Disaster Relief Work: An Assessment of Training Effectiveness

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This study evaluates the applicability of the training and operational practices of a group of firefighters to disaster search and rescue duties. Using schema theory it is hypothesized that training effectiveness could be evaluated by assessing the incidence with which event characteristics are perceived as stressors. A comparison of the propensity of a group of firefighters and a group of predominantly nonemergency service volunteers (who were specifically trained for disaster relief work) to define event characteristics as stressors provided the means of testing the hypothesis. The results suggest that the training and experience of these firefighters did not prepare them for major disaster work. The difference in stressor susceptibility serves as a basis for identifying training and response factors that appeared to promote an adaptive response. The implications of schema theory for the design of training programs is discussed.

KEY WORDS: disaster; training; emergency services; evaluation; schema theory.

INTRODUCTION

Emergency service personnel, as a result of the perceived similarity between their usual work roles and professional competencies and those required to meet the needs of disaster victims, feature prominently in post-disaster relief operations. However, this perceived similarity conceals the fact that professionals also suffer as a consequence of providing this service (Short, 1979; Taylor and Frazer, 1982; Raphael et al., 1983/84; Green et al., 1983; Durham et al., 1985; Paton, 1989, 1992; Mitchell, 1990; Alexander and Wells, 1991). Rather, these “helpers” represent a discrete victim group

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Disaster work can thus be said to exceed the professional competencies of relief workers (Skeet, 1977). Consequently, it is pertinent to question the degree to which emergency personnel are prepared, by virtue of their existing training and experience, for the demands of disaster work.

Schema theory (Bartlett, 1932; Rumelhart and Ortony, 1977) has recently been used as a means of conceptualizing the dynamics of trauma impact (Janoff-Bulman, 1989, 1992; Yates et al., 1989; Parry, 1990). People reconcile their experiences to construct integrated conceptual frameworks—schemata—that provide a basis for making sense of (new) experiences, anticipating future demands and planning appropriate courses of action to deal with them. Complex schemata guide comprehension of events, define the roles that must be performed and the event characteristics that should occur (Schank and Abelson, 1977; Fiske and Taylor, 1984), create expectations regarding the physical and emotional impact of events, identify the tasks to be performed, and specify the conditions under which these performances will take place (Yale et al., 1989). In an occupational context, the schemata that will be used to deal with the demands of traumatic events will reflect an individual's training and experience and the procedures typically prevailing within these operating contexts. Following this line of argument, the personal impact of a traumatic event will be a function of the extent to which these schemata provide a viable framework within which a relief worker can make sense of the event and develop and implement appropriate and effective action plans. Training is designed to prepare individuals for the demands (stressors) likely to be encountered and to provide them with the knowledge, skills, roles and attitudes appropriate for dealing with these demands. Consequently, one measure of the appropriateness of "professional" schemata will be the degree to which these conceptual frameworks can accommodate atypical (e.g., disaster) demands. Training which is inappropriate to the special needs of disaster work, or skills rendered inapplicable to the demands of the helping role, will reduce the effectiveness of a worker’s preparation and the degree of control over the situation that they might have expected on the basis of past (routine) experience and increase the likelihood of their perceiving event characteristics as stressors. Reduced predictability and control will lay the foundations for a range of emotional and psychological problems (Horowitz et al., 1980; Fisher, 1984). This paper will evaluate the effectiveness of the training and preparation of disaster relief workers by comparing the experiences of a group of volunteers and a group of firefighters who provided search and rescue services following the Armenian earthquake in December 1988. Specifically, it will assess whether the operational schemata of emergency service workers provide an appropriate basis for the performance of their role under the exceptional circumstances of a major disaster.