

Predicting Social Psychological Well-Being Following Trauma: The Role of Postdisaster Social Support

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This longitudinal study assessed both the mobilization and deterioration dynamics of postdisaster social support and aid unfolding within the first 12 months after a natural disaster. These were the predictor variables hypothesized to influence various subsequent manifestations of survivors' social psychological well-being such as perceptions of social support and community cohesion, engagement in interpersonal contacts, and beliefs about mutual helpfulness and benevolence. Data came from a sample of 285 respondents who experienced a severe flood that devastated parts of southwestern Poland in 1997. A series of hierarchical regression analyses that controlled for the influence of sociodemographic factors and direct disaster exposure measures showed that a greater involvement in the instantaneous postdisaster altruistic communities (mainly the amount of social support received) was associated with more favorable appraisals of interpersonal and community relationships assessed 20 months after the flood. Conversely, the indicators of postdisaster social bitterness, operationalized as dissatisfaction with aid and interpersonal and community animosities and disagreements, were predictive of lower levels of subsequent social psychological well-being. Results underscore the relevance of both the social support mobilization and social support deterioration models for trauma theory. These findings also suggest that postdisaster relief and intervention programs should consider helping survivors maintain, or even augment, their perceptions of being supported and their trust in benefits of belonging to a valued social group and community.

Keywords: social support, disasters, traumatic stress, sense of community, world assumptions

All catastrophes, but natural disasters in particular, elicit an outpouring of immense mutual helping. In essence, this is exactly what people expect in time of crisis. Immediately after the impact, communities of victims, professional supporters, and empathetic witnesses rally to rescue, protect, and help each other. Yet, this compassionate stage of resource mobilization does not last long and must inevitably cease. The sense of initial solidarity, benevolence, and altruism is slowly overpowered by a gradual disillusionment and outright realization of the harsh reality of grief, loss, and destruction. Tangible losses are often accompanied by a growing sense of deterioration of resources and increased competition and polarization within what used to be, only a short time before, a united community in shared distress. Guided by a general theory of social support and research on coping with trauma, this longitudinal study assessed both the mobilization and deterioration facets of postdisaster social support and aid processes occurring within the first year after a severe flood (Wave 1, 12 months

postdisaster). These were the predictor variables hypothesized to influence subsequent manifestations of survivors' social psychological well-being in terms of quality and quantity of their personal and communal bonds assessed 8 months later (Wave 2, 20 months postdisaster).

Mobilization of Social Support in the Aftermath of Disasters

Across a variety of life events, it is not uncommon to observe considerable mobilization of social support networks to aid those affected. Although the idea that social support is marshaled in times of stress is implicit in nearly all theoretical notions explaining the role of social support in the stress process, the actual causal linkage between (more) stress and (more) support has been most explicitly stated by the suppressor or social support mobilization model (Barrera, 1988; Wheaton, 1985). According to this formulation, deleterious effects of life stressors are suppressed, or counteracted, through an activation of social support networks.

Notwithstanding some exceptions to the rule (see Kaniasty & Norris, 2009), many studies have documented high levels of received social support (i.e., reports of actual receipt of help) in the immediate aftermath of natural disasters (e.g., Beggs, Hainess, & Hurlbert, 1996; Bolin & Bolton, 1986; Drabek & Key, 1984; Kaniasty & Norris, 1995, 2000; Tyler, 2006). Historically, this instant postdisaster mobilization of social support has been referred to with an assortment of labels, including "democracy of distress" (Kutak, 1938), "postdisaster utopia" (Wolfenstein, 1957), or "altruistic community" (Barton, 1969). The most distinguishing

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