Toward a substantive dialogue: The case for an ethical framework in emergency management, Part 2

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Abstract

Emergency management/disaster risk management is a profession that focuses on reducing the suffering of people, and it would greatly benefit from the undergirding of a robust ethical foundation. A basis of ethical principles specifically for emergency management/disaster risk management has been insufficiently developed thus far, and a broad dialogue would do much toward enhancing the profession and establishing a moral basis for emergency management/disaster risk management actions. A collective dialogue toward developing an ethical framework is becoming increasingly important given the complex and dynamic vulnerabilities and risk environment societies are facing. Further, the discourse is encouraged to be broad, inclusive, thoughtful, and inclusive of ethicists as well as emergency/disaster managers and the wider communities they serve. A discourse toward establishing a framework will embrace a variety of ethical theories, acknowledge the plurality of values that exist in current societies, and further define the emergency management/disaster risk management community. The beginnings of a discourse regarding an ethical framework for emergency management/disaster risk management should optimally be grounded in theory. Therefore, a number of relevant ethical theories and values that could be used to support the professional discourse have been reviewed in this paper.

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

Many professions have ethical principles that are used to provide guidance for their members regarding appropriate conduct and decision making. Examples include engineers, psychologists, doctors, nurses, and others. In fact, the existence of ethical principles extends far back in history; examples include the Hippocratic Oath for physicians, the Babylonian Code of Hammurabi, and the ancient Egyptian Law of Tehut. Even pirates (Johnson, 1724) had a Code of the Brethren, which at times included special protections for women (Creighton & Norling, 1996). Such ethical frameworks were, and are, common because they serve important purposes; they reflect the cultural norms used by people in professional practice to guide their decisions and actions and provide standards for behavior.

The intent of this paper is to inform a more substantive dialogue toward an emergency management/disaster risk management (EM/DRM) ethical framework through an overview of ethical theories that underlie the profession and the wider communities they serve. While some efforts have been made in this area (IAEM, 2011), further discourse is needed to root an EM/DRM framework more deeply in ethical theory, and engage the broader community of transdisciplinary practitioners and researchers, who interface with disaster risk management or emergency management activities.

Emergency management is the responsibility of more than government; it involves NGOs, community groups, and individuals. Part of being an effective manager in the public service means creating a trusting relationship with the public and media. Trust is an essential factor in almost every action within the EM/DRM profession. Personal networks and relationships are critical to effective disaster management, and unless there are trusting relationships in place any process is likely to

become dysfunctional. Co-workers and victims alike must have trust in the competence and character of those managing a disaster (Etkin, 2015). EM/DRM is based upon the value of reducing human suffering, and as such should reflect ethical considerations.

Ethical actions draw their meaning from social relations, and are rooted in social context (Lewis & Gilman, 2012). Engaging in a broad discourse that addresses an ethical framework for EM/DRM would also benefit both the profession and the wider communities they serve. Such a framework could provide a compass for behaviors and difficult resource decisions, enhance development in professional practice of EM/DRM, and improve consistency of policy and procedures.

Ethical Theories

To encourage a deeper dialogue, a few theories that may inform the EM/DRM considerations are briefly summarized. Clearly, a broader range of perspectives and values will need to be brought into the dialogue as the collective conversation grows. The intent here is to begin to inform a basic dialogue regarding an ethical framework for the EM/DRM profession and the wider communities they serve.

Utilitarianism

> *Actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness; wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness, i.e., pleasure or absence of pain.*
>
> *(John Stuart Mill as cited in Beauchamp & Walters, 1999, p. 11)*

The consequences of action accounting for context and flexibility form the central basis of Utilitarianism (Lewis & Gilman, 2012). It is a theory of normative ethics, which evaluates actions based upon maximizing utility at the same time as reducing suffering. In utilitarianism, the moral worth of an action is determined only by its resulting consequences, which is often expressed via the concept, *the greatest good for the greatest number* (Etkin, 2015).

Utilitarian theory can also apply to values, such as reducing human suffering in a disaster. Yet, disaster situations are complex and require the consideration of a number of issues as a system. Where multiple goals are addressed, the set of goals must be optimized in some fashion. A system perspective generally requires the use of trade-offs, which greatly complicates an analysis. Trade-offs are common in the field of EM/DRM; multiple players exist on both sides of risk creation and risk consequence and become important for hazard prone area risk assessments, but yield benefits to select groups when developed.

As long as the end justifies the means, Utilitarianism can accept bad things happening to some people. For example, during the Red River Flood in Manitoba, Canada in 1998, it was perceived that some communities were sacrificed in order to save the city of Winnipeg from flooding (Klohn-Cripeen, 1999). Is such a utilitarian based decision justifiable, and if so what are the moral arguments that support it? And if few are sacrificed for the greater good, what obligations ensue towards them following the disaster?

Defining what is good for the greatest number and how to measure goodness is a value laden exercise that leads people, organizations, and cultures in diverse directions. Cost-benefit analysis, a process with both significant strengths and weaknesses (Hanley, Barbier & Barbier, 2009), is fundamental to analyzing utilitarian arguments. Numerous mitigation studies show very positive cost-benefit ratios (Rose, Porter, Dash, Bouabid, Huyck, & Whitehead et al., 2007), which from a utilitarian perspective support public policy mitigation initiatives. Some social programs are based upon utilitarian theory as well, one example being disaster financial assistance funded from a tax base; by reallocating resources from those who can afford it to those in need, thereby the greater good is served.

Utilitarian theory is an important way of thinking about morality and decision making. Nevertheless, used in isolation, utilitarianism can lead to morally repugnant actions, especially when a definition of 'good' is based upon extreme political or religious philosophies. Utilitarian arguments are powerful when it comes to disaster ethics and play an important role in EM/DRM. These types of arguments are equally important in non-disaster times, when most of the construction of risk takes place. Utilitarian arguments promote egalitarian values, and accordingly represent an important influence in EM/DRM. A social contract that requires the government to care for and protect all of its citizens is rooted in a utilitarian ethical theory.

Deontology

What ought I to do?

(Immanuel Kant as cited in Porter, 1894, p. 25).

Duty or the principle behind the action is at the core of Deontology (Lewis & Gilman, 2012). The principles of deontology judge the morality of an action based on its adherence to rules. The notions of duty, obligation, standards, and rules are foundational to this concept. In deontological theory, morality is a function of the actions themselves and the intent/motive of those who are acting (Etkin, 2015). The argument is that intrinsic good and bad is not situationally dependent, but rather is absolute. This fixed ideal means that good actions, such as truth telling, must be followed under all circumstances, even if the outcomes are harmful.

Another fundamental element of the deontology perspective is human dignity and worth (Lewis & Gilman, 2012). Zack's analysis of disaster ethics lists several values and principles that are commonly accepted in western democratic society: "1) Human life has intrinsic worth, 2) everyone's life is equally valuable, 3) everyone has the same right to freedom from harm by others, and 4) everyone is entitled to protection from harm by nonhuman forces" (Zack, 2010, p. 23). Following from these values are three primary ethical principles, that: 1)"We are obligated to care for ourselves and our dependents, 2) we are obligated not to harm one another, and 3) we are obligated to care for strangers when it doesn't harm us to do so" (Zack, 2010, p. 23). The connection to obligations suggests that these principles are rooted in deontology; and accordingly have a variety of implications for EM/DRM.

Deontological theory underlies the belief that government and citizens have duties to help those who have suffered in a disaster, and that victims have the right to assistance. This principle has also served as the basis for the development of the international disaster response law. All societies have sets of rights and obligations for their citizens and governmental organizations, though they vary from culture to culture. An important challenge arising from globalization is the influence of increasing values variation at both global and community levels (Jensen, Feldmann-Jensen, Johnston & Brown, 2015). Key drivers of these diverse and changing values are access to global communication structures and ease of population movement. The complex cultural matrix must be taken into account in EM/DRM discourse toward an ethical framework to achieve any meaningful guidance.

Virtue Ethics

All virtue is summed up in dealing justly.

Aristotle

Virtue is about character, intentions, motives, and attitudes (Lewis & Gilman, 2012); and at its basis, virtue ethics emphasizes right being over right action. The founders of virtue ethics go far back in time, and include the Greek philosophers Plato and Aristotle. Different from utilitarian and deontological theories, virtue ethics considers character traits and virtues a person should adopt, which in turn will help them to live a moral life and choose moral actions. At its core, virtue ethics is about character and values manifesting in the treatment of others (Lewis & Gilman, 2012).

How people view the worth of others (Etkin & Timmerman, 2013) is evidenced in character traits, such as empathy, compassion, or honesty. Human beings can adopt two basic perspectives of others, which can be called 'I-Thou' or "I-It". Within an 'I-It' relationship objects or beings are viewed by their functions (Buber, 1958). Inevitably in the large and complex world we live in, 'I-It' relationships are likely more common. An 'I-Thou' relationship engages in a mutual dialogue that goes beyond function, and acknowledges the fundamental worth of the other. Unlike 'I-It' relationships, 'I-Thou' ones are imbued with rights, duties, and moral worth. The disconnection between the two perspectives takes form primarily as a lack of empathy (Buber, 1958). Therefore, the trait of empathy is an acknowledgment of 'I-Thou' relationships.

In EM/DRM, human beings can be treated as objects or obstacles. In a disaster, people can very quickly be turned into obstacles to the greater or individual good (during a stampede, for example), and are thus transformed into an "It" as opposed to a "Thou" (Etkin & Timmerman, 2013). The most famous expression of this situation is found in Simone Weil's work on violence. She argues that part of the essence of violence is the turning of one's opponent into a thing (e.g. dead meat) as one inflicts violence (Weil & Bespaloff, 2005). In order to get to one's goal, one 'cuts through' the opposition. In such an approach, it is only the goal that matters, while injured people become things that can be described as collateral damage.

When the institutions and people who construct risk are disconnected from those who bear its negative consequences then relationships become of an 'I-It' kind, thus removing the issue of moral/ethical values

from the risk management equation and reducing it to simple economics. When people are given no dignity or respect, injustices are easier to carry out (Glover, 2000). Disaster case studies suggest that utilitarian principles are less important than egalitarian or deontological ones in EM/DRM (Zack, 2010), which suggests that more attention should be paid to the character and virtues of decision makers.

Virtue ethics has received less attention than other ethical theories in EM/DRM, and deserves more consideration. In particular, the importance of treating people as moral beings imbued with dignity and rights, as opposed to objects, is fundamental to ethical EM/DRM. Altruistic motivations often lead people into the EM/DRM field. Disaster situations are complex and no playbook can cover all possible situations. Decision makers, therefore, should embody the characteristics and values that will enable them to deal with wicked problems that are important, rife with uncertainties, and create dilemmas that require resolution.

Other Values to Consider

The discourse toward the development of an EM/DRM ethical framework can also benefit by considering values-based concepts from other disciplinary areas. Many such constructs are relevant to the distributed functions of EM/DRM. As examples germane to EM/DRM, Social Contract theory and Environmental Sustainability are considered below.

Social contract

Social Contract theory is a moral and political philosophy that may also add value to the discourse. Social contracts between citizens and their governments exist in legislation, policy, and cultural values. The idea is based upon the notion that there is an agreement, implicit or explicit, between citizens and those who govern, which specify rights, freedoms, and liberties (Zack, 2009). In particular, citizens forego some rights and freedoms in order to live in a state that provides security and safety. It is then the responsibility of government to provide a society, which is better than would have existed without such an agreement (Rousseau, 2003).

The notion of a social contract is fundamental to disaster management. In western democracies, such a contract does exist, both informally in the minds of citizens and also formalized in legislation and policy. Citizens, as part of the social contract, give up freedoms in exchange for the benefits that government can provide; thus follows the duty of governments to engage in disaster risk reduction initiatives. Individuals have duties as well. The motive behind duty and its action closely links the social contract with deontological thought. Identifying where individual duties end and collective duties begin is complex, but can be clarified through social discourse.

A social contract can be a basis for EM/DRM undertaken by different levels of government. Land-use planning and building codes are forms of government regulation designed to make society safer. Governments also have the responsibility to continue functioning during and following a disaster; hence the emphasis on Continuity of Operations (COOP) in order to fulfill the contract. These actions display explicit values already exist in social contracts. Further, evidence of adaptation to changes in environment and culture also suggest that social contracts are not static. Therefore, the evolving social contracts would be a critical factor to integrate into the forthcoming discourse.

Environmental sustainability

Environmental values address the moral relationship of human beings to the environment. Traditionally, environmental values have played a weak role in the disaster field, but it is becoming much stronger for two reasons. The first is an increasing recognition of the role that the degradation of natural systems plays in exacerbating natural hazards. The second is a growing awareness of the impact of humans on the rest of the natural world. Environmental degradation will contribute to difficult choices in the future, and the misuse of the environment sets the stage for future catastrophes.

Uncertain and adverse environmental trends are beginning to emerge. Among these important changes are: increasing population density in high risk hazard areas, environmental degradation, unreliable and unclean water supplies, emerging pathogens, loss of biodiversity, and changing weather patterns. Therefore, the value of environmental sustainability becomes important to the discussion. The articulation of this principle has been set forth in the global forums of United Nations Education Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and World Commission on the Ethics of Scientific Knowledge and Technology (COMEST); where the global collaborative established a framework of ethical principles for climate change adaptation. In

that global context, environmental sustainability was expressed as:

> *the moral relevance of the fact that humanity is dependent on the environment for its long term survival. Human beings are therefore in a relation with the environment, modifying the habitat in using modern and traditional technologies to change the material conditions of their living. Moral virtues addressing this relationship are important in order to maintain the condition of life itself.*
>
> *(COMEST, 2013, p. 16)*

Correspondingly, environmental sustainability has importance for EM/DRM context, both in its influence on scale and frequency of future disasters and potential to reduce human suffering.

The complex challenges of the 21st century increasingly demand the application of environmental values. The principle of environmental sustainability can be understood as the moral obligation to care for the earth's environment because it supports the very basis of human life on the planet (COMEST, 2013). A vital consideration to be included into an EM/DRM ethical framework discourse will be values of environmental sustainability and stability.

Conclusion

The central focus in the field of emergency management is the reduction of human suffering and loss. At the same time, the dynamic context of concentrated risks, diminishing resources, and changing nature of hazards, exposures, and vulnerabilities require the EM/DRM professionals to make difficult and unclear value-based choices. Interestingly, the moral basis for action within the humanitarian field has been well established and articulated; yet, this same attention has not yet been given to EM/DRM. The need for discourse about the moral basis for EM/DRM actions is clear. Further, the articulation of an ethical framework advances the EM/DRM professionalization.

The optimal course of examination should be grounded in theory. For that reason, a number of relevant ethical theories and values that could be used to support the professional discourse have been presented and discussed in this paper. At the same time, the constructs reviewed here are skewed toward a western cultural perspective, and other cultural perspectives need to be included for a meaningful discussion and holistic design. The aspiration for the dialogue is to ultimately move toward a recognized ethical framework or even a code of ethics. These papers represent a step in the process that will hopefully lead to a larger engagement and a profession rooted in ethical principles.

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