Organizational Response to the Mexico City Earthquake of 1985: Characteristics and Implications*

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Abstract. A study involving a collaborative effort between American and Mexican social scientists was made of the individual and organizational response to the 1985 earthquake in Mexico City. Our general findings only about the activities of organizations are summarized under five general themes: (1) the massive and complex organizational response was decentralized, (2) resources for organizational actions were not problematical but there were difficulties in their quick and effective use, (3) the dominant organizational behavior was emergent rather than traditional, (4) organizational personnel carried out their work and occupational roles, and (5) there was changes in disaster planning of organizations as a result of the disaster. Both practical and theoretical implications of our research findings are noted.

Key words. Earthquake, organizations, cross-societal research, emergent behavior, disaster planning, social response.

1. Introduction

This paper reports on part of a larger social science study of the response to the Mexico City earthquake of 1985. The Disaster Research Center (DRC) in the United States in cooperation with Mexican colleagues, undertook field research on both organizational and individual behavior in the aftermath of the disaster in the largest urban complex in the world. Since the observations made about the behavior of individuals (including households and families) have been published elsewhere, this paper summarizes only our findings about the characteristics of the formal and emergent organizations responding in the earthquake, and also some of the implications of those conclusions.

* The findings summarized in this article are drawn from a very detailed and extensive report on the disaster by Russel R. Dynes, E. L. Quarantelli, and Dennis Wenger, Individual and Organizational Response to the 1985 Earthquake in Mexico City, issued in 1990 by the Disaster Research Center at the University of Delaware. The field work for the study was supported by Grant #ECE-8610904 from the National Science Foundation (NSF). However, all observations and conclusions advanced are those of the author and are not necessarily those of NSF, the other authors of the larger report, or our Mexican collaborators on the study who collected much of the field data in Mexico City.
2. Sources of Data and Data Collection

Earthquakes have been noted in history as far back as oral and written records go. But studies of a systematic nature of the more social aspects of such disasters are a very recent phenomena. Inventories of the relevant literature credit research at the University of Chicago done on the 1952 Bakersfield, California earthquake, as the first field study of its kind (a preliminary report, 1954). The most complete inventory of such work up to 1979 lists only 26 other studies done by social scientists of such occasions as the Alaskan, Niigata, Chilean, Western Sicily, Gediz, Banja Luka, Peruvian, 1971 southern California, Managua, Guatemala City and Friuli earthquakes (Quarantelli, 1984b). However, the great majority of such work had not either been systematic, done immediately after the disaster and/or of a large urban area. Thus, we had little direct guidance from previous social research on earthquakes on how to proceed in our study of the Mexican City disaster. (Since 1985 there has been somewhat of an acceleration of field work in such earthquakes as the Campania Basilicata in Italy, the Armenian, and especially Loma Prieta, although this is all research initiated after our own study was concluded.)

But there is a rather substantial literature from nearly 40 years of research on other kinds of disasters (see Kreps, 1984, 1985), and DRC used that in its approach. We decided to concentrate primarily on the emergency time period reactions and the immediate postimpact response, and secondarily on whatever longer run social effects we could study. This still left us with many research possibilities. After discussions with our Mexican colleagues we eventually centered on two different but related aspects.

For one, we launched a study of the emergency time response of organizations in Mexico City to the earthquake; this was partly dictated by the fact that DRC has over the years undertaken extensive studies of formal and informal organizational responses to disasters (see, e.g., Warheit and Dynes, 1968; Dynes, 1974; Dynes, Quarantelli and Kreps, 1981; Quarantelli, 1990). On the other hand, we also decided to study behavior at the individual or human level (including households and families); we saw the possibility of carrying out systematic social science surveys of a metropolitan population involved in a disaster, a rare research undertaking up to the present time (for the survey findings on individuals, households and families, see Quarantelli, 1992).

With the assistance of our Mexican colleagues, DRC obtained two major sets of primary data on organizational behavior: in-depth interview protocols and documentary material.

2.1. The In-Depth Interview Protocols

La Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales (FLACSO) obtained over three dozen in depth interviews of organizational officials who played major roles in the