

CULTURAL VARIABLES RELATED TO RISK AND DISASTER. TOWARDS A DEFINITION OF CULTURALLY INFORMED COMMUNICATION

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Abstract: *This paper provides a multi-disciplinary overview of existing knowledge on cultural factors that shape and influence citizens' risk perceptions, emotions, and risk behavior in the context of man-made, natural and technical disasters. The aim of the study is to explore to what extent the effect of culturally-informed risk perceptions are known and taken up by disaster managers in their risk communication, and how – in turn – their own cultures (i.e. cultural aspects within disaster management units) influence the effectiveness of disaster preparedness, response and recovery. Additionally, given the fact that cultural factors can not only inhibit successful risk communication in disaster situations but may also be beneficial to disaster preparation, response and recovery – taking into account the considerable strength of cultural ties and values – the paper also explores cultural dimensions and cultural variables that are, or can be, used for capacity building, defining, and enhancing the specific cultural ties between disaster managers and disaster victims.*

Keywords: *risk perception; cultural variable; natural disaster; disaster management*

1. INTRODUCTION. WHAT IS CULTURE? AN APPLIED PERSPECTIVE

For the purpose of the current study in which the main objective is that of identifying the most relevant cultural variables impacting communication in risk and disaster management, we shall undertake an understanding of culture as specific to the discipline of anthropology, which understands culture via examining different lifestyles and the way they interact or fail to interact successfully. Therefore, eliminating from the start the concept of *high culture*, namely culture defined as the sum of artistic products and works of art a society produces through its most talented members, we shall focus on an understanding of culture as a set of core values, attitudes, beliefs and behaviors that are shared, understood and valued by a community and that informs their lifestyle, their patterns of understanding and their decision making. In a recent handbook of applied anthropological studies, Andreatta and Ferraro, for instance, observe that

the anthropologist does not distinguish between cultured people (those who have the finer things) and uncultured people. All people have culture

according to the anthropological definition (Andreatta and Ferraro, 2013:33)

For Andreatta and Ferraro (2013:34), culture can be defined as *everything that people have, think and do as members of a society*. Such an approach to culture comes in a long anthropological tradition established in the 19th century by anthropologists such as Edward Tylor, Raymond Williams, Malinowski and Radcliff Brown, for whom culture was understood as a way of life rather than a sophisticated means toward civilization, moral perfection and social good (as by contrast Mathew Arnold, or F.R. Leavis used to define culture).

In another comprehensive attempt to define culture as nowadays understood by both specialists and lay people, Chris Barker observes:

The multitudinous ways that culture has been talked about within cultural studies include culture as a whole way of life; as like a language; as constituted by representation; as a tool; as practices; as artefacts; as spatial arrangements; as power; as high or low; as mass and as popular only to conclude that the concept of culture is thus political and contingent and (refers to) a shared social meaning (*The SAGE Dictionary of Cultural Studies*, 2004:44).

In this sense, culture is not only a socially transmitted set of shared behaviors and meanings, but also a shared community construct that displays the following characteristics:

Cultures can be (1) **transitory** (i.e., situational even for a few minutes) or (2) **enduring** (e.g., ethnocultural life styles), and in all instances are (3) **dynamic** (i.e., constantly subject to change and modification). Cultures are represented (4) **internally** (i.e., values, beliefs, attitudes, axioms, orientations, epistemologies, consciousness levels, perceptions, expectations, personhood) and (5) **externally** (i.e., artifacts, roles, institutions, social structures). Cultures (6) **shape and construct our realities** (i.e., they contribute to our world views, perceptions, orientations) with ideas, morals, and preferences (Marsella, 2008:5).

At a closer look, all definitions of culture cited above point to an understanding of culture as a complex system of meanings that is disseminated, shared, embraced and propagated by its individuals through the production and dissemination of material goods, ethical values and symbolic relations.

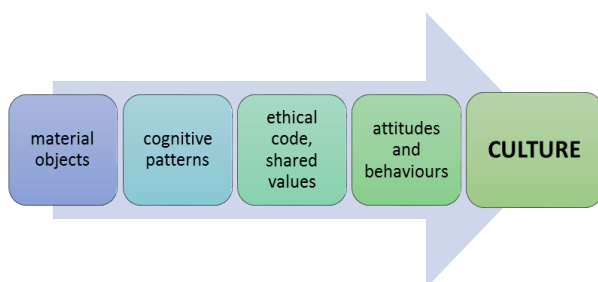


Fig. 5 Culture as complex system of meanings

Culture, risk and disaster. What do they have in common? In order to better understand the cultural variables that have an impact in modeling understanding, attitudes, behaviors and the overall reception of messages that make up risk and disaster communication we must first take a look at what a risk, disaster or crisis signify in the collective memory of the community. Regardless of individual, particular traits of one community or another, it must be stated that in *any* given culture, a disaster and/or a crisis represent a traumatic disruption of the normal routine of society. As such, they have a traumatic connotation that starts to loom over the horizon of the community once the risk has been made aware and imprinted in the conscience of the individual and the community. Therefore, the experience of conveying

significance and rendering the crisis/disaster into the routinized patterns of thinking is mediated through cultural variables made available via collective shared values, ethical code and last but not least, collective memory of similar events. It has been noted that:

Both the immediate chaotic experience of the catastrophic event and the calm and composed retrospective comprehension thereof draw on our collective reservoir of cultural forms and patterns of understanding. It is in this way that one can talk about catastrophes and crises having a cultural life (Meiner and Veel, 2012:4)

If regarded through specific cultural lenses, it must be noted that any crisis or disaster has an exceptional character which evades routinized patterns of understanding. Therefore, such events often are first grasped as incomprehensible, a fissure in the reality of the individual and the community. Cultural patterns therefore act as a mediating filter, an aid in framing ‘the incomprehensible’ into the known or at least comprehensible reality.

In this, we can only agree with Isak Winkel Holm that:

every new catastrophe or crisis also depends on and is culturally constituted by the experiences and cultural processing of previous events in that it rearticulates the ideas, forms and fantasies related to catastrophic and critical situations which reverberate in our cultural imagination (Holm, 2012).

Therefore, we believe, cultural imagination and the overall cultural package that make up the collective set of memories and values of a community should be carefully considered if we are to understand the impact culture can have in the integration of a successful risk, crisis situation or disaster management strategy.

Furthermore, if considering the impact of technology on communication patterns and the circulation of information at global level, we understand that now more than ever the local and global cultural values and practices combine to create cultural packages with unprecedented forms of evolution and hybridization. Let’s take for instance the agenda promoted by local NOG’s whose main objective is the protection of the environment. A local e.g. anti-fracking movement in the USA, or anti-cyanide mining in the Amazon gets to have significant echo in e.g. Romania, Canada or Peru, where information, protest

practices and civic movements are replicating a pattern developed continents apart and further hybridizing both the message and the practice of environmental protection. Not to mention here the cultural impact of online connectivity between movements, individuals and messages that achieve a global shared conscience of a common agenda and why not power of action.

Another illustrative example, closer to risk management is the highly mediatized New Orleans disaster in the aftermath of the Katrina Hurricane. Citizen outrage, empowered by the media account of the destruction of New Orleans led to a publicly embraced narrative in which the ineffectual authorities and the epic dimensions of the outrage held the stage for weeks to come (US Congress, 2006). Elsewhere in Europe, every time a terrorist attack occurs, such as the Bataclan or Nice murders, or the Bruxelles terrorist attacks in March 2016, both classic and social media seem to focus discussions on the human component, the error, the inability of the authorities to control and contain the danger. Most frequently invoked reasons range from “institutional failures, short staffing and communication struggles” (A., 2016); “insufficient resources, missed signals, failure to pass on information, complacency” (Heath, Sheftalocvich, & Spillane, 2016); failure to carry out investigations extensively (Dalton, 2015).

This particular trend which makes an underlying characteristic of the current glocal (global and local) society, has to be understood in the overall framework of the changing nature of risk in the 21st century, a change prophesized by Ulrich Beck in his concept of ‘risk society’ (Beck, 1992).

2. RISK SOCIETY AND ITS CULTURAL VARIABLES

Quoting UN statistics, Cristof Mauch observed that:

every year approximately two hundred million people are directly affected by natural disasters—seven times the number of people who are affected by war. In just the past few years, earthquakes, tsunamis, hurricanes, and floods have wrought tremendous devastation around the world. Hurricane Katrina, which in late August 2005 submerged large parts of New Orleans, was by far the costliest natural disaster of American history after accounting for inflation. The South Asian tsunami on December 26, 2004, known in the scientific community as the Sumatra-Andaman earthquake, was one of the most terrible natural

disasters of this type in recent history; more than one hundred eighty thousand people died as a result (Mauch, 2009:3).

If put in a historical perspective, these figures may not seem too impressive in comparison to past disasters. What has however changed dramatically is people’s exposure to their representations. If a century ago a disaster would have impacted the collective imagination and the cultural framework of a region or perhaps a country, today, with televisual representations, digital images and comments from the scene being instantly shared by both mainstream and social media, the impact on the anthropological structure of our collective imagination is far larger. Communities are exposed to images of disasters almost every day. As a result, human frailty, vulnerability, as well as the need to contain and control vast forces of nature combined with man made errors and/or ill-intent and violence have become a recurrent pattern in a larger narrative about survival and endurance of the human species and planet Earth. Therefore, post 9/11, post Hurricane Katrina, post the Sumatra-Andaman earthquake, post London, Madrid and Paris terrorist attacks and well into a late modernity framework, we are witnessing and experiencing at the same time a world in which the many faces of risk are changing and transforming at an unprecedented rate. *Every advance from gene technology to nanotechnology opens a “Pandora’s box” that could be used as a terrorist’s toolki* (Beck, 2002). Social networks, connectivity and collective commons can in their turn affect the way we live our lives both for the good and the bad. They can foster liberty of thinking and individual agency, but they can also facilitate the emergence of enhanced surveillance and regressive, over securitized, over regulated states. In order to determine how all these factors affect the way communities of citizens perceive risks today, and how they understand to mitigate and manage them, we need to understand what are the driving forces of change and which are the level of expectations and the framework of understanding that are being shaped with the advent and embracing of new technologies, of connectivity, of globalized communities and of social activism. Therefore one feature that needs to be underlined right from the beginning is the increasing lack of credibility and legitimacy of centralized authorities.

The globalized, urban, digital natives that make up the world’s youth population have been increasingly changing patterns of thinking on authority. The authorities and institutions are

questioned in terms of efficacy and expertise by both media and common citizens. This shows a profound change in the patterns citizens process information and address authority. The 'skeptical public' (Bennet 2000) or the 'reflexive public' (Beck, 2009) expresses an increasing need to demystify old certainties and figures of authority – be it church, doctors, or police officers. Increasingly, the public tends to favor and give voice to anti-establishment figures, alternative voices and countercultures.

According to Bennet (2012) and Beck (2009) *In late modernity established loci of authority and power – science, the State – are challenged and, in the case of the forces of law and order, undermined.* Furthermore, as Beck observes:

strategies that lend the appearance of control and security instead of guaranteeing them and exacerbate the general feeling of insecurity and endangerment (...) it is not the terrorist act that destroys the West, but the reaction to its anticipation. It ignites the felt war in the minds and centers of the West (Beck, cited in Bennet, 2009:28).

The unprecedented challenge to established authority is most likely caused by the high levels of connectivity, intermedia communication and transnational cultural patterns emerging with the advent of globalization, internet and the overall impact of the social networks on the way citizens across the globe relate to theirs and others feelings, values, expressions of shared humanity and fighting against shared challenges and dangers, be it incurable diseases, migration, terrorism, scarcity of resources, famine, severe income disparity or climate change. Eduardo Neiva once noted that today,

without great cultural chasms around them, like the waters where schools of fish swim, societies will not tighten themselves with organic solidarity, forging the impression of stability and permanence so enchanting to anthropological monographs. Whether we like it or not, singular cultural systems are presently preyed on with information and messages that sprout and leap suddenly not from the rims but from their core. There are no parochial limits to the international media networks, much less to the computerized communication exchanges happening on the Internet. The tendency is to have communication rings that are hopelessly without boundaries (Neiva, 2001:49).

Referred to as 'the global village' by Marshall McLuhan or 'the global ecumene' by Ulf Hannerz (2001:58), the highly irregular and interconnected

phenomenon that lies at the center of the formation and circulation of shared value(s) across the divides of the nation states has come to be regarded as the starting point of a distinct, influential and unusual grassroots cultural construct that informs attitudes, beliefs and perceptions on life of citizens across the world – and with them perceptions of risk and crisis situations as well.

In an interesting study on the cultural analysis of disaster, a rather new field of study, speaking of community perceptions in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, Isak Winkel Holm underlines *the two most important themes in contemporary disaster research, both of which were dramatically underscored by Hurricane Katrina* were the fits of anger directed against the man-made character of the calamity that doubled the biophysical phenomenon, and against

"the media-borne character of a calamity caused to a large degree by the severe misrepresentations and misunderstandings of the city of New Orleans by federal and international media, behaving less like sober eye-witnesses and more like vultures preying on death and suffering (Holm, 2012:17)

These two keen observations highlight a characteristic of the global village or the global ecumene – the acute distrust in both state and media establishments of at least some categories of target audiences. The 2016 Edelman Trust Barometer for instance, shows a 3 point increase in trust inequality during 2012-2016, between informed public and mass population with regard to their trust in the four institutions of government, business, media and NGO's (Edelman's Trust Barometer, Trust Inequality), accelerated disparity and decreasing trust of mass population in the media outlets being highlighted in most parts of the world, including France, UK, US, Spain, Singapore, Malaysia, India, China, Brazil, Germany, Australia, Ireland, Russia, Poland etc. Low levels of trust have also been linked in the Edelman's Trust Barometer to the low levels of income, with respondents in bottom quartile of income in each country ranked significantly lower in the level of trust in mentioned authorities.

As the following case-studies will show, similar perceptions and attitudes can be detected in the public perception across the globe with regard to any of the more recent events, be they the series of terrorist attacks in France, the floods across Europe, the fire in the Colectiv club in Romania, to name just of few of the case studies and incidents mentioned in the current project.

Therefore, admitting that crisis and disasters have come to be perceived across the globe according to and/or in reaction to media generated archetypes and cultural representations of disaster, we can only conclude that vulnerability, incapacity and a certain malignant passivity have come to populate collective imaginary of disaster and disaster management - a trend all the more relevant and dangerous as it signals an undercurrent of pessimistic reluctance to act upon and generate solutions. Therefore, we agree with Holm that

The recent decade (...) has seen a growing recognition of the importance of the way we frame disaster culturally. According to this “cultural turn” in sociological disaster research (Webb), not only the physical and institutional but also the cultural infrastructure of a society play a major role in shaping disaster by determining how it is interpreted by human beings (Holm, 2012:17).

The cultural infrastructure of the - recurrent Hollywoodesque interpretations of disaster, media reports on terrorism, the “no comment” zone of online media promoting the so called unfiltered reports from conflict zones or the social media unpredictable circulations of narratives – generates models of understanding and coping with risk and disaster. We thus understand the fundamental role that the cultural infrastructure of a community (combining elements of the global *ecumene*, the local community and the collective imaginary of its living members) plays in generating cognitive patterns that frame both the perception of crisis and disaster and the response to it. Being able to contextualize communication and action within these cognitive patterns would then be the stakes that any risk and disaster management communicator should have on the radar.

2.1 The repertoire of cultural variables in the risk society. Trying to search for cultural variables that nowadays populate the glocal imaginary is in many ways the same as watching the patterns and movements of a kaleidoscope. One can only follow a limited number of bits at a time, guess their movement and *imagine* a pattern according to the limited experience of its formation. This is the reason why, in this particular section, and before we move on to the particular and grassroots makings of risk, crisis and disaster communication management, we feel the need to take a closer look on several cultural traits that seem to emerge as global rather than local imaginings of the cultural infrastructure of disaster.

Taking into account human emotions, routine experiences and the way they are modelled by the mediated digital communication nowadays can be another key factor to explore for a better understanding of the way people, especially in urban areas, respond to risk and crisis situations. Let us not forget that emotions stirred by cultural symbolism can and will play a dominant role in the way perceptions are shaped and mitigated with, especially when dealing with fear, anxiety and panic. This is the reason why, today more than ever, we need to integrate a deep understanding of cultural stereotypes and cultural taboos into the way we transform risk perceptions for better crisis mitigation. According to Lull,

“The global availability of ever more diverse and mobile symbolic forms emanating from the culture and information industries, when combined with increased access by individuals to micro-communication technologies, uniquely empowers many people (Lull, 2001:3).

The lack of trust in established authority. The lack of trust in the established loci of authority is a pervasive characteristic of the global *ecumene* and the risk society that seems to be directly connected to the advent of technology and the instant circulation of digital information. Growing numbers of citizens nowadays demand to occupy public space, have access to information and claim transparency of the public affairs. In this larger framework and due to the instant access to information, it has become more and more frequent a practice to address, whenever necessary, the ‘poor quality’ of government response in crisis and disaster situations. Individual interrogations quickly turn into public outrage, citizen journalism combines with professional journalistic investigations, people demand the right to know on social media and the mainstream media channels often have no choice but to follow popular leads. All these have become frequent elements in the repertoire of public reactions. This specific trend must be addressed by crisis and disaster management communicators in rapid, informed, specific and transparent manner that can thus help in the building of a solid capital of trust, able to remain resilient in the advent of a crisis situation.

The self-help, open source, globally networked local community The fast paced technology development and the almost instant circulation of digital information have also had enduring effects on communication patterns embraced by citizens across the world. Today, we are witnesses to increasing bidirectional

communication between established authorities and citizens, between citizens and communities themselves as well as between communities situated continents apart. Grassroots initiatives get propagated with increasing speed while the creative commons generate open-source initiatives that everyone who wishes can contribute to. And though not yet a general trend of initiative, movements of self-help combined with open source initiative and citizen alert systems created ad-hoc via e.g. social media in the advent of e.g. a major earthquake or a terrorist attack, must be taken into consideration when designing communication strategies for risk, crisis and disaster management.

The constitutive pleasurable forms of violence and disaster in the risk society. Community and individual understanding of risk, crisis and disaster is often embedded in those forms of violence that have become constitutive to our shared identity. The plethora of disaster imaginings of epic proportions that populate Hollywood movies, videogames, science-fiction literature circulate across the world and contribute to the creation of behavioral models and cultural practices. Such mental models, in their turn, are used by individuals later on in order to decode real events, expect meaning and generate attitudes and reactions towards ways of managing crisis situations. In the beginning of a study on natural disasters and their cultural responses across the centuries, Christof Mauch observes:

Lately it seems that every Borders bookshop and Blockbuster videostore is filled with titles such as *Nature on the Rampage*, *Killer Flood*, *Devil Winds*, *Tidal Wave: No Escape*, *Dante's Peak*, *Aftershock: Earthquake in New York*, and *Storm of the Century*. Hollywood provides a steady stream of disaster movies featuring erupting volcanoes, earthquakes, tornadoes, and even menacing asteroids. In 2004, *The Day After Tomorrow*—a rollercoaster drama about a superstorm that devastates New York City at the start of a new Ice Age—was among the top grossing movies worldwide (Mauch, 2009:1).

While not entirely new, this fascination with natural and man-made disaster and crisis situations that populates popular culture and the collective imagination globally speaks of violence and suffering in pleasurable forms that invite the human being to assess the way in which suffering tests human dignity, courage and the ability to address forces that are beyond his/her power to shape. At the same time, it speaks of a more disturbing entertaining nature of death, of violence

as a constitutive possibility. Now a famous study, Slavoj Žižek's *On Violence* chapter on the 9/11 terrorist attack analyses exactly the way in which the cultural schemata populating the Hollywood movies has channeled the public towards expecting the unexpected and rendering to the real the surreal character of an alternative, virtual reality (Žižek, 2008). More than a decade before, a famous study signed this time by Jean Baudrillard attracted attention to the televisual character that the first Gulf War had in the collective imaginary. Framed by television renderings of a clean and game-like warzone, it created expectations of a war in which violence remained abstract and almost pleasurable, entertaining. It voided disaster of its fleshy character and created expectations of abstract realms where terror was manageable and remote (Baudrillard, 1995).

More into our times, there have been speculations that suggested the 11/13 attacks in Paris were plotted while using the Sony's PS4 game platform for communication, either through audio messages or by using the network of the gaming facility. (Rawal, 2015) (Titcomb, 2015) Furthermore, the similarity of actionable patterns between war video games and the actual terrorist acts create concerns as to how the virtual reality gets to emulate into real life situations whenever motivation occurs. Research so far proved inconclusive results, some studies arguing for, other against an existing connection between players of violent video games and heightened levels of aggression in young adults (Amini, 2013).

Nevertheless, all of the examples above illustrate the way in which cultural frames encourage a fictional presence of crisis and disaster into our everyday lives and facilitate the transfer of meaning between the virtual towards the real and not the other way round as we have generally been used to in cultural receptions of the 20th century. Furthermore, we can argue that this cultural fascination for doom like scenarios has had its role in creating negative expectations and readings of violence and disaster, both natural and manmade, as a constitutive part of our collective imaginary. Should this be considered a threat to how the public models the unexpected and the incomprehensible of a disaster situation? Contradictory results recorded by researchers in this field prevent us from reaching a direct and unequivocal conclusion. However, one cannot refrain from wondering whether the pleasurable, narcissistic quality of violence and the entertaining nature of disaster, combined with all the more frequent dramatic climactic changes and upsurge

of terrorism in real life won't affect the collective imaginary we share so much so as to create passive expectations of suchlike events. Recent propaganda materials put forward, for instance, by the terrorist organization DAESH seem to suggest a clear attempt to exploit what it must be sensed by the terrorist propaganda disseminators as a very fluid interaction between the real and the virtual models of reality. As the George Washington University's School of Media and Public Affairs scholar Javier Lesaca concludes after analyzing some 845 videos put forward by the terrorist organization, propaganda "nods and sometimes directly copies—memes, characters, and scenes contained in Hollywood movies, video games, and music videos." (Khan, 2015)

All of the above in mind, we believe communicators should be advised to create strategies to share information especially with youth by integrating game-like, interactive features of a 'learn how to help yourself and others' culture, simply as a way to disseminate information and know-how according to patterns.

2.2 Cultures of disaster, cultures of resilience. There are frequent examples in the literature on disaster and disaster management that show cultures which are often exposed to extreme phenomena to create coping mechanisms so as to include the abnormal character of disaster into a routine, and, therefore, into the normalcy of everyday life. According to Bankoff, for instance,

For Filipinos, hazard and disaster are simply accepted aspects of daily life, what can be termed a frequent life experience.(...) It is so ordinary that Filipino cultures are partly the product of adaptation by communities to these phenomena through processes that permit the incorporation of threat into daily life, or what can be called the "normalization of threats (Bankoff, 2009, p. 265).

As Bankoff discovered, normalization of threat by the, for example, Filipino, implied the creation of distinctive patterns of activity as well as behavior, and that, despite the dissimilarities between various ethnic communities. From materials used in architecture to agricultural patterns or seasonal migration patterns, cultural norms and every day practices seem to have been regulated so as to avoid and contain the effects of seismic and meteorological disasters that frequently affect the country. Material culture practice may or may not be of relevance to other countries in other climates. They belong to the local and maintain across the centuries local value

as long as they are still integrated by modern communities. Psychological and emotional adaptation strategies integrated into cultural norms may, on the other hand, bear greater relevance and importance for cultures across the world as they can always be trained and exercised through education, preparation and training. Cognitive and behavioral responses designed to reduce psychological distress, passed on from one generation to the next with the help of collective memory represent one of the cultural mechanisms that must be correctly assessed and benefitted from. In the Philippines, *migration and relocation can be regarded as preventative coping practices, as they attempt to prevent the same set of circumstances from recurring* (Bankoff, 2009:265).

In the same way, a sociological survey shows that the refusal of part of the Afro-American population in New Orleans before Hurricane Katrina to leave home and incapacitated family members behind can also be said to represent a cultural model constructed though past experiences of Hurricanes that as often as they appeared, never created destructions of such magnitude and threat to human lives and therefore did not recommend extreme measures and especially the symbolic destructuring of the family nucleus (Eisenman, Cordasco, Asch, Golden and Glik, 2007). Thus we see how opposite behaviors in the face of danger both are apparently motivated by the same recourse to the collective memory of similar events and the way they have remained imprinted in the imaginary of the community. Therefore, one has to emphasize the fundamental importance of determining expectations and collective representations of specific types of disaster within the community where policy is being drafted. Without a correct assessment, a policy maker may not have the measure of what needs to be corrected in the pattern of behavior so as to create successful adaptation strategies and integrate them into recommended cultural norms.

In the case of the Philippines, Bankoff illustrates, the feeling that life is essentially a game of change (*bahala na*), that one is indelibly united with the other and community good is also the good of the individual (*pakikipagkapwa*) and the particular sense of humor which allows Filipinos laugh in the face of any adversity (Bankoff, 2009: 269-270), represent cultural variables that allow and foster the creation of strong social support networks and self – generated community actions. Bankoff (2009) identifies as efficient coping strategies developed within the Filipino cultural

framework the storytelling practice and the swapping jokes with friends:

Reports of the aftermath of the Mayon eruption of June 23, 1897, describe how survivors were heard to tell jokes while collecting the grotesquely disfigured bodies of the dead, comparing the separation of body and soul to a “slow” husband being left by his “fast” wife, or the remains of a dead coconut farmer to the oil he used to make: “They told all sorts of jokes and so instead of being sad while gathering the dead, they were all laughing. The pain in their hearts was great but the jokes were comparable to the water that extinguishes a fire. The jokes were made to defend one from getting weak, and so to be able to go on gathering the dead without shedding too many tears (Bankoff, 2009:270).

Finally, Bankoff’s research shows that constant exposure to hazards has created in the case of the Filipinos

hazard as a frequent life experience manifests itself in a history of formal and informal associations committed to individual and community welfare that stretches as far back in time as the earliest written record (Bankoff, 2009:270).

His conclusions are mirrored by research carried out by anthropologists elsewhere in regions that are also highly exposed to disaster and crisis situations due to natural disasters.

The cases discussed show that one of the particularities of the less developed countries in coping with natural disasters is not so much the appeal to technology (as is the case with the highly developed urban societies in the West) as the appeal to cultural values that can help both individual and the community build resilience in the face of adverse situations. In all the studies quoted above, perhaps the most important trait identified was the recourse to self-generated help within communities, to *enlisting people’s participation as an essential element in disaster management through the formation or support of grassroots organizations* (Bankoff, 2009:279).

2.3 From glocal to local. Grassroots movements and the empowering of the citizen. Some studies in disaster mitigation and relief, especially those dealing with the psychological effects of crisis and disaster situations and their aftermath, have insisted on the importance of acknowledging, understanding and integration into the intervention strategy of structured knowledge of ethnic, gender, local community and/or

professional cultures. Ethnic community especially has repeatedly been invoked as one key factor for the successful mitigation of crisis and disaster situations as well as its containment and limitation. In an interesting study dedicated to Ethno-Cultural Perspectives on Disaster and Trauma, editors Anthony J. Marsella, Jeannette L. Johnson, Patricia Watson and Jan Gryczynski insist on the importance of adapting the universals of Western science to the specificities of the local communities, if experts and intervention teams are to have a positive effect in the disaster preparation and mitigation:

Local communities have specific methods and tools for healing such as rituals, ceremonies, and practices of remembrance. Since they are grounded in the beliefs, values, and traditions of the local culture, they are both culturally appropriate and more sustainable than methods brought in from the outside (Wessells, 1999:274-275).

They also state that the dynamics of response to a crisis or disaster situation is often generated in the interaction of the following types of cultures:

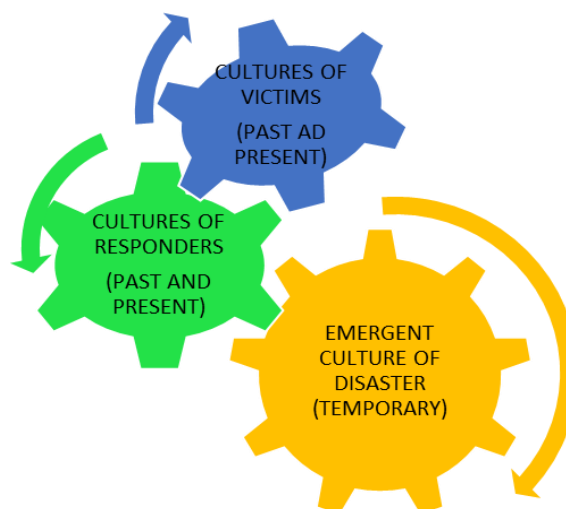


Fig. 6 Types of cultures interacting in crisis and disaster situations. Adapted after (Anthony J. Marsella, 2008:XI), Cultural Encounters of Disasters

As a result, when adopting the socio-cultural perspective on crisis and disaster mitigation, one cannot overlook the importance of a productive dialogue and interaction between the cultures of the victims and those of the responders. The major topics invoked by Marsella et al, and which can be found more or less comprehensive in similar studies (by e.g. Andreatta & Ferraro, 2013;

Bankoff, 2009; Bennet, 2012; Meiner & Veel, 2012), include:

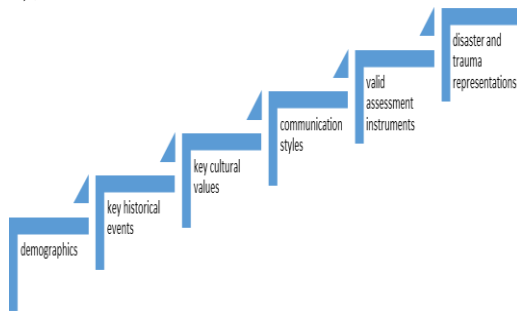


Fig. 7 Topics used to define and explain cultural variables.

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