

When the desert floods: Military relief work, attributing clean-up responsibility, and future helping intentions following the Katherine flood

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Abstract

Attribution theory has seldom been applied to assess the impact of community disaster relief work on military personnel, despite a clear prediction from Actor-Observer theory that direct experience of the community's environment will increase helpers' motivation to help in future crises. In the wake of the Northern Territory's Katherine River Flood in January 1998, 31 Royal Australian Army relief workers and 21 army personnel not posted to relief work attributed responsibility for cleaning-up homes, shops and businesses in the recently flood-affected South Pacific communities of Katherine, Townsville, and the Cook Islands. Direct experience of disaster relief work was not associated with any systematic differences in dispositional or situational attributions, although the latter were generally linked to intention to help in future crises. Occasional rumours of negative critical incidents with the local community, although rare considering the magnitude of the relief effort, may have partly coloured the experience of seeing the tragedy first-hand, which would suggest a need to research the Negative Information Bias and the psychology of rumour in future disaster recovery projects.

On Australia Day 1998, flood waters peaked in Katherine, exceeding a one in one hundred year expectation. Three lives

were lost and floodwaters reached the ceilings of many shops in the shopping centre. Hundreds of people were moved into a makeshift refuge at the local High School, waiting for the waters to subside and for what was to be a lengthy clean up operation. The Australian Defence Force provided labour for the clean up operation, deploying men and women from the Airforce base at Tindal, and from various Army units (primarily the First Brigade) based in and around Darwin.

Over the last decade we have been caught amid a fierce debate over the presence of, and consequent impact of, climatic change and Greenhouse effects. *Climate Change under Enhanced Greenhouse Conditions in Northern Australia* (CSIRO, 1998), forecast a significant amount of climatic change across northern Australia over the next 30 to 100 years. These changes include (1) changes in water supply; (2) droughts; (3) tropical cyclones and storm surges; and (4) floods. More especially, extreme rainfall events are expected to increase, bringing with it increased incidences of flash flooding.

Much of the psychological research related to natural disasters has been clinical in its focus, examining aspects such as post traumatic stress, morbidity, and support provision; while research into the relationship between attributions and natural disasters has been limited (Amato, Ho, & Partridge, 1984). With more extreme weather events predicted, the new millenium will witness more frequent calls for both volunteer workers, and for increased donations. Thus, it will also be essential to understand the effect that disaster relief work has on volunteers, both for future appeals for physical help and for maximizing helping behaviour generally.

Attribution theory focuses on how people explain events such as poverty, hardship,

and recovery from hardship (Hewstone, 1983). These explanations often hinge on whether the event is blamed on the person, or on the environment (Antaki, 1981). In the Katherine crisis, a dispositional attribution might involve attributing the responsibility for post-flood clean up to the residents affected because they chose to live there; or choosing not to donate money because the 'victims' should have had flood insurance. In contrast, situational attributions would acknowledge that the flood was unexpected and was due to factors beyond the community's control. *Situational* attributions like these have been linked to increased helping behaviour (Kelley, 1989), and indeed the research evidence suggests that they can be augmented through direct experience of what the community in question has experienced (Storms, 1973). Thus, the basic framework of attribution theory and research allows us to predict that those who are sent to help in a crisis will tend to make situational attributions and hence become more community-oriented with respect to future crises.

Method

There were fifty-two participants from the Royal Australian Army posted to 1 Brigade. Thirty-one of these had actually performed relief work after the Katherine flood in January/February 1998, while 21 of the respondents were matched observers who had observed the events in the media but had not directly experienced the flood environment itself. Under conditions of informed consent and confidentiality, all 52 participants completed a survey form that presented three flood scenarios. In addition to Katherine in the Northern Territory, these included Townsville on the South Pacific coast of North Australia, and the Cook Islands in the South Pacific. Each of these communities had recently experienced flooding, which had been

reported across Australia and directly impacted the military itself (Townsville has a military base and military personnel were involved in the post-flood relief operation). For each of these scenarios, the survey form asked for attributions of responsibility for cleaning up homes, shops/ /businesses, and amenities (parks, playgrounds, sports facilities). The scale ranged from the community itself, to the local government organisations, to the State/Territory government concerned, to the national government. Participants were also asked for their likely intention to donate (money and resources such as expertise) to the flood victims in each community concerned, if there was a flood "right now." The scale had five-points, ranging from Very Unlikely to Very Likely, with "Unsure" offered as a mid-point.

Results

After checking for outliers, Mann-Whitney U tests were conducted on clean-up attributions made for each scenario, and for each type of clean-up (homes, shops, amenities). Contrary to expectations, no differences were found between those who had directly participated in the Katherine relief work, and those who had not. Indeed, on 8/9 instances where attributions were made, those tended more towards the situational (national government) end of the scale in the eyes of those who had *not* experienced the Katherine flood. Some of the participants, at debriefing, volunteered negative anecdotes, e.g., of a resident apparently standing back and watching, or giving instructions to military personnel. These might have partly coloured the experience of actors, but such anecdotes were also volunteered by observers, who had heard them on the proverbial grapevine. Over both groups combined, greater situational (vs. Dispositional) attributions were, as predicted, correlated

with donation intentions to the respective community setting. The correlation coefficients ranged from +.30 to +.45 ($p < .05$, two-tails). Thus, while the expected link between attributions and helping did materialise, that between experience and attributional re-orientation (Storms, 1973) did not.

Discussion

This study attempted to test attribution theory in an applied setting with real community development (disaster recovery) workers. Criticism has been leveled at attribution theory for its laboratory focus and its use of psychology students as participants (e.g., Coolican, 1990). The natural disaster context is very different to the laboratory context of the university. Real disasters are likely to throw up contextual realities that interact with any positive influences of encountering a disaster, and its management, first-hand. In the present study, volunteered anecdotes recounting one or two negative incidents, however rare considering the magnitude of the relief effort, may nonetheless have partly tainted some of the participants' direct and indirect experiences of the disaster. Rumour thrives on a "negative information bias" (Darlin, 1985), and close contact with the needy occasionally prompts some "blame the victim" (Walkup, 1997). Whilst we are not suggesting that either of these processes played a significant role in the Katherine disaster, they, and other contextual factors, may warrant monitoring and evaluation in future community disasters, natural or otherwise (Carr, 1996). Attribution theory, in itself, may not be enough.

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