

Toward a substantive dialogue: The case for an ethical framework in emergency management, Part 1

Shirley Feldmann-Jensen ¹

Steven Jensen ²

Sandy Smith ³

David Etkin ⁴

¹ California State University Long Beach, Long Beach, CA, USA

² The American Red Cross Scientific Advisory Council & Global Disaster Preparedness Center, Washington DC, USA .

³ Arkansas Tech University, Russellville, AR, USA

⁴ York University, Toronto, Ontario, Canada

© The Author(s) 2016. (Copyright notice)

Author correspondence:

Shirley Feldmann-Jensen

California State University Long Beach,
Long Beach, CA,
USA.

Email: shirleyfeldmannjensen@gmail.com

URL: http://trauma.massey.ac.nz/issues/2016-1/AJDTS_20-1_Feldmann-Jensen.pdf

Abstract

The changes in and interactions between the social, built, and physical environments are making some hazards more severe, concentrating risk, and widening exposure and vulnerability. The scale, interdependencies, and uncertainty of these transformations foreshadow dramatic influences on humankind, greatly increasing the probabilities of future catastrophes. This dynamic context coupled with diminishing resources will require the EM/DRM professionals and the wider communities they serve to make difficult and uncertain values based decisions. The existing opportunity is to begin a process of reasoning together, in order to discern the essential components of an ethical framework for 21st century emergency management and its related interdisciplinary communities. The intent of this essay is not to provide answers or solutions, but rather to stimulate a dialogue about the moral basis for EM/DRM decisions in a world that is becoming increasingly complex and risk laden. To kindle the early phases of the discourse, a series of related articles will follow in the coming months.

Keywords: *disaster risk management; emergency management; ethics; values; decision making; emergency; disaster*

We have neither a theory that can locate societal goodness, nor one that might dispel wickedness, nor one that might resolve the problems of equity.

(Rittel & Webber, 1973)

As the world becomes increasingly interconnected and interdependent, the social systems we live and work in are fundamentally transformed (Castells & Cardoso, 2005). Further, changes in and interactions between the social, built, and physical environments are making some hazards more extreme, creating new previously unknown threats, and increasing many vulnerabilities (Etkin, 1999; Mileti, 1999; Lagadec, 2008). This complex new terrain is marked by areas of greater population densities, rapid unplanned urbanization, more people living in high risk hazard zones, environmental degradation, biodiversity loss, emerging pathogens, and climate change. The scale, interdependencies, and uncertainty of these transformations foreshadow dramatic influences on humankind, greatly increasing the probabilities of future catastrophes. Of concern is the central role of emergency management /disaster risk management (EM/DRM) navigating through these unprecedented challenges.

The concentration of risk and the dynamic nature of hazards have already produced significant demands on human safety and humanitarian systems, and outpaced capacity in many places (Jensen, Feldmann-Jensen, Johnston & Brown, 2015). The youthful field of EM/DRM is facing a myriad of present and future disasters. Unmistakably, limited and diminishing resources amid an ever changing environment of hazard, exposure, and vulnerability will necessitate unprecedented value-based choices. Examples of such choices include deciding between strong governance and individual freedoms to live in places of high risk, economic growth versus environmental health, and to what degree societies engage in the socialization of risk. At their core, these difficult and unclear choices are elicited by ethical issues; moreover, these dilemmas engage people and societies of very different worldviews and values. Ethics have a vital role, not just for disaster research, but also for decisions at the policy level and in the domain of action.

EM/DRM as a Profession

The developing profession of EM/DRM is charged with the vision of “promoting safer, less vulnerable communities with the capacity to cope with hazards and disasters” (Principles of EM Working Group, 2007, para 2), at the same time facing an increasingly complex hazard and vulnerability landscape. Advancing the emerging profession and promoting a common understanding are widely accepted definitions, which have been established for practice, research, and institutional policy for example:

-The practice of Emergency Management (EM) “is the managerial function charged with creating the framework within which communities reduce vulnerability to hazards and cope with disasters” (Principles of EM Working Group, 2007, p.4).

-Disaster Risk Management (DRM) is “the systematic process of using administrative directives, organizations, and operational skills and capacities to implement strategies, policies and improved coping capacities in order to lessen the adverse impacts of hazards and the possibility of disaster” (UNISDR, 2009, para 27).

-The academic purview of EM is “the scientific study of how humans and their institutions deal with hazards, vulnerabilities, and the events that result from their interaction” (Disciplinary Purview Focus Group, 2013, p. 1).

Pointing to a theoretical underpinning of praxeology, the application of scientific knowledge to better inform human action, the definitions recommend action to be taken toward the vision. The adjustment of the means to both the goal and reality is also reflected in the guiding doctrine of the eight EM professional principles: comprehensive, progressive, risk-driven, integrated, collaborative, coordinated, flexible, and professional (Principles of EM Working Group, 2007). One of the next steps in furthering the profession would be to begin an in depth dialogue about the ethical values for EM/DRM because ethics have a vital role for EM/DRM decisions, both in the domains of action, research, and policy.

International Context

Three significant global policy developments occurred in 2015, which can provide both occasion and foundation for timely dialogues about a framework for values based decisions in EM/DRM contexts. The historic

and interrelated global agreements that were achieved include: 1) The Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030, 2) The Sustainable Development Goals, and 3) The Paris Agreement on Climate Change (Aitsi-Selma, Murray, Wannous, Dickinson, Johnston, & Kawasaki et al., 2016). While the humanitarian action field has an established foundation for value based action, the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit imparted further impetus toward strengthening these processes. For the purposes of this discussion, the focus will primarily be on the Sendai Framework for Global Disaster Risk Reduction. The Sendai Framework promotes an ethical goal to reduce disaster losses of human life, health, and assets (UNISDR, 2016). The targets and priorities established in the framework align with the principles of human rights and dignity; further, it extends value based considerations to the interaction of policies with human dignity, justice, and social responsibility (UNISDR, 2016). These recent policies provide a unique opportunity to open a values based dialogue for EM/DRM.

The Need for Dialogue

The existing opportunity is to begin a process of reasoning together, in order to discern the essential components of an ethical framework for 21st century emergency management and its related interdisciplinary communities. Rational and inclusive debate is critical to determine such a framework’s components, as perspective influences the analysis. Uncertainties can affect predictive capacity, speed of change, scope of the issue, and completeness of knowledge (COMEST, 2013). Other contextual factors that influence moral judgments include legislation and policy, multiculturalism, and religious affiliations. Examples can include deciding between strong governance and individual freedoms to live in places of high risk, economic growth versus environmental health, and to what degree societies engage in the socialization of risk. At their core, these difficult and uncertain choices are elicited by ethical issues; moreover, these dilemmas engage people and societies with very different worldviews and values. The debate for an ethical decision framework is needed not only to better address current EM/DRM issues, but also because complex interactions and interdependencies are altering the context within which EM/DRM exists.

The intent of this essay is not to provide answers or solutions, but rather to stimulate a dialogue about the moral basis for EM/DRM decisions in a world that is

becoming increasingly complex and risk laden. To kindle the early phases of the discourse, a series of related articles will follow in the coming months. It must also be acknowledged that basic ethical dimensions applicable to emergency management are already documented in various forms and can be built upon. Further, internationally recognized principles exist in the practices of other disciplines and professions, which can also inform the dialogue. An EM/DRM ethics discourse can also be informed by existing frameworks that have similar applicability concerning optimized actions. An example could include the Climate Change ethical principles, which contains the following themes: “1) The link between foreknowledge and the duty to act on it; 2) The precautionary principle for action in the face of uncertainty; 3) Human rights; 4) Consideration for future generations in the ethical outline; and 5) Obstacles to sharing and differentiating responsibilities” (COMEST, 2010, pp. 27-30). Moreover, aligning the configuration of an emergency management ethical framework with existing works would more broadly unify efforts in related practices.

A foundational value for an EM/DRM ethical framework is the worth of protecting those most vulnerable to a hazard event. For this reason, transparency is an essential point for the discussion. Transparency is not only a key component of both social capital and effective risk communications, but it also influences decision making concerning inequality and predatory behaviours following a disaster (Aitsi-Selma et al., 2016). The direct connection of these considerations to justice, equity, and public good implies a deeper significance. Therefore, the needs of those most vulnerable before, during, and after hazard events, as well as the obligations that may be due to them, is worth highlighting for values based dialogue.

Conclusion

Values based decision making is an indispensable element within any set of disaster risk management and resilience building considerations. Yet, ethical matters are seldom clear in discourse, and as a result, are not thoroughly debated. A thorough discourse suits a holistic approach, fitting well with renewed emphasis on whole of community involvement. All phases of disaster management engage multiple sectors, disciplines, and organizations; therefore, widening the scope of reflection for interdisciplinary and community participation is recommended (UNISDR, 2016). The course of examination is optimally grounded in ethical

theory, and addresses ethical issues pertinent to the discipline and profession of EM/DRM. The collective discourse toward the formation of an EM/DRM ethical framework will not only have a substantive influence on professional strategies and decision making, but also on the lives of those who are casualties of a disaster.

References

- Aitsi-Selmi, A., Murray, V., Wannous, C., Dickinson, C., Johnston, D., Kawasaki, A., ... & Yeung, T. (2016). Reflections on a science and technology agenda for 21st century disaster risk reduction: Based on the scientific content of the 2016 UNISDR Science and Technology Conference on the Implementation of the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-. *International Journal of Disaster Risk Science*, 7, 1-29. doi:10.1007/s13753-016-0081-x
- Castells, M., & Cardoso, G. (Eds.) (2005). *The network society: From knowledge to policy*. Washington, DC: Johns Hopkins Center for Transatlantic Relations.
- COMEST (2005). *The precautionary principle: World commission on the ethics of scientific knowledge and technology*. Paris, France: UNESCO.
- COMEST (2010). *The ethical implications of global climate change*. Paris, France: UNESCO.
- COMEST (2013). *Background for a framework of ethical principles and responsibilities for climate change adaptation*. Bratislava, Slovakia: UNESCO.
- Disciplinary Purview Focus Group (2013). *Report of the disciplinary purview focus group: Scholarship and research to ground the emerging discipline of emergency management*. Emmitsburg, MD: Federal Emergency Management Agency.
- Etkin, D. (1999). Risk transference and related trends: driving forces towards more mega-disasters. *Environmental Hazards*, 1, 69-75.
- Jensen, S., Feldmann-Jensen, S., Johnston, D., & Brown, N. (2015). The emergence of a globalized system for disaster risk management and challenges for appropriate governance. *International Journal of Disaster Risk Science*, 6, 87-93. doi: 10.1007/s13753-015-0043-8.
- Lagadec, P. (2008). *Crisis management in the 21st century: Unthinkable events in inconceivable contexts*. Paris, France: Ecole Polytechnic.
- Mileti, D. (1999). *Disasters by design*. Washington, DC: Joseph Henry Press.
- Principles of Emergency Management Working Group (2007). *Principles of emergency management supplement*. Emmitsburg, MD: Federal Emergency Management Agency.
- Rittel, H.W., & Webber, M.M. (1973). Dilemmas in a general theory of planning. *Policy Sciences*, 4, 155-169. Retrieved from www.uctc.net/mwebber/Rittel%2BWebber%2BDilemmas%2BGeneral_Theory_of_Planning.pdf
- UNISDR (2016, April). *Side Event 5 concept note: Bioethics and ethics*. Retrieved from www.unisdr.org/we/inform/terminology

This page intentionally left blank.

