

WHAT IS A DISASTER?
AN AGENT SPECIFIC OR AN ALL DISASTER SPECTRUM APPROACH
TO SOCIO-BEHAVIORAL ASPECTS OF EARTHQUAKES?

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Introduction: The Problem Question

Kenneth Burke once wrote, "A way of seeing is also a way of not seeing" (quoted in Lindesmith and Strauss, [1949; p. 101]). One implication of this remark is that all of us are partly blind in almost all situations since we get accustomed to looking at various situations in set customary ways. People interested in the disaster area are not immune to this kind of blindness. We all have a habitual way of looking at disaster phenomena.

This paper is aimed at making us better aware, perhaps, of some of the consequences of our usual blindness. If the comments and observations made make us more conscious that the way we habitually see phenomena is not the only meaningful way possible or the only obvious one, it will have achieved its major goal. While later on, we eventually advocate one kind of perspective for certain kinds of earthquake phenomena, the purpose of this paper is less one of converting people to a particular approach than it is to try to suggest that there are different ways.

In this conference we are basically concerned with earthquake phenomena, or more specifically, with the social and economic aspects of earthquakes and planning to mitigate their impacts. Less than twelve months ago, I attended a workshop on aircraft disasters [Quarantelli, 1980a]. Just about a year ago, at the Disaster Research Center we had a national invitational meeting on preparations for and responses to acute chemical emergencies [Gray and Quarantelli, 1981]. Conferences on flash floods have regularly been held for the last several years in the United States. Earthquakes, aircraft accidents, acute chemical emergencies, flash floods--in each case, one kind of disaster or disaster agent has been the primary if not exclusive focus of attention of those in attendance. In contrast, also in the last few years, I have been at international and national conferences where the over all or basic theme of the meeting has been disasters of all kinds (e.g., The Sociology and Social Psychology of Disasters at the 9th World Congress of Civil Defence in Rabat, Morocco, November 1980) or extremely broad classes of disasters (e.g., as at the annual Natural Hazards Workshop held at the University