

An Unnatural Response to a Natural Disaster: Implications of Ethnicity, Class, & Culture in Disaster Response

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This presentation is given in the
Spirit of my brother
Kenneth 'Kenny' Caldwell
who perished in the North Tower
of the World Trade Center during
the terrorist acts of
September 11, 2001

Disaster Response

Disaster, relief, trauma, disruption, emotional instability, recovery are part of the cycle of humanity. Civilizations have been destroyed and the course of the world shaped by disasters.

From Pompeii to Katrina, disaster is an unpredictable reality of the human condition. Thus our existence depends on our response to disaster not the disaster itself.

The Un-Natural Response



- Exposing the vulnerable to their vulnerabilities.
- Changing the language of disaster when the population changes.

The Un-Natural Response



- To demonstrate that there are at least two Americas. The assumption of middle class, Eurocentric values in planning creates linear and limited strategies.

The Un-Natural Response

- To not account for the impact of poverty, ethnicity, or local culture in the response to disaster.



The Natural Response

- Plan for diversity by planning with diversity.
- Acknowledge that systems in the U.S. by in large have failed to meet the needs of ethnic minorities and the poor in America.
- Build response systems and strategies with flexibility.
- Demand cultural culturally competent services delivery.
- Acknowledge the power of language by using consistent language that dignifies those impacted by disasters.
- Acknowledge that disaster has no geographic preference.

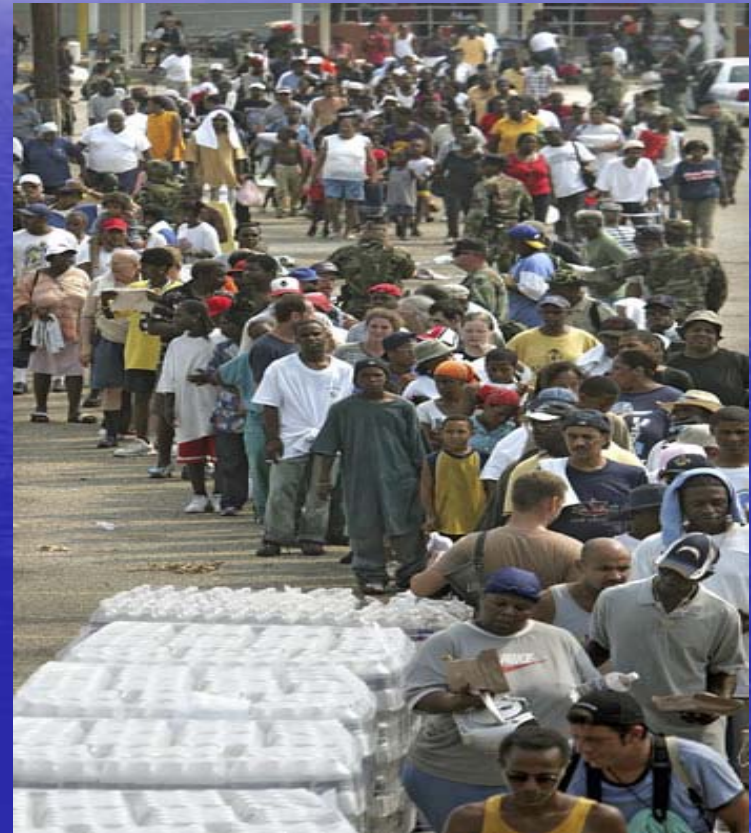
Disaster in Urban America

- Disaster in urban America requires a skill set that few have received training. For example, urban language and race relations.



Disaster in Urban America

- Mass migration of urbanites requires that the nation's response systems become culturally competent. Katrina exposed that disaster response is no longer local.



The New Face of Disaster

- Urban disaster relief is challenged by histories of urban blight, discrimination, disenfranchisement, marginalization, inequities, corruption, and a host of other problems that have exposed the faces at the bottom of the well.



Preparing for the Next ...



Directions and Strategies

1. Engage in mental health service utilization disparities elimination.
2. Build a service delivery systems that is culturally competent.
3. Create alternative forms of service delivery by creating culturally consistent services.

Engage in mental health service
utilization disparities elimination.

Mental health is a culturally loaded concept.

A majority of the services are underutilized not
based on need but on delivery method.

Impact of historic exploitation and marginalization
resulting in mistrust.

The need for more professionals who come from
these communities and brokers who have their
trusts. Relationship building during the calm.

Basic Assumptions of Mental Health Interventions

- All communication is cultural
- Mental health requires communication thus it is cultural
- Our experiences are universal but reactions are specific
- Perceptual gaps are the norm
- People desire stability, balance, certainty – thus relief

Build a service delivery systems that is culturally competent.

- Conduct an individual and systems competence assessment.
- Confront the '-isms' in difficult dialogues with professional help.
- Find models that are being tested and step out your comfort zones.
- Acknowledge that your services may be culturally narrow.

Confronting Racism

- As American as apple pie racism is part of the discussion of the new face of disaster relief.
- Questions of equity, fairness, and consistency will always be part of the conversation.
- New Orleans exposed America's human rights vulnerabilities.

Individual Competence Assessment

- Individual competence assessment – “Am I prepared with a process of gaining appropriate information to serve diverse clients?”
- What barriers exist to serve clients of the a different ethnicity, SES, and culture than mine?
- What strengths do I bring to the table?

Systems Competence Assessment

- What policies do we have that may be prohibitive to serving clients of diverse ethnicity, SES, or cultures?
- Are there practices that enhance or impede service delivery to diverse populations?
- Do our plans include for strengthening those things that work and changing those things that don't

Create alternative forms of service delivery by creating culturally consistent services.

- Most systems are set on standards used by the medical model. We are in need of new helping parameters.
- Case management requires collaboration with formal and informal sources of help.
- Psycho-educational and group approaches are proven successful.
- New settings should be explored of intervention dissemination.

Intervention Strategies

For the Disaster Responders and Survivors

- Use of religion and spirituality
- Faith-based intervention partnerships
- Notion of an objective listener
- Sitting with racism reactions
- The fallacy of colorblindness
- Racialized guilt and defensiveness
- Confronting the poverty mentality
- Cognitive rephrasing and realistic appraisals

Summary

- Ethnicity, SES, and Culture have an impact on the work of responders,
- The disaster response community is in need of cultural competence assessments,
- Disaster responders are committed to growth by confronting their limitations
- Relief is in the eye of the beholder

Conclusion

A natural response is when we offer our humanity to people in places where their humanity is dimmed but not extinguished. As long as the light of humanity is illuminated with our work their will always be relief from disaster.



Questions and Maybe Answers