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## **PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS**

### **2018 International Sociological Association Research Committee on Disasters (RC39) Presidential Address: Looking Back and Moving Forward**

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**Editor's Note:** *This article is a revised and lightly edited version of the International Sociological Association Research Committee on Disasters (RC39) Presidential Address, which was delivered on July 18, 2018, at the RC39 Business Meeting at the World Congress of Sociology in Toronto, Canada. In this address, Peek—who is a long-time member of the committee and the first woman to have served as president of the RC39—reflects on the history of the organization, how it has changed over time, challenges ahead, and future possibilities.*

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**2018 International Sociological Association Research Committee on Disasters  
(RC39) Presidential Address:  
Looking Back and Moving Forward**

As I prepared these remarks, I started by re-reading the Research Committee on Disasters (RC39) archive. While reviewing documents and statements from decades past, I learned that some presidents chose not to deliver a closing address, others used this opportunity to thank the members of the committee who have served so generously over the past four years, and still others offered longer and more detailed statements. As my time as president of the RC39 draws to a close, I would like to end this term of service by expressing my profound gratitude and sharing some reflections and thoughts with you.

### **HISTORY**

This year at the International Sociological Association (ISA) World Congress of Sociology, many papers were delivered that addressed the concept of “community” in some way or another. Therefore, in the run-up to the meetings in Toronto, I spent time reflecting on that abstract idea and what it has meant in terms of actually defining and shaping this research committee. Here is what I learned about when, where, and how this community of researchers was formed.

Forty years have now passed since the first seeds of what eventually blossomed into this organization were planted. It was in 1978 at the World Congress of Sociology in Uppsala, Sweden, when E.L. “Henry” Quarantelli and Örjan Hultåker first called for the establishment of a research committee on the social and behavioral aspects of disasters. At that time, many of the leading scholars in the field reached an agreement that some kind of association was needed for disaster researchers. They held an informal straw poll, and many indicated an interest in such an organizing body, although nothing came of it immediately.

It wasn’t until the lead up to the 1982 World Congress that 59 scholars from 17 countries signed a petition to form a new working group as part of the ISA. Quarantelli submitted the petition to the ISA Executive Office in advance of the meetings. While at the World Congress in Mexico City in July, two dozen researchers unanimously passed the resolution to form a Working Group on Disasters. Those founding documents stressed that it was not meant to be an organization for sociologists exclusively, but instead emphasized that “anyone with a research interest in the human and social aspects of disasters would be welcome to join the committee.”

The participants at the Mexico City meetings elected a provisional board, which included Quarantelli (USA) as president, Ritsuo Akimoto (Japan) as vice president, Jan Trost (Sweden) as secretary-treasurer, and Russell Dynes (USA), Ovesi Gelman (Mexico), Carlo Pelanda (Italy), and Roger Wettenhall (Australia) as members at large. Soon after

the meeting and elections, the ISA approved the Working Group and by August they had adopted the full name of the International Sociological Association Research Committee on the Sociology of Disasters. The first orders of business for the newly established committee included launching a new journal—what would become *this* journal—and publishing the *Unscheduled Events* newsletter.

In 1984, Quarantelli issued a formal statement in the newsletter regarding the mission of the RC39. I share it here to give a better sense of the original intent of this committee and to highlight the wide range of topics of interest (for more information on the history and emergence of the field, see Quarantelli 1987; Quarantelli and Dynes 1977).

The general objective of the committee is to promote the social scientific study of disasters. More specifically, the purpose is to help increase scientific knowledge and understanding of the social and behavioral aspects of sudden collective stress situations, usually called disasters or mass emergencies. These situations are most often created by natural disaster agents and technological accidents, but are sometimes associated with acute environmental threats, abrupt shortages of vital resources, localized violent inner-group conflicts, and other kinds of major hazards to life, property, well-being, and everyday routines. The committee is supportive of research on individual, group, organizational, community, societal, and international activities in preparations for, responses to, and recoveries from the indicated kinds of sudden mass emergencies.

The RC39 membership approved this statement and a set of by-laws in 1984. These documents clarified that the committee's scope would be multidisciplinary and multinational.

During my years of participation in this committee and in the World Congress meetings, I have often heard people remark on the wide range of disciplines represented in the RC39 sessions. The welcoming of multidisciplinary approaches to the study of disasters—which was part of the organization from inception—has clearly continued to create an atmosphere open to sharing knowledge across disciplinary boundaries.

My own history as a sociologist and disaster researcher is deeply tied to this organization. I did not attend my first World Congress until 2010, but as early as 2001, I had already begun participating in RC39 special sessions that coincided with American Sociological Association annual meetings. Around 2006, those RC39 meetings started being held in conjunction with the annual Natural Hazards Research and Applications Workshop in Colorado.

It was at those RC39 sessions that I first met many of the founders of the committee, who were also the founders of this field. I remember vividly when, at one of the meetings, Henry Quarantelli sat beside me and asked how things were going at the Natural Hazards Center, where I was a graduate research assistant at the time. It was also at one of those

meetings when I shared that Alice Fothergill and I had started a new project on children and disasters. Russ Dynes turned to me and said, “Lori, it is so good that you two are working to capture the voices of children, but do not forget that children are embedded in families, schools, and other institutional contexts.” We did not ever lose sight of Russ’s words, and they had a strong influence on how we approached the sociological study of children’s recovery.

It was also through the RC39 that Alice and I were able to deepen our connection with Bill Anderson. Alice and I had reached out to him to ask if he would help us to think through the framing of our project on children after Hurricane Katrina. After all, it was Bill’s foundational paper, published in this journal, that inspired us to do the work in the first place (Anderson 2005). Bill began, as he so often did, by asking questions both in his manuscript and of us personally: “What are the myths that exist about children and disasters? How do children perceive recovery? How do children help themselves and others after disaster?” The questions that he asked informed and inspired the opening chapter—and so much more—of what eventually became *Children of Katrina* (Fothergill and Peek 2015).

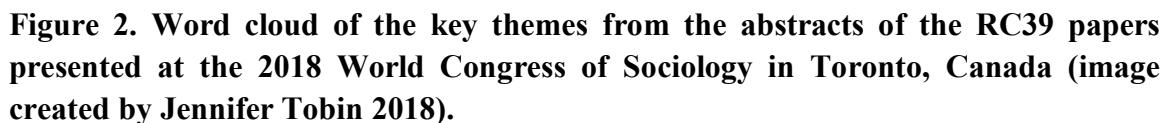
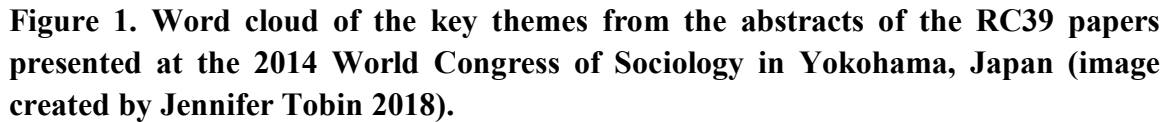
When I step back and let this all sink in, it is so clear what an intellectual debt of gratitude I owe to the leaders and members of this committee. The RC39 has created a web of support that has strengthened into what we can now, rightly, refer to as the social science hazards and disaster research community. I am, and will always remain, grateful.

### PAST TO THE PRESENT

I’m struck by how much has remained consistent, as well as how much has changed, since 2014, when I collaborated with Sudha Arlikatti to co-organize the World Congress sessions for the meetings in Yokohama, Japan. This year, I watched with admiration and respect as Sudha and Bill Lovekamp took the reins and worked closely with the session organizers to pull together over 70 academic papers for the 2018 meetings in Toronto, Canada.

This recognition of consistency and change led me to pull the text from the abstracts of the 2014 and the 2018 meetings in order to generate word clouds in anticipation of this World Congress (see Figures 1 and 2 below).

Some common themes are apparent in these images. Disaster. Research. University. Risk. Social. People. Community. This indicates a certain sense of stability when it comes to our research foci over the years. Other important words appear with varying degrees of regularity over the years. Vulnerability. Need. Capacity. Policy. Change. Care. To me, these words evoke the fact that this research committee has always stood, unapologetically, for real-world applications of the best disaster science. This is one of the many things that makes me so proud to be a member of this community.



Even as so many things have remained consistent, other things have changed dramatically in the four years since our committee gathered at the 2014 World Congress. Within our research community, we have lost several eminent scholars who were foundational to the field. On the broader national and international plane, we have experienced tectonic shifts in terms of shifting policy contexts, rising rates of inequality, and escalating disaster losses.

In 2017, nations around the world were subject to a rapid succession of record-breaking disasters. We have witnessed atmospheric changes that are calling even the direst climate modeling scenarios into question. All the while, economic and social inequality are on the rise, and now, eight men own as much wealth as 3.5 billion people on this planet (Hardoon 2017). We have also experienced dramatic political change in the United States since we last saw one another in 2014. We are in a historical moment where we are potentially poised to transition to a radically different global order—one unparalleled since World War II. Although some are attributing this shifting power structure to the rise of populism, we might just as easily point to the escalation of right-wing nationalism, overt racism, and jingoism. We're living in a moment in 2018 where our already vulnerable social safety net has been further shredded and left billions of the poorest across the planet even more at risk. Yes, much has remained the same since 2014, but somehow, the world feels more unstable and uncertain today.

## **MOVING FORWARD**

What does all this change mean for us, as a research committee? Foremost, I think these shifts have further underscored the importance and the urgency of the work that the members of this community do. It also raises certain questions about how we are approaching the study of disaster and the lenses that we bring to our research in this ever more turbulent world.

### **Disasters in the Plural**

When I look at the word clouds from the 2014 and 2018 World Congress papers, I see that disaster continues to be most commonly cast in the singular. We often, myself included, reference disaster as if it is one unique shock. Yet, along the Gulf Coast of the United States, the average child will have experienced 3.2 major community-level disasters by his or her 18th birthday (Abramson et al. 2013). Let me emphasize that again: 3.2.

The experience of the children of the U.S. Gulf Coast may be a harbinger of what is to come. We could learn much from the sorts of repetitive, collectively-endured, cumulative shocks that they are enduring—hurricanes, floods, tornadoes, oil spills. These children have much to teach us about the future state of places that could start experiencing events like these with a great deal more frequency and intensity. Research on toxic stress and

adverse childhood experiences is instructive in that it has demonstrated how individual trauma and shock can play out in negative ways across the life course (Shonkoff et al. 2012). Those advancements in science remind us that we as a community need to continue to move away from thinking about disaster as a singular and begin writing more about the repetitive and multiplicative nature of disasters on people's lives.

### **The Utility of Vulnerability**

Over the years, I have read and listened to numerous papers presented on the topic of social vulnerability and vulnerable populations. Before I say anything more about this, I want to pause for a moment and acknowledge just how much researchers in this field, and from this research committee specifically, have helped advance thinking around social vulnerability. More than forty years ago, the paper "Taking the Naturalness out of Natural Disasters" first appeared in print (O'Keefe, Westgate, and Wisner 1976). That paper and other important works published around that time led to a dramatic shift in social scientific thinking regarding the social roots of risk and the social construction of disaster. Over the decades, that line of theorizing and empirical work has slowly but surely transformed emergency and disaster management practice, as well.

With all that in mind, I have been struck many times lately by this feeling that the vulnerable populations framework is collapsing under the weight of history. It is collapsing under the weight of colonialism, systemic oppression, structural racism, slow violence, and institutionalized policies and practices that segregate and denigrate entire populations of people. We use "vulnerable population" as a two-word shorthand for what actually refers to a long history of inequality. Of course, "vulnerability" was never meant to encompass everything. It is the tip of an iceberg that represents the legacies of the many forms of marginalization and exclusion that lie beneath. Now the water is receding and more and more of that iceberg is being exposed. As we write more urgently about the histories and the ramifications of various forms of systemic oppression, racism, and segregation, it is also crucial that we continue to leave space for the consideration of possibilities around justice and equity.

### **Research: Why, What, Who, Where**

Since the founding of this research committee, and to date, approximately three-quarters of our memberships have come from "Category A" countries. The ISA defines these categories based on economies at the country level, and they are the highest income countries around the world. Most researchers continue to be located in these Category A countries and most of the studies they conduct are in the wealthiest nations (Gaillard and Gomez 2015). There are many explanations for why this is so, and some people might argue that is the right lens of focus. Indeed, the vast majority of economic losses continue

to be situated in high-income countries. We know, however, that although we have seen dramatic decreases in overall loss of life over time from disasters, when large-scale loss of life does it occur, it is almost always concentrated in low-income countries.

Where researchers are located, what and who we are studying, how we are carrying out those studies, and why we are conducting them in the first place remain pressing matters of concern for our research community. Indeed, continuing to ask ourselves what we see and what we don't see, who we hear and who we don't hear, what we know and what we do not yet know is crucial to the continued advancement of this field. We must never forget that our research is imbued with ethical and moral considerations, and continually stepping back and reflecting on these broader patterns related to knowledge production can help us to set a scientifically rigorous and socially just research agenda well into the future.

Many of the most intellectually stimulating discussions that have occurred at this year's sessions have posed these types of pressing questions and have invited us to sit in the discomfort outside of the binaries of vulnerability and resilience, of need and capacity, of inequality and equity. I hope that over the next four years our community will continue to take up these complexities and challenges and move this field forward.

## GRATITUDE

I want to thank the members of the RC39 and the volunteers who keep this organization not just afloat, but always sailing forward. During my term as president, Michele Companion, Andrea Lampis, Bill Lovekamp, Michelle Meyer, and Joseph Trainor all assumed lead organizing roles for major events that afforded the members of this committee the opportunity to present original research findings. In 2017, Shih-Kai "Sky" Huang and Hao-Che "Tristan" Wu stepped in to assume the editorship of the *International Journal of Mass Emergencies and Disasters*. They have done a remarkable job and I will always be thankful that they uttered the simple word of "yes" when asked to serve.

I am so grateful for the members of the RC39 Executive. The following individuals served from 2014 to 2018 with integrity and a strong sense of purpose: Sudha Arlikatti (vice president) and board members Joseph Trainor (Category A representative), Dewald Van Niekerk (Category B representative), and Jesús Macias (Category C representative). The secretary-treasurer is the one presidentially-appointed officer for this organization, and for six years, Bill Lovekamp has filled this role with diligence and care. The RC39 membership recently elected Bill as the incoming president, and I have no doubt that he will continue in the same tradition of excellence for his next four years.

Over the past four years while I was president, I was often cast as the head of this organizational body. But it was this group of committed volunteers who served as the heart. I thank each of you from the bottom of mine.

I also want to acknowledge the presidents who came before me. Each one, like skilled masons, added layer after layer of the bricks that built this organization outward and



upward. We all owe a tremendous debt of gratitude to the founding president, E. L. Quarantelli (1982-1986) and the esteemed researchers who followed him, including Russell Dynes (1986-1990), Thomas Drabek (1990-1994), T. Joseph Scanlon (1994-1998), Benigno Aguirre (1998-2002), Robert Stallings (2002-2006), Ronald Perry (2006-2010), and Walter Peacock (2010-2014).

This may be the end of my term, but I actually view this as a time of new beginnings. I look forward to continuing to listen to and learn from the extraordinary members of this research community. A final thank you, to each of you, for entrusting me in this role and affording me the opportunity to serve.

Please take care of yourselves and others.

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