

Disasters, Trust, and Social Cohesion

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When disaster strikes, we usually hear of people from near and far coming to help the victims. Do disasters lead to a greater sense of community cohesion and greater trust? Or do they lead to a sense of anomie and alienation as people struggle to cope?

There are many stories of people coming together to help victims after national disasters. Aldrich (2010) finds that social ties among residents were the central factor in helping people recover from the 1995 earthquake in Kobe, Japan. Putnam (2002) argues that all sorts of measures of “social capital” or cohesion increased dramatically after the September 11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center and other targets. Americans became more trusting of most government institutions (especially the military) and of each other—and also were more likely to take part in community organizations and especially to donate to charitable causes.

Disasters do not always lead to a greater sense of solidarity. The tsunami and earthquake in Japan in 2010 led to a crisis in trust for the government and the nuclear power company that built the reactor that melted down (Foster, 2011). The Korean ferry disaster of 2014 also led to sharply lower trust in government (*New York Times*, 2014).

There is no simple answer about public reactions to disasters. Any answer depends upon:

- § The type of trust. Trust in government will go down if people believe that the government could have done more to prevent the disaster—or to mitigate its effects. Trust in government will go up if people evaluate the government’s response as both immediate and helpful in rebuilding. It will also go up if people blame the disaster on an external enemy (as in September 11, 2001 in the United States). Trust in government will go down if people see the government as responsible for the disaster or as not doing enough to rebuild. Even when trust in government rises, the increase is likely to be temporary.
- § Despite Putnam’s finding, disasters are unlikely to increase trust in other people. Generalized trust—faith in strangers who may be different from yourself—is a value learned early in life and is generally stable over long periods of time (Uslaner, 2002). Generalized trust *may* help with recovery—if people of different backgrounds come to the aid of victims. But when people in a community band together to rebuild, they may demonstrate social cohesion—greater solidarity and altruism to their neighbors, but this reflects in-group trust, not generalized trust.

Trust and Social Cohesion

Trust is a multifaceted concept. The most common view of trust is that it rests upon information and experience. Claus Offe (1999:56; cf. Putnam, 1993, 170) states: “Trust in persons results from past experience with concrete persons.” There is an alternative view of trust, which I call moralistic trust, that is trust in strangers. Trust in people you know is important, but it really doesn’t help us solve collective action problems. Moralistic trust is a value learned early in life—from your parents—and is stable over time and across generations, and it is not fragile. It is not based upon personal experience, nor does it depend upon reciprocity. It is a value that rests on an optimistic view of the world and one’s ability to control it. Moralistic trust is not a relationship between specific persons for a particular context. It is the belief that others share your fundamental moral values and therefore should be treated as you would wish to be treated by them.

Moralistic (or generalized) trust is important because it leads to a wide range of positive outcomes, including greater tolerance and a willingness to help others. Trust doesn’t lead to civic participation nor does group membership produce trust. The only exceptions are altruistic deeds—giving to charity and volunteering time. But *not just any charitable contributions or time spent helping others matters*. Only altruism designed to help out-groups, notably people who are in great need and different from the donor—depends upon trust and in turn produces more faith in others, or what Andreoni (1989) calls a “warm glow.”

Generalized trust may lead people to help others in distress, but it is not likely to be affected by natural disasters. It is learned early in life and does not change for most people over time (or even across generations, see Uslaner, 2002, chs. 4, 6). The spike in generalized trust Putnam found after 9/11 quickly receded (Smith, Rasinski, and Toce, 2001). Generalized trust depends upon an optimistic world view and a sense of control—life is good, going to get better, and I can help make it better (Uslaner, 2002, chs. 2, 4). But these are precisely the *opposite* conditions we find after a disaster. It is hard to be optimistic after a major disaster. And it is even harder to believe that you are in control of your own destiny.

It is even more difficult to increase generalized trust when it is low before the disaster. And this is precisely what we are likely to see. Economic inequality is the single most important factor in shaping generalized trust. Disasters are more common in countries and regions that are poor and unequal. The infrastructure is especially weak in countries with high levels of inequality and low levels of income—so people in those countries are more likely to be adversely affected by natural disasters. Since they are likely to be low in generalized trust, the pessimism and the lost sense of any control will make them even less likely to believe that most people can be trusted. Floods do the most damage (alas, regularly) in the poorest sections of Bangladesh, earthquakes destroy the dwellings of poor people in Istanbul leaving the sturdier new buildings untouched, and in New Orleans Hurricane Katrina flooded the low-lying areas where poor African-Americans lived while leaving untouched the expensive mansions on higher ground owned largely by wealthy whites.

Disasters, whether natural or from an external threat, seem perfect recipes for reducing trust rather than enhancing it. If people respond with a sense of greater solidarity by working together to rebuild, we are likely witnessing in-group rather than generalized trust. We are more likely to help out in our own communities. There is some evidence of people coming to disaster sites to help rebuild and resettle—and this generosity toward others is more common among people who are generalized trusters, such as Red Cross volunteers (Uslaner, 2002, ch. 7). It is more common for people helping others to come from the same community.

In-group trust is common. Almost everyone trusts people they know very well (especially their families and their neighbors). Out-group trust is less common. Out of almost 100 countries, only 8 have a majority of people who believe that “most people can be trusted.” They are Denmark, Sweden, Norway, Finland, the Netherlands, Canada, and Australia. The lowest levels of generalized trust are in the most unequal countries, which are the most prone to natural disasters.

Both in-group and out-group trust promote assistance to others (volunteering). In-group trust leads people to help people like themselves—their families, their neighbors, members of groups they belong to (and especially to members of their house of worship).

Generalized trust is not affected by experiences in your adult life, be they positive (group membership) or negative (divorce, being robbed, or even facing disasters). Trusting people will see negative events, even disasters, as exceptions to the norm. It would take many negative experiences to make people less trusting of strangers. Mistrusting people would be more likely see disasters as confirmation that the world is unjust and outside their control. . Disasters are unlikely to lead to lower levels of generalized trust.

Trust in government is different from trust in one’s fellow citizens. These two forms of trust have different roots and are generally not strongly correlated with each other. Unlike trust in other people, confidence in government is *not* stable. It goes up and down with the performance of the economy. People are also more likely to have trust in government when they support the party in power. Confidence in government thus depends mostly on the regime’s performance—but also in the perception that the people in power are honest. When people believe that a disaster was either caused by or made worse by governmental actions, they are likely to lose faith in their leaders. If they believe that the crisis was either caused or exacerbated by corrupt dealings between public officials and business leaders, people will be far less likely to trust their government. In the wake of a natural disaster, how quickly and successfully a government responds will shape the level of trust in government. When a disaster is caused by external events, such as the 9/11 attacks in the United States, people will, at least initially, rally around their government.

Beyond trust in other people and in government are social connections, which Putnam (2000) sees as part of a larger syndrome of “social capital.” For him, social networks lead to greater levels of trust. Uslaner (2002, chs. 4, 5, 7) disagrees and shows that social ties are not linked to either generalized trust or confidence in government. Yet social networks are an important resource for recovering from disasters, even if they do not lead to greater trust.

Disasters and Social Cohesion

Social networks are a key factor in helping to recover from disasters. Aldrich (N.D.) argues that such networks were essential in rebuilding New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina in 2005. Hurricane Katrina was one of the worst natural disasters to have hit the U.S. The hurricane hit New Orleans, Louisiana and surrounding areas on August 29, 2005, breaching the levees on the Mississippi River. Over a million people were displaced; 1,800 were killed and 100,000 people (especially the poor and African-Americans) were stranded without power or water for weeks.

Aldrich (N.D., emphasis added) writes:

neighborhoods with similar levels of damage and poverty bounced back from the disaster at very different rates....The Vietnamese community centered around Mary Queen of Viet Nam (MQVN) Church in Village de L'Est brought back a tremendous number of residents and businesses. This was despite high levels of poverty, flood waters, and low levels of formal education. Within a year of the disaster, for example, observers estimated that 9 in 10 businesses and households had returned to the area. Residents set up their own charter school, built an urban farm, and set up new medical clinics to avoid the 25 minute wait for ambulances. On the other hand, similar neighborhoods in the Big Easy which also suffered from unemployment, damage, and poverty did not seem to be recovering. Some of those neighborhoods now – some five years after Hurricane Katrina – seem untouched since the day the levees broke. Blighted properties filled with tall weeds dominate and less than half of the residents have returned in these slow-to-recover areas. Government officials did not send more funds to survivors in the MQVN area; if anything...they often ignored the neighborhood....**neighborhoods with deeper levels of social capital are better able to make their voices heard and connect with authorities.**

Black residents—already low in trust—perceived even more discrimination and became even more pessimistic (Levy et al., 2006)

Lu, Sato, and Zhang (2008) found little support for a link between recovery from natural disasters and social networks in China in a much more extensive survey.

Dussaillant and Guzmán (2014) report an increase in trust in neighbors after an earthquake in Chile in 2010 in moderately affected areas. In the worst hit areas, there was no increase in any form of trust. Presumably this result stems from the greater ability of people to work with their neighbors in areas that were not completely devastated. Chang (2010) reports similar results for a flood in Carlisle (United Kingdom) in 2005. The increase in trust in neighbors, but not in strangers, points to the central role of small networks. Aldrich (2010) and Zhao and Dalen (2006) find that small networks were much more effective in banding together to rebuild after disasters (in Japan and China, respectively).

There is thus little evidence that disasters either build or destroy social trust. Disasters may lead to increased social cohesion, but cooperative efforts largely build on in-group

rather than generalized trust. The effects are strongest when strong in-group ties already exist—and when the destruction of disasters is less severe and recovery is relatively quick.

There is no support for the claim that disasters can increase out-group ties. The most severe disasters may make people even more pessimistic about the future and see events in life outside their control—thus reducing already low levels of generalized trust. Population displacement may also weaken in-group trust as support networks disappear when people leave an area permanently. For Katrina in the United States and the 2010 tsunami in Japan, large shares of each area's population were forced to relocate—and this leads to rootlessness, pessimism, and likely less trust (certainly less trust in neighbors).

Disasters and Trust in Government

Major disasters and even “minor” disasters such as floods and snowstorms can lead to a loss of trust in government.

Trust in government may fall during disasters for three reasons:

- (1) The public may come to believe that leaders and bureaucrats are not competent to handle crises.
- (2) The public may come to believe that public officials don't have enough sympathy for the victims of crises.
- (3) The public perceives that corrupt dealings either led to the disaster or made recovery more difficult.

The partial meltdown at Three Mile Island in the United States led to lower trust in government in the area of western Pennsylvania but not throughout the country.

In Katrina, we see the same dynamic: African-American residents of New Orleans already had low trust in government—and trust dropped. But there was not a major loss of trust throughout the country and over time there seems to be no relationship (see Figure 1).

There was a sharp drop in trust in government among African-Americans and others who were directly affected by the hurricane (Pew Research Center, 2005; Nicholls and Picou, 2013). Trust in government did not fall more generally because the impact of Katrina was restricted to Louisiana and Mississippi—and the people who suffered most were minorities with less political clout. After a year, the issue was no longer a key topic of national discussion.

Another survey (by Gallup) showed that people who lived in the area affected by Katrina had sharply lower trust in government (Pew Research Center, 2005). People who experienced financial losses were especially more likely to distrust government. Yet, these effects were not long-lasting. By 2006, trust in government returned to its pre-Katrina level. In the 2010 BP oil spill, 2/3 of respondents were critical of the government, but trust did not fall.

The Gulf oil spill, off the Louisiana coast in April, 2010: the largest oil spill in U.S. history occurred when BP's Deepwater Horizon oil rig exploded. The spill wasn't fully contained until

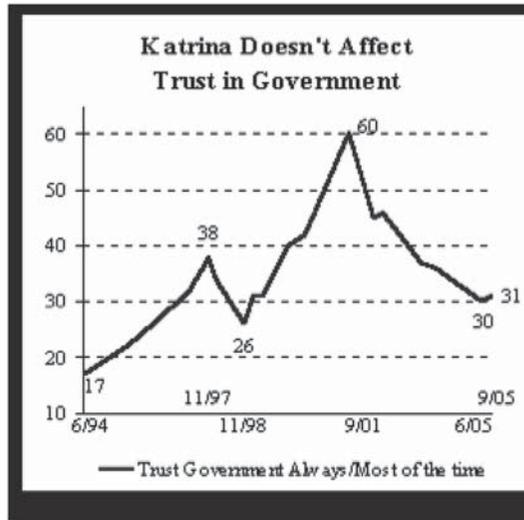


Figure 1

Source: <http://www.people-press.org/2005/09/22/katrina-has-only-modest-impact-on-basic-public-values/>

September and many people blamed both the government and BP for not stopping the leak earlier. Over 4.4 million barrels of oil were spilled and cost to clean up over \$40 billion.

Two-thirds of Americans thought that the government's response to the oil spill was insufficient. In an ABC News/Washington Post poll only a quarter of Americans expressed confidence in the government's handling of the oil spill. Approval of government was not much higher than was approval of oil companies such as BP (Langer, 2005).

There was a different dynamic in the 2008 earthquake in Sichuan, China. People reportedly have very high levels of trust in the central government in China. They have lower trust in local governments and blamed local officials for corruption leading to poor construction of buildings, unequal treatment in reconstruction, and a more general lack of concern for ordinary people. The President and the Premier visited the affected areas so trust in the central government did not fall (Han et al, 2011.).

In 2010 wildfires destroyed more than 500,000 hectares in Russia, the most ever. Even as half of the Russian population blamed government, they gave high marks to the relief effort. The federal government rebuilt homes for all villagers in a short period of time, regardless of the value of their own homes. Prime Minister Putin visited two villages. His own popularity stayed high and trust in government increased substantially in the affected areas (Lazarev et al, 2014.).

The Japanese Earthquake and Tsunami

The earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear accident in Japan in 2010 had long-lasting effects. In 2014 100,000 residents of the affected area remained dislocated. ¥3.28 trillion in funding for roads,

bridges and thousands of new homes in areas devastated by the tsunami in Tohoku 3½ years ago is unspent. More than ¥5.46 trillion in aid to local governments also remains in banks, as does ¥251 billion for Ishinomaki, where 3700 people died. Only 5 percent of homes have been rebuilt. And only 6% of municipal waste has been disposed of.

82% of Japanese believe that the government could not help them in an emergency and 80% believe that the government has not told the truth. 2/3 say that relief was too slow. 60% had little or no confidence in nuclear power plants. One survey found that trust in government in Japan was at a similar level as in Russia (Economist, 2012). Americans after Katrina were less critical of their government.

The government's poor record in rebuilding is responsible for declining trust. But so are the close ties between the Tokyo Electric Power Company (TEPCO) that built and ran the reactors and the government. Tepco falsified a 2002 report on safety tests and ignored early warnings that the plants could not withstand earthquakes. The Prime Minister hid a report about the possible evacuation of Tokyo. People saw this relationship as cozy and corrupt—leading to lower trust.

The Korean Ferry Disaster

In April 2014 the MV Sewol, a ferry carrying 476 passengers (mostly students) capsized on its route from Incheon to Jeju. Prosecutors charged that the ferry was carrying more than twice as much cargo as allowed. Members of the family that owned the ferry were charged with embezzling \$169 million from a church and the son of the owner was convicted of taking \$6.8 million.

The Sewol had been cited in the past for safety violations. But the Korean Shipping Association, composed of former government officials, had cleared the ship to sail (Fattig, 2014). After the accident, Prime Minister Chung Hong-won resigned. But President Park remains in power. Korea has long had low trust in government, but confidence fell even more after the accident. The close—and corrupt—ties between the ferry operators and political leaders have led to low trust (Jung and Sung, 2012).

Parents of the deceased students have staged protests on the streets. They charged that the ferry owner was allowed to violate the law because of close ties with political leaders—and that the government was impeding the work of an independent commission investigating the accident. An advertisement in the New York Times included the charge that the President was instructing the public prosecutor to track people making negative comments. The Korean public sees the ferry capsizing as a national embarrassment that could have been avoided if the political leaders had been more vigilant and less corrupt.

The General Pattern

Disasters have strong effects on trust in government and minimal effects on social trust. This largely stems from the roots of the two types of trust. Generalized trust is not based upon everyday experience. It is largely stable. Political trust is based upon government honesty and performance. Yamamura (2013) has shown that high levels of corruption increases the likelihood of technological disasters (in data from 1948 to 2008). He also shows (using data from 1900 to 2010 for 84 countries) that disasters also lead to more corruption, especially when they are more frequent. Corruption is associated with (as both a cause and effect) of poor responses by government to disasters—and thus to low confidence in the state.

Disasters in the United States lead to electoral punishment (as a surrogate for low trust in government) when officials in the states do not request disaster relief— but to more support when officials do get funding. A simple declaration of disaster is worth a 4% boost in the vote in each county. So as in China and Russia, good performance is rewarded by more trust. Poor performance is penalized (as in Japan and Korea).

The key issues seem to be how widespread the effects are, how long-lasting they are, and how well the leaders seem to have handled the crisis. Yet, even when the impact is neither great nor lasting (as in the Korean ferry disaster), a disaster may have large effects if it is tinged with corruption—and if people feel that it brings shame to the nation's image.

Most disasters have very limited impacts on trust in government. Some politicians' careers have been placed in jeopardy. But others have recovered. The key issues seem to be how widespread the effects are, how long-lasting they are, and how well the leaders seem to have handled the crisis.

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