Natural Hazard Research

LIVING IN THE AFTERMATH: BLAMING PROCESSES IN THE LOMA PRIETA EARTHQUAKE

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PREFACE

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SUMMARY

In the immediate aftermath of the 1989 Loma Prieta (California) earthquake, massive sheltering needs arose. A variety of sheltering needs developed because of the diverse Bay Area population. These populations included non-English speakers, physically and mentally disabled individuals, ''pre-quake'' homeless, and others. Long accustomed to responding to sheltering, the American Red Cross stepped in to help. In some locales, complaints were lodged against American Red Cross shelter operations (or perceived nonsheltering efforts) as well as against local government sheltering efforts. Shelter problems in Watsonville, California, received heavy media attention. Allegations of cultural insensitivity and discrimination against the large Latino community arose. This paper examines Watsonville's shelter problems and the social process known as ''blaming.''

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INTRODUCTION

Classic studies of blame, a fairly atypical disaster phenomenon, include studies of the Cocoanut Grove nightclub fire (Veltfort and Lee, 1943) and multiple, same location plane crashes (Bucher, 1957). Drabek and Quarantelli's (1967) focus on the Indianapolis Coliseum explosion and Neal's (1984) look at air pollution help alleviate a dearth of research available on the blame process. Drabek and Quarantelli (1967) and Neal (1984) suggest that we tend to seek the cause and place the blame in non-natural disasters. More recently, however, researchers suggest that to distinguish between natural and technological disasters, at least in typologies, is unnecessary (Quarantelli, 1987; Blocker, Rochford, and Sherkat, 1991). Rochford and Blocker (1991) suggest that blaming will increase in the future "because humans in the modern context perceive the natural world as increasingly within the realm of their control" (p. 187; see also Blocker and Sherkat, 1992).

Nevertheless, research on blame in disasters is singularly lacking. A recent exception is from Rochford and Blocker (1991) who found that a natural disaster (a flood) promoted blaming and social protest. Local residents defined the flood as the fault of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. The Loma Prieta earthquake, and particularly the Watsonville sheltering dispute, provided an opportunity to assess the blame process in natural disasters, especially in light of predictions that such blaming will increase.

Veltfort and Lee (1943) used a psychological perspective to explain blame. Those involved in blaming are said to feel a need for an emotional release of latent hostilities. Allport (1948) continued this psychological theme in his work on scapegoating. Presently, a framework delineated by Bucher (1957) serves as the basis for blame analysis. Bucher starts with a three-fold sociological perspective. First, blame is the result of a long, interactive process. Second, the definition of the situation—or how the situation is structured—frames the blaming process. Third, blame is essentially symbolic interaction—the process of creating, sustaining, and redefining shared meanings. Bucher then specifies conditions for blame in disaster. Essentially, those blamed are viewed as violating community and/or moral standards and values, defined as deserving the attribution, and considered unlikely to resolve

the problem on their own initiative. Blaming is oriented toward action to alleviate or mitigate the situation.

Drabek and Quarantelli (1967) point out that blame is rooted in the American social structure. The judicial system provides a framework in which responsible parties are identified and brought to justice. Individuals, rather than groups or organizations, are typically identified. Neal (1984), like Drabek and Quarantelli, essentially agrees with Bucher that community standards must be perceived as violated, and the violators must be perceived as benefitting from the transgression. As we move into an era of urbanization and denser populations, we anticipate that disasters—and thus blaming—will increase. In essence, we are seeing a grass roots construction of a social problem. Social problems are ''the activities of groups making assertions of grievances and claims to organizations, agencies, and institutions about some putative conditions'' (Spector and Kitsuse, 1973, p. 146). Thus, in the Loma Prieta earthquake aftermath, we have the opportunity to see the social construction of a social problem in light of changing demographics and under adverse disaster conditions.

METHOD

We used two data gathering techniques: systematic documentation and interviewing. First, similar to other blame studies, we reviewed newspaper accounts for chronological and substantive information.

Additionally, we gathered and analyzed documents ranging from county and city disaster plans to post hoc evaluations of emergency responses to written legislation. We obtained census data and public testimony from governmental and other community-based nonprofit groups.

We also conducted in-depth interviews with 19 individuals from 21 organizations within the affected community. These organizations ranged from formal emergency response organizations to nonprofit groups involved in assisting earthquake victims. Interviews lasted an average of one and a half hours and were conducted in October 1989; March, May, and October 1990; and July 1991. Half of our respondents were interviewed more than once; we talked with several respondents at four different times. Our analysis was inductively based, similar to a grounded theory approach (Glaser and Strauss, 1967).

CHRONOLOGY

Immediately after the October 17 (Tuesday) earthquake, families gathered in nearby parks and open spaces. Children feared re-entering homes and adults grew concerned about aftershocks causing further destruction or injuries. Uncertainty characterized the lives of most citizens. Open-air camping began that evening and became a hot issue less than 48 hours after impact. Local newspapers (used here as a source of information because of a higher probability of accuracy; see Fischer, 1989) indicated that about 500 victims had camped in Watsonville city parks by October 19. Another 500 had gone to Red Cross shelters at the National Guard Armory and Veterans Hall. We corroborated these figures through our interviews with shelter officials.

Media pointed out the plight of the victims for almost a week after the earthquake. Initial local news stories began on October 19 (Thursday) and peaked on October 23 (Monday). Politicians and celebrities flew in to inspect the damage, visit shelters, donate money, and promise future aid.

Tent cities, as they came to be called, originally appeared in the 200 block of Watsonville's Main Street, the Watsonville High School soccer field, and Ramsey and Callaghan Parks. Individual families also camped out near their homes in cars, tents, under sheets, or in the open air. One nonprofit response organization notably omitted from media accounts was the Watsonville Salvation Army (WSA). Traditionally involved in disaster response, the WSA was active early on with earthquake victims. The Salvation Army provided campers with blankets, tents, lanterns, water, and other essential camping supplies.

Blaming originated because of deteriorating conditions in Ramsey and Callaghan Parks. These encampments, not officially sanctioned Red Cross shelters, contained hundreds of victims. Red Cross shelters, though available, were indoors.

Conditions in the parks quickly became physically unpleasant. Overcrowding was evident in the developing tent cities. One local news article, for example, cited 13 children and eight adults under one tent. When rain began to fall a few days after the quake, the situation changed from unpleasant to intolerable.

A Latino city council candidate and a Latino medical care organization sponsored a rally in City Plaza on Friday, October 20. Included in the rally were city officials, a state

assemblyman (who spoke Spanish), and the local fire chief. Our data suggest that this rally was, for many Latino residents, the first opportunity to learn of aid sources. The media indicated varying perceptions of Latino needs on the part of city officials. Community groups set up information tables at the rally, while the city did not provide any. City officials later commented to us that, despite their best efforts (including 24-hour work days), conflict lingered.

Rain on October 21 (Saturday) considerably worsened the plight of tent city victims. Families shared sparse tent space in an effort to remain dry. Rain, with occasional downpours, continued through Monday. Local streets flooded. At this time, over one thousand victims were estimated to be living outdoors or in official emergency shelters. Tent residents remained too frightened of aftershocks to return home (Aptekar, 1991). Indeed, aftershocks of 4.0 and 5.0 did continue to shake the county.

Over the weekend, city and county officials persuaded the Red Cross to open Ramsey Park as an official shelter. County officials had already brought in National Guard tents for victims. Several hundred families chose to remain in Callaghan Park. Fear of looting and a distrust of the National Guard by former Central Americans reportedly kept many from moving to Ramsey Park, where medical care and food were available. Some victims were allegedly undocumented workers.

Practically speaking, the tent shelters were a health risk. Red Cross officials grew concerned over a lack of sanitation facilities and the possible spread of communicable diseases. Heaters could not be used in tents because they constituted a fire risk. Lighting did not become available until one week after the earthquake.

As time progressed, efforts to assist the Latino community increased and became more coordinated. These efforts received increased media coverage. In particular, the media singled out the Latino medical care organization—Salud Para La Gente. Salud had treated over 700 earthquake victims, many via mobile medical vans. Salud and other Latino groups became a sounding board for complaints from the Latino community. Latino organizations began to meet with city officials to relay concerns over shelter conditions. Problems included a lack of information for Latino residents, fear of government or local agency help, concern over whether homes were safe (in part because house tags were printed in English only), fear

of aftershocks (especially among earthquake victims with personal or familial experience with the Mexico City earthquake and aftershocks of 1985), and a lack of bilingual speakers at responding organizations such as the Red Cross and Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA).

Twelve days post-quake (October 29), activist Cesar Chavez led a protest march that focused on a perceived lack of financial aid and housing. About 100 United Farm Workers participated. City officials were accused of not supporting Latinos before or after the earthquake. Of special concern were tent city victims. Most marchers, however, were reportedly non-tent city residents.

Community activists believed that officials did not establish the Ramsey Park shelter in an appropriate manner. Ramsey Park, with about 180 residents (down from 500) was being operated by the Red Cross and staffed in part by the National Guard. Military uniforms allegedly frightened Latino campers who feared deportation and/or arrest. Outside Ramsey Park, activists singled out Watsonville city council members as unresponsive but lauded fire and police efforts. City and county officials were distressed to learn that the tents they had provided through the National Guard, within an enclosed park setting, had the appearance of a concentration camp.

By Halloween, a Department of Justice investigation into allegations of discrimination was underway. However, Justice officials reported there had been no overt discrimination, essentially echoing the position of city officials: the city wanted to respond and listen to Latinos. There was, however, room for improvement. The Department of Justice suggested that disaster relief meetings be opened to Latino representatives. The city agreed.

Callaghan Park became a political focal point. Tent city residents refused to move despite encouragement from the city and the Red Cross. Still numbering 150 by November 10, Callaghan Park campers (mostly male at this point) refused to move. One city council candidate made speeches at the park. Callaghan Park closed in early December 1989 (Bolin and Stanford, 1990; Phillips, 1991).

As victims' homes were repaired, additional problems surfaced. Apartments were not always rented to the original lessee. FEMA federal aid denial rates ran as high as 50%, at least indirectly prohibiting many shelter residents from moving into permanent housing (local

legal aid groups subsequently filed a lawsuit against FEMA and won). As complaints against the Red Cross and the city diminished, FEMA loomed as the new target of blame.

To summarize, blame centered on those initially involved in providing shelter aid—the Red Cross and the city. These traditional emergency response groups were singled out and accused of cultural insensitivity and providing inadequate shelter. In this disaster, the aggrieved group defined adequate shelter as being outdoors, having bilingual workers/ services, offering culturally appropriate food, and providing bilingual information.

Thus, blaming occurred over a relatively short time, beginning 48 hours after the quake and lasting intensively for about 72 hours. Of relative importance in decreasing the blaming was the Department of Justice report. Although the department found no blatant racism, they did facilitate entrance of Latino representatives into disaster relief meetings. Such interaction reduced conflict by specifically addressing disaster-related problems.

WHO BLAMED WHOM?

The majority of the people involved in this blaming episode came from the local Latino and Anglo communities. Latinos composed the largest part of the emergent group of campers; Anglos dominated the local emergency response organizations. Latino activists from local community organizations spearheaded much of the blaming.

We determined additional characteristics via interviews. Families made up most of the campers, although activists pointed out that campers were unfairly characterized as gang members. Media accounts never mentioned gangs in the tent cities, and only one of our respondents referred to gangs. Campers included some undocumented workers, but most were established Watsonville residents. Spanish was the common language among campers; apparently quite a few residents were monolingual Spanish speakers.

HOW DOES BLAMING OCCUR?

Spector and Kitsuse (1973) suggest that social problems, such as the those that emerged in Watsonville, follow a four-stage process. In step one, group(s) try to present a condition to the general public and/or to stimulate controversy. In the second step, the condition is recognized by an appropriate organization or group, possibly resulting in investigations or promises to alleviate the problem. Third, groups re-establish their claims

and press for resolution of problems created by the responding organizations (such as bureaucratic procedures). Finally, the aggrieved group rejects how the claims/blame were handled and seeks an alternative means of redress. In Watsonville, steps one and two were clear-cut. However, the third and fourth steps did not follow the anticipated four-stage process.

Looking back, we see that the stage one claims-making activity—or blaming—is facilitated by the group(s) making the claim. In Watsonville, deteriorating conditions within the tent cities prompted existing Latino groups to press city hall for action. Because of the earthquake, group claims were pointed and specific to the disaster. Media pressure contributed to widespread awareness of shelter problems and objections. Spector and Kitsuse (1973) suggest that the groups that are unable to affix blame and that have diffuse claims are less likely to experience rectification. In Watsonville, claims were specific, and the city, the Red Cross, and FEMA became visible targets for assigning responsibility. Spector and Kitsuse also maintain that the mechanism for pressing claims, how the media respond, and how the targeted groups respond determine final resolution. The presence of established and experienced advocacy groups to present claims expedited resolution. Media response, intense and critical, also prompted attention from targeted groups. Lastly, despite problems, local groups (especially many local emergency responders) wanted to resolve the problems. Although city hall was not as responsive as aggrieved groups may have desired, action on the claims did happen.

The second stage of the process outlined by Spector and Kitsuse occurs when organizations begin to respond to the grievances. Certainly the Department of Justice investigation encouraged targeted groups to respond to the claims-making activities. Spector and Kitsuse note that protest groups may find themselves to be spokespersons for a broader constituency. Indeed, this did happen in Watsonville. Local Latino leaders and their organizations, over the subsequent post-quake years, have been increasingly included in resolutions of disaster-related issues. Locally, there has been significant change in how the community perceives the impact of disasters on its predominantly Latino population. Other targeted organizations have responded, but in different manners. The American Red Cross, in response to a variety of blaming throughout northern California, has created a national course

in cultural diversity. FEMA, though, has seemed inflexible in its ability to respond to the blaming. Thus, it appears that the more bureaucratic the organization, the less likely it is to respond to change. Also, the further removed the targeted organization is from the claimants, the less likely they are to respond in ways consistent with the desires of aggrieved groups.

As noted earlier, the third and fourth stages of the claims-making (or blaming) activity as noted by Spector and Kitsuse were largely absent in Watsonville. In stage three, it is likely that organizational responses to blaming may diffuse the protest groups and curtail their activities. Because of the local inclusion of protest groups and social structural changes that resulted from the blaming, aggrieved groups and their leaders were transformed. Rather than their being co-opted, however, a new social and political order seemed to come about. Although this new order is largely the result of pre-earthquake conditions, the disaster and blaming probably sped the course of social change. These changes came about more because of desired local change rather than a re-expression of the initial grievances.

Finally, stage four, which involves groups deciding they can no longer work within the system, also did not seem to come about. Currently, aggrieved groups in Watsonville are included within the local system more than at any other historical time. It is thus unlikely that further massive claims-making or blaming activities will occur.

WHY DID BLAMING OCCUR?

First, a caveat: Drabek and Quarantelli (1967) suggest that sociologists are not in the business of assessing whether charges such as racism are true or false. Rather, sociologists are involved in assessing "whether—and to what extent—they were made public and how people viewed them." This brings us to the conditions underlying blame.

We agree with other social scientists who have studied blame. Blaming occurred in Watsonville because the city and the Red Cross were perceived as violating community or moral standards. The standard violated was that all citizens should receive aid according to their needs, or in social science terms, according to the victim's definition of the situation. Numerous respondents suggested that disaster organizations did not meet their organizational goals and the community's needs. As a result, blamers felt that Latino earthquake victims suffered.

From the opposite perspective, formal emergency response entities believed they followed established rules and regulations in the best interests of all disaster victims. For example, Red Cross and city personnel tried to persuade campers to move to indoor shelters where sanitation, food, and protection from the elements were available. Campers, however, preferred outdoor shelter because of perceived earthquake-related hazards—namely after-shocks. Obviously, a gap existed between what Latino campers/activists and disaster organizations defined as appropriate response.

A second point in the blaming literature is that violators must be seen as benefitting from the violations. In Watsonville, this was apparently not the case. Anglos or families from higher social classes may have benefitted from existing disaster plans and arrangements, but Latino respondents did not indicate this directly. Rather, they focused on what victims were deprived of, rather than any benefits the blamed groups received.

Blaming might not have happened or at least been so extensive, if tent cities had not emerged. Additional factors contributing to the blaming included pre-existing conflict, an existing activist advocacy network, and ecological factors.

As documented, pre-existing conflict existed between the main conflicting groups: Latinos and city hall. A prime example of this already existing tension was a court-ordered district election, brought about by rancorous legal action. Furthermore, Latino respondents felt that pre-existing racism, lack of affirmative action, cultural insensitivity, and residential segregation played a role in the perceived neglect of Latino earthquake victims. These perceptions spurred activists to become representatives of disaster victims and their shelter needs.

Conversely, city hall and the Red Cross (and later FEMA) felt they had gone above and beyond their usual capacities for rendering aid. As mentioned earlier, some employees literally put in 24-hour work days in an effort to respond to their community's disaster. These groups felt that the magnitude and scope of the disaster meant that any effort would fall short of citizen's expectations.

Typically, pre-existing conflict continues after disasters, although consensus will develop in the interim. An unusual aspect of this disaster is that conflict, rather than consensus, increased—the opposite of what typically occurs in most disasters. A return to pre-

existing conflict did not take place. Thus, the blaming process may have altered the normative outcome of post-disaster recovery (i.e., a return to pre-existing conflict).

The large Latino community, with significant numbers of low-income families, generated both need and opportunity for advocacy organizations. Indeed, such organizations represented health, religious, political, educational, economic, and nutritional interests for Latinos. These organizations had become politically sophisticated and experienced. Inter-organizational co-operation and networking—informally through friendships and formally on boards and committees—facilitated services to Latinos and the larger community. Latino organizations thus served as a vocal conduit for the relatively unorganized campers, a role they had previously assumed.

Environmental factors have been noted by Neal and Phillips (1988) as precipitating collective behavior. For example, crowd development generally follows a normal curve; as temperature increases into the 60s and 70s (°F) crowd size increases; as temperature climbs further, crowds diminish. Blaming in Watsonville increased with the onset of adverse weather. Downpours turned tent cities into mudholes, drenching and chilling children and entire families. Illness spread and overcrowding dramatically increased. As conditions worsened, blaming escalated. Blaming decreased when the weather improved and when the Red Cross responded by opening Ramsey Park as an official shelter. More comfortable shelter conditions, given the inclement weather, thus reduced the blaming. Later, the Department of Justice report and the resulting Latino-city liaison further diminished blaming.

The media brought attention to camping conditions and Latino concerns. As such, the media provided an opportunity for Latino organizations to present and publicize concerns and problems. The media focused on the disaster and ensuing conflict; blamers, blamed, and victims caught in the middle expressed views through media. Media coverage increased as conditions worsened and as rescue efforts dwindled. Such media attention is not unexpected; disasters and conflict sell newspapers (Gans, 1979).

Finally, cultural insensitivity (and thus inappropriate disaster preparedness) played a role in engendering blame. At Ramsey Park, food initially available was not culturally palatable to tent city residents (for example, dishes included spaghetti and lasagna). For disaster victims, the food was welcome for a limited time. Shortly, however, the unorthodox

cuisine brought on upset stomachs and diarrhea. Unaccustomed to the food, the tent residents soon grew weary of the fare. Food, a symbolic source of comfort, traditionally brings solace because of victims' familiarity with the food and its connection to home and culture. This source of comfort was not part of the predisaster planning; thus a lack of inclusiveness and preplanning facilitated blaming.

CONSEQUENCES OF THE EARTHQUAKE

The consequences of the earthquake were extensive. Especially hard-hit were low-income Latino residents. The earthquake left hundreds of families homeless. Transportation was disrupted. The city postponed the long-anticipated election. Schools remained closed for just over a week, and even when schools reopened, some Latino children remained in shelters/camps without accessible transportation.

Economically, numerous victims experienced both the loss of homes as well as the loss of jobs. Workplaces, and thus sources of employment were negatively affected. Damage to frozen food companies (traditional employment sources) totaled millions of dollars. Agricultural losses alone exceeded $12.6 million by the spring of 1990.

CONSEQUENCES OF BLAMING

Neal (1984) suggests that sociologists need to examine the impact of the blaming process in bringing about social change. Such an opportunity exists in this study. Our findings indicate that social change was mostly temporary, although some potential inroads for the Latino community via disaster organizations became possible.

In the short term, blaming led the Red Cross to create more culturally appropriate services, such as mass care (food), outdoor shelter, and increased bilingual workers. Had these culturally inclusive services existed in pre-established disaster plans, the blaming might not have happened.

Further, blaming resulted in Latino representatives being appointed to various leadership and liaison positions. At the suggestion of the Department of Justice and Latino representatives, the city created an ombudsperson's position and appointed Latinos to city and county disaster committees, a housing task force, and the Red Cross.

The ombudsperson mediated shelter problems and served as a liaison between the city, FEMA, and Latinos placed in FEMA mobile home parks. This position was temporary and part-time, ending in June 1990. Caseworkers from various social service organizations, including the Red Cross, then largely assumed the ombudsperson's duties as liaison for mobile home residents.

The Red Cross mobilized to decrease future problems. For example, a bicultural, tri-county specialist was hired as a full-time staff member. Additionally, the local Red Cross employed a bilingual caseworker to assist families with disaster recovery. The National Red Cross formed a committee on minority concerns in 1990, appointing a Watsonville Latina as a member. The outcome of this latter Red Cross activity was a national training course directed toward meeting the needs of diverse groups. Training of course leaders began in August 1991.

In the city of Watsonville itself, the court-ordered district elections resulted in one Latino being elected. Latinos continue to serve on various disaster committees, and linkages have been forged between the Red Cross, the city, and Latino organizations. For example, the Red Cross and the emergency services coordinator have met to discuss problems from this disaster and mitigation efforts for similar future events. The Red Cross also actively recruited and trained Latino volunteers.

The most promising long-term result of this blaming process, although it may be indirect at best, is the potential for increased coordination among and inclusion of the various sociocultural groups in the area. These efforts should serve to reduce future problems and blaming. Unfortunately, we may have to wait for the next disaster to find out.

A COMPARISON WITH SANTA CRUZ

A tent city also developed in the neighboring city of Santa Cruz. Blaming, however, did not arise. The Santa Cruz tent city appeared almost a week after the earthquake. Most of the tent city residents had been staying in the official Red Cross shelter at the local civic auditorium. Four days after the earthquake, when the rain began to fall, the civic auditorium roof began to leak. The Red Cross moved shelter residents over a mile away, across a

highway to a new facility. Most civic auditorium residents did not make the move, however, and some erected tents at the local high school sports field.

Apparently, some of these campers included pre-earthquake homeless who camped in Santa Cruz prior to the earthquake. Santa Cruz had previously instituted a camping ban, which was enforced through police action. After the earthquake, police temporarily lifted the ban, but police and high school officials disallowed the tent city. The number of tents at the high school never grew beyond a dozen.

Compared to Watsonville, Santa Cruz's tent city, and thus the blaming process, never "got off the ground." The sheer numbers of victims seeking outdoor shelter in Watsonville —and the language barrier—created the need for large encampments. In Watsonville, an established activist community and network existed to help Latinos. Perhaps more importantly, Watsonville's tent cities and blaming developed almost immediately after impact, escalating at a time when the media was searching for a story. The small Santa Cruz tent city appeared as the media turned away from the Watsonville story to other issues. In Santa Cruz, social control agents actively closed the tent city down. Watsonville experienced the opposite, with numerous groups pitching in with camping donations.

CONCLUSION

The present research corroborates previous sociological studies on blame. Basically, blaming occurs when there are disparate definitions of the situation and when community standards are perceived as having been violated. Furthermore, ecological factors and group emergence facilitate blaming. The presence of pre-existing conflict plays a role in blame as does the presence of an organized, activist community. The media serve to focus attention.

Blaming is a vehicle for the construction of social problems. Claims-making activity such as the blaming discussed here resulted in furthering social and political change, especially at the local level.

FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research must take into account the role of blaming or claims-making in constructing social problems and furthering social change. In Watsonville, we caught a glimpse of the future. Scholars anticipate that disasters will occur with increasingly frequency

because of the nation's and world's growing population and increased concentration of people in hazard-prone urban and suburban areas. Concomitantly, we will see growing minority populations. By the year 2010, demographers estimate that over one-third of all births in the U.S. will be to African-American, Latino, or Asian-American families (Schwartz and Exter, 1989). Thus, Watsonville's sheltering grievances are likely to be harbingers of things to come.

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