weaving together of narratives for sense-making, one that links the present with the past, before the disruption to after, is an important strategy for repair and remaking. One way in which memory becomes a strategy for social repair is in its articulation as attachment to place. Memory like culture sits in place, in objects, in socially constructed rituals and in daily life routines, and it is reclaimed and recreated after disruption in an effort to establish some form of historical continuity and maintain relationships between oneself and others.

Freire (1994) links the agency of hope with the possibilities of achieving a meaningful life. Hope nurtures the capacity for action and is anchored in practice. Freire asserts, “dreaming is not only a necessary political act, it is an integral part of the historico-social manner of being a person. It is part of human nature, which within history, is a permanent process of becoming” (p. 77). The capacity to hope is not uniformly distributed. Hopelessness is recognized as an outcome of historical, economic and social forces (p. 2). The ability/inability to hope is indicative of a subjective reality, of how sense making has been operationalized in an imperfect and non-egalitarian social world. It is a meta-capacity and rich and powerful are better at it. Appadurai (2004) conceives this aspirational capacity as a navigational map allowing marginalized groups to find resources to contest and alter the concrete conditions of their oppression (p. 69). The capacity to aspire is interlinked with the faculty of voice, which allows the possibility of marginalized groups to mobilize themselves internally (as a group) and “change the dynamics of their consensus in their larger social worlds” (Appadurai 2004, p. 70).

Everyday actions of resistance, also being a theory of agency, articulate a different scale of politics. The notion of everyday forms of resistance is premised on the idea that most political life of marginalized groups is not found in “overt collective defiance of power holders nor in complete hegemonic compliance, but in the vast territory between these two polar opposites” (Scott 1990, p.136). Social disruptions such as natural disasters typically take place within existing systems of oppression and exclusion; therefore, the post-disaster space is essentially a space under subjugation. Everyday forms of resistance are distinct from contentious politics, as a tool of social remaking after disruption rather than as a mechanism of analysis of the micropolitics of subversion. These forms of resistance frustrate the system (Thomson 2011, p. 447), enable a “veiled discourse of
dignity and self-assertion” (Scott 1990, p. 137) and most importantly make daily life more sustainable (Thomson 2011, p. 447).

SOCIAL LEARNING IN DISRUPTION AND STRUGGLE

Social repair can be realized by the creative usage of memory, hope and the proclamation of everyday life as a generative space for enacting resistance. Social learning is the naming of the processes by which social repair is realized via the strategic and almost artistic use of memory, hope and resistance. People in the midst of their precarious lives rely on various social resources embedded within their life worlds. This allows them to “achieve a level of complex social coordination that far exceeds our ability to design” (Chamlee-Wright 2010, p.1). After natural disasters, the loss of these social support networks (formal and informal) makes the continuation of life extremely difficult. Das (2007) shows that there is a clear gap between the end of violence and resumption of everyday life. In this gap, community reordering strategies such as crafting of new institutions, re-building of networks, linkages and identities are realized.

In unsettled times, such as after natural disasters, communities gain some cognitive distance from their pre-existing cultural contexts (Chamlee-Wright 2010, p. 108). In such spaces of disruption, the strategic and creative use of one’s culture is more likely as alternate ideas and norms compete for legitimacy. By maintaining a fresh distance from the usual way of doing things, individuals are able to consciously select and deploy certain elements of their cultural worlds in an almost tool-like manner (p. 108). By investigating how “pre-articulate mental models get transformed into cultural tools and are combined with other complementary social resources, we understand better how people are able to carve out a sphere of effective agency in an otherwise highly constrained social structure” (p. 105). Communities strategically locate and employ the socially embedded resources available in their life worlds, proving that ultimately, they are the source of resilience and strength in their recovery journeys. Memory as forms of embodiment, emplacement and forgetting; hope and aspirational capacities; and everyday forms of resistance are examples of the various ways these socially embedded resources may be deployed. Subjects employ these resources and others with almost artistic finesse in an effort to re-humanize and resume a sense of normalcy by engaging in everyday life.
POINTS OF DEPARTURE FROM DISASTER RECOVERY PRACTICE

Within disaster studies, the conceptual framework of disaster recovery refers to the broad processes by which society is reordered and reconstructed after natural disasters (Haas et al. 1977; Jha et al. 2010). Typically, research on disaster recovery remains focused on external processes implemented by governments, humanitarian actors and concerned institutions and their interface with communities. Community efforts of re-establishing their lives after natural disasters are conceptualized either as short-term coping strategies or as long-term adaptive mechanisms. Disaster recovery literature remains largely restricted by cyclical approaches to disaster management. Phases of the disaster management cycle include disaster preparedness, prevention, relief and recovery.

Restricted by a linear temporal scale, which segregates life into before, during and after disasters, the disaster management cycle inadvertently emphasizes the centrality of the disaster event and undermines those experiencing it. Such an abstraction also signals the linear transition of communities from one phase to the other and strongly influences the way disaster response and research is conducted. A social repair orientation to disaster recovery takes a step back from current versions of the disaster management cycle and corresponding research. A social repair orientation transcends the need to focus on stability, but focuses on the notion of movement, in the intersections of social remaking and disasters as they continuously unfold within community life. In summary, a social repair orientation to disaster recovery differs from existing conceptualizations of disaster recovery in the following ways:

- A social repair orientation to disaster recovery proposes that a social suffering lens is better suited to capture the complexities of human experiences after natural disasters.

- A social repair orientation to disaster recovery defines disaster survivors as complex beings and as subjects of their own recovery. This allows us to construct the subject and his/her aspirations of life after disruption as extending beyond mere survival.

- A social repair orientation to disaster recovery directs attention to the everyday both as a site of knowledge and an articulation of scale for observation.
A social repair orientation to disaster recovery reveals to policy makers that natural disasters and disaster recovery cannot be isolated from existing socioeconomic conditions, and therefore disaster recovery interventions must seek to dismantle pre-existing structural violence. This includes an intersectional analysis of multiple and intersecting forms of oppression such as race, gender and class that limit survivor abilities to work towards a meaningful life.

A social repair orientation encourages policy makers to recognize people’s capacities to learn in disruption and make conceptual linkages with humanitarian and/or disaster recovery interventions.

A social repair orientation to disaster recovery also encourages programmers and policy makers to recreate conditions of everyday life as a starting point for recovery. This means, for example, restoring community playgrounds, places of worship, teashops and marketplaces. This can also take the form of encouraging culturally validated roles to be part of recovery programming.

A social repair orientation reflects the long-term nature of disaster recovery. It encourages programmers and policy makers to adopt a longer time frame against which recovery is assessed. It also reveals to policy makers/programmers the intimate nature of disaster recovery necessitating the development of intimate, community-specific and personal recovery indicators.

However, it is important to clarify that a social repair orientation to disaster recovery is not meant to replace existing mandates of service provision after natural disasters. Rather it encourages policy makers and programmers to re-evaluate disaster survivors’ relationships with commonly understood needs such as a food, home/shelter, social spaces, etc. as being mediated by a complex set of relationships, memories and familiarity that is essential for returning to a life of meaning. This has direct bearing on the way disaster services are designed.

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Cite as:

References


