

THE EARLY HISTORY OF THE DISASTER RESEARCH CENTER*

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The Disaster Research Center (DRC) came into being somewhat informally at the Ohio State University in August 1963. Its appearance was not the result of the unfolding of some prior master plan to set up a center to study disasters and crises. That was far from what happened. Instead, as we shall detail below, three sociologists at the University found themselves “at the right place at the right time with the right idea” and took advantage of that opportunity.

After I graduated from the University of Chicago in 1959, we obtained an assistant professor position in the Department of Sociology at the Ohio State University (OSU). We were assigned to teach already existing regular courses in social psychology and in collective behavior/social movements, two of our major substantive interests as a graduate student at Chicago. Our first sponsored research at OSU was focused on the professionalization of dental students, the topic of our Ph.D. dissertation.

However, between 1949 and 1954 we also had been employed as a research assistant at the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) at the University of Chicago where the first ever systematic large scale field studies of disasters was conducted. The research was operationally run by Charles Fritz. Our Master’s degree in 1953 was on the nature of panic. Also while we did no studies on disasters from 1954 into 1963, we did remain in contact with what was going on in the area through attending meetings with the National Academy of Sciences (NAS) committee on disasters where Fritz had become a central figure.

Sometime in 1961 we were approached by two colleagues in the OSU Department of Sociology, Russell Dynes and Eugene Haas, who were aware of our earlier field work in disasters. They had started to put together a research proposal with the title of “Organizations under stress”. We agreed to join them and collectively a proposal was put together that said we three sociologists want to do field research on organizations in natural and technological disasters in the United States. The proposal also indicated our general interest in possible simulation laboratory work on organizational members under stress conditions. Although none of us had done any simulation work, we were aware that in the early 1960s universities were setting up laboratories on their campuses with one way mirrors and photographic and recording machinery that could be used to study volunteer participants in such laboratory settings. While OSU did not have an actual laboratory of that kind in place, there had been some general talk that it might be open to creating such a facility. So without much thinking about it except that it might be a high priority item for University administrators, we three put the laboratory simulation idea into the proposal.

An effort initial was made to find internal university funding for the proposal, but the mostly source for that, the Mershon Center on campus, rejected the proposal as not

relevant to national security, its major concern at that time (maybe we were too ahead for our time given 9/11, the Department of Homeland Security, etc!.).

A revised proposal was then sent to the National Science Foundation in Washington, D.C. It asked roughly for about \$80,000 for research (including both field work and laboratory simulation studies) that would be done over a year and a half time period. In retrospect, the sum of money requested was very high for a social science study in the 1960s, and the time period was very woefully short for all that we proposed to do, clearly reflecting the lack of experience of three young researchers in proposing and running a rather ambitious project.

The National Science Foundation (NSF) for reasons unknown to this day, turned down the proposal. But before the three OSU writers learned that fact, a telephone was received by me from an official in the Office of Civil Defense (OCD) that their agency had obtained a copy of the proposal, and wanted to discuss it in person in Washington a few days later. The official also indicated that a representative of the Air Force Office of Scientific Research (AFOSR) would be present at the proposed meeting. No other details were provided to us. Even now it has never been totally clear how the proposal to NSF got informally passed on to OCD and the AFSOR (something that NSF did not normally do). But apparently Frtiz, who had left the NSA by that time, had a copy of the proposal and brokered the meeting.

Why had OCD and the AFSOR become interested in the proposal from OSU and initiated contact? Simply put, it had to do with the ongoing cold war between the Soviet Union and the United States. This had led to several major confrontations between the two countries, one being the Soviet blockade of Berlin, and the other being the Cuban crisis where Soviet missiles were going to be installed on the island not too far from Florida. From oral histories obtained later from key officials involved, it is obvious that there was a strong belief in both political and military top level circles, that both crises sharply accelerated a concern over how American society would react to an atomic attack on the United States. There was a pervasive belief among elite circles that the reaction would not be a good one, that there would be widespread “panic” and a breakdown of the social order.

As a consequence, OCD, among whose major mission was the civil protection of the American population, received massive increases in the millions in its funding (\$ 207 millions just in 1961 according to Blanchard, 2004). So there was a convergence in 1962 between major OCD concern over expected bad civilian behavior in a new wartime situation, major increase in funding for government agencies that had responsibilities for protecting the population, and the informal appearance of a research proposal from OSU. As we learned later, OCD and AFSOR officials saw the proposal as something that would meet their needs to show they were doing something to meet the new threat to American society. Ironically this was at a time when the US Strategic Bombing Studies were circulating, and which at least the disaster researchers on the NORC project knew showed that the civilian populations in Germany and Japan had reacted very well to massive air raid bombings.

Much of the above of course was not known to the three OSU researchers when they showed up in Washington for the requested meeting. Specific details of what happened in the meeting can be found in the DRC archives, but important for the purposes of this essay, were the following decisions. The OCD representative said that his agency was interested in the fieldwork on organizations that had been set forth in the OSU proposal, but it strongly preferred that a contract be drawn up to cover work over a five year at roughly \$ 200,000 per year. The OSU readily researchers agreed they could live with that kind of funding, given that for social science research of any kind in the 1960s it was almost an unheard sum of money. OCD said that if the OSU researchers agreed to the time frame and funding suggested the original proposal would have to be revised, among other things to have DRC do field studies outside of the United States. DRC had no problem with the extension of the field work to the entire world. Finally there was joint agreement by OCD and OSU that specific details would be worked out in later negotiations, but for all practical purposes and in principle there was going to be an OCD funding support for a major OSU disaster research effort.

The AFSOR representative said his agency could not offer immediate funding, but indicated that his organization was very much interested in the laboratory simulation study proposed. The only condition imposed was that if AFSOR gave a grant for the work, the university would have to insure that it would provide the kind of laboratory facility mentioned in the OSU proposal.

Again more specific details of what went on at the University can be found in the DRC archives, but the following were among the more important decisions and actions that were taken. Just as the obtaining of funding for both the field and lab work deviated rather markedly from standard methodology textbook descriptions on the writing of proposals, the actual setting up of DRC also did not follow traditional ways of creating and establishing university centers and institutes. During the middle of the summer of 1963 the OSU researchers rewrote the proposal more or less in line with what OCD had suggested. Actual work started informally in August 1963, although a formal contact was not signed until a while later. In addition, the University upon being told of the AFSOR interest in supporting laboratory research quickly agreed to accelerate the building of such a facility. The laboratory was ready by early 1964 and a grant was obtained from the AFSOR at that time, which was said to be likely to be renewed indefinitely.

Because it was obvious after the Washington meeting that there would be at least two concurrent and long duration projects, the OSU researchers involved thought that it would be useful from an administrating point of view to have a collective name to embrace such activities and even other projects. The name "Disaster Research Center" (DRC) was chosen in the early summer of 1963 after the consideration of other names. It was thought it might be wise to check with the OSU administration if that name could be used. We were told by a relevant vice-president at the university that we could call ourselves a Center because that was an informal designation, and did not constitute the setting up of a new formal administrative unit on campus as would be required if

something called an Institute was created. So DRC was never a formal part of OSU; we were not in the table of organization of the University. Also, no funding of any kind was ever provided to DRC by OSU. DRC solely existed for nearly two decades on getting its own grants and contracts. So in one meaningful sense we were a phantom organization and answerable only to ourselves

Although we did not recognize it at that time, this proved a totally unexpected blessing in disguise because it allowed DRC a very large degree of independence in doing what it wanted to do. Since the three faculty members were regular faculty members in the sociology department, for administrative paperwork purposes DRC operated through the sociology department. But since the department provided no funding at all to DRC until some minor support about 15 years later, that also left DRC with a very large degree of autonomy. For example, the three OSU faculty members designated themselves as Directors of the Center. It was not an official title given by the University, although after a decade or so most everyone around the University incorrectly assumed that DRC was a formal organization on campus run by formally appointed Directors.

As is obvious, there was never any master plan to establish a DRC. The initial proposal that the three OSU faculty members advanced was substantially changed by what OCD and the informal DRC eventually agreed upon. This is well indicated in the revised proposal that was worked out with OCD in January 1964.

To quote the proposal, it is said that insofar as OCD is concerned there would be five major objectives:

1. To collate and synthesize findings obtained in prior studies of organizational behavior under stress.
2. To examine, both by field work and other means, pre-crisis organizational structures and procedures for meeting stress.
3. To establish a field research team to engage in immediate and follow-up studies of the operation of organizations in community disaster settings, both domestic and foreign.
4. To develop, in coordination with a concurrent project, a program for field experiments and laboratory simulation studies of organizational behavior under stress.
5. To produce a series of publications on the basis of these four objectives with special emphasis on recommendations concerning the effective emergency operations of organizations and other matters pertinent to civil defense planners.

The language of the first three objectives consciously reflects the vocabulary of the DRC Directors. Objective # 4 was meaningless since AFOSR never formally agreed with it; in fact, we do not think they ever saw themselves in a coordinated effort with OCD. Objective # 5 was what OCD specifically wanted.

The emphasis on organizations and doing field work, I consciously drew from what was done in the NORC study. In time, DRC expanded its prime unit of analysis, particularly

to communities although organizations were always the primary focus while DRC was at OSU. But even when at OSU, DRC undertook large scale population surveys (they were done in the field rather than by phone) and systematic participant observations (they used ideas gathered in the NORC study). Much of what DRC did from 1963 to 1984 while at OSU is deeply rooted in the NORC model. Even the training of research assistants followed the NORC model (see Quarantelli, 2002 for details of how field teams were trained and what was actually done in the field). A final parallel to the NORC work has to do with Objective # 5 above. Even the NORC study was supposed to extrapolate its findings from civilian disasters to a wartime setting. But as we have written elsewhere, that extrapolation was heavily downplayed by NORC field workers and analysts. My impression is that this was also done in the early DRC work for OCD, but this is only hinted at in some oral histories and has not been systematically studied. This question has important implications for what researchers should expect from funders and vice versa.

What has been described provides very brief highlights of how DRC got informally established. Many more details are in the varied cited sources used in this essay. But many other details currently exist only in the DRC archives and some oral histories that have been barely looked at by anyone.

*Apart from unpublished DRC archival documents, most of the rest of the descriptions and accounts in this essay are drawn primarily from two major published sources.

1. Quarantelli, E. L. The Disaster Research Center (DRC) field studies of organized behavior in disasters. PP. 94-116 in Robert Stallings (Ed) *Methods of Disaster Research*. Philadelphia: Xlibris. 2002.

2. The chapter (PP. 321-339) by Quarantelli in O'Leary *The First 72 Hours*. New York: Universe Inc. 2004.

Finally another source used is in the process of being prepared for public publication and is tentatively listed as E. L. Quarantelli. *The earliest interest in disasters and the earliest social science studies of disasters: A sociology of knowledge perspective*. (Probably in 2009).