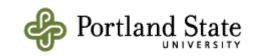# Fear and Loathing on the Front Lines: A Look at Disaster from the First-Responder Perspective

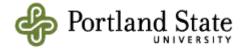The Regenhard Center for
Emergency Response Studies

2 October 2008

RACERS
The Christian Regenhard Center for Emergency Response Studies

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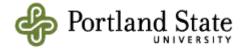# Contemporary Accounts of Disaster

- Social construction (Dynes & Rodriquez 2007)
  - First-responders: victims or villains?
  - Citizens: portrayals often emphasize actions that seem irrational, opportunistic, or even criminal
- Need for consistent definitions and clarity …
  - Distinction between crises and disasters (and possibly even catastrophes) – change is the common element
  - Appreciation of the policy-making and leadership roles of boundary actors – those who make and implement policy
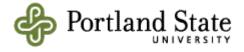
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Leadership

Heifetz (1992) distinguishes between two types of change that require leadership
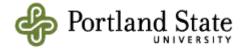
- Technical change
- Adaptive change

Objectives

- Contextualize disasters from first-responder perspective

- Advance emergency management as leadership work

- Improve structures, systems, and processes

- Advocate public policy that reflects experience
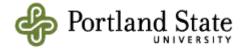
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Approach

- Review the literature
  - Crisis and disaster management generally
  - Public sector leadership and decision-making
- Propose a way forward
  - Continued use of narrative and case studies, but
  - Grounded in a theory of action research

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Literature

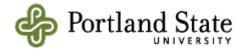A growing body of work on disasters, particularly from social science and natural hazards perspectives

– Public administration: Distinctions between crises and disasters (Schneider 2008)

– Organizational theory: High-reliability organizations (Weick & Sutcliffe 2001; Bigley & Roberts 2001; cf. Perrow 1996)

– Natural hazards: Vulnerability often result from human decisions (Mileti 1999; Pelling 2003)

Literature

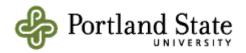Little or none of it focuses on first-responders' actions

- PTSD/CISD (Roberts & Everly 2006; Everly & Boyle 1999; Paton & Flin 1999; Mitchell & Dyregrov 1993)
- RPD & ICS (Flin & Arbuthnot 2002; Bigley & Roberts 2001; Klein 1999; Flin 1996)
- Sensemaking (Weick 1993)
- Communication at WTC during 9/11 (Dearstyne 2007)
- Heroic action of USCG during Katrina (Flynn 2007)

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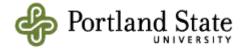UNIVERSITY

Some Additional Sources

Human error
- Active versus latent error (Reason 1990)
- Intention & action (Senders & Moray 1992)
  - Slips
  - Mistakes
  - Memory errors
- Skill-, rule- & knowledge-based (Rassmussen 1981)
- Causes (Dörner 1989)
  - Thinking in linear time series (cf. exponential or logarithmic)
  - Thinking in simple cause-effect relationships vs complex networks
  - Tunnel vision vs "thematic vagabonding"
- Normal accidents (Perrow 1996, cf. Dörner 1989)

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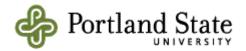
Some Additional Sources

Group decision problems

– Groupthink (Janis 1982)

– Bureaucratization (Dunn 2007)

– Institutional inertia and path-dependence

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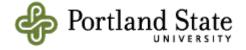UNIVERSITY

Some Additional Issues

- Resilience and reliability
  - Engineering resilience
  - Ecological resilience
- Reform/restructuring/renewal/rationalization
  - Structural
  - Strategic
  - Systemic (regime change)

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Public Policy

Two contrasting views …

- Focusing events bring needed attention to longstanding problems and accelerate policy-level adaptations (Birkland 2006/1996)

- Political involvement, public interest competition, and powerplays delay recovery (Picou & Marshall 2006)
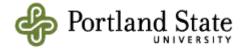
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Leadership

- Organizational/group perspectives
  - Private sector is dominant source of models (Van Wart 2003)
  - Theories have reflected historical conditions (Van Wart 2003)
  - Contemporary principles of public sector leadership emphasize the moral dimension and democratic values (Denhardt & Denhardt 2000; Denhardt & Campbell 2006)
- Individual Perspectives
  - Street-level bureaucrats (Prottas 1978; Lipsky 1980)
  - Street-level leadership (Vinzant & Crothers 1998)
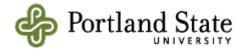 - Empowerment (Petter, et al. 2002)

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Public Sector Crisis Leadership

- Hillyard (2000) suggests that the organizational structure should be matched to crisis characteristics
  - Crisis dimensions
  - Network characteristics
- Boin & 't Hart (2003) argue that reform leadership and crisis response differ in their requirements
  - Both involve change
  - But one involves adaptation, the other requires technical competence and decisive action
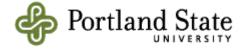
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A Way Forward?

- Case studies
  - Tendency toward voyeurism
  - Need to improve the exploratory and explanatory dimensions
    - Attention to first-person narratives
    - Focus on both what is and is *not* said
    - Interview boundary actors
- Grounded theory
  - Use case studies to develop a theory of action
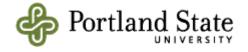 - Based on loop-learning (levels of reform)

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Grounded Theory of Action

- Anticipation
- Access
- Attention
- Assessment
- Action
- Adaptation

Loop Learning

- Organizational Learning (Argyris & Schön 1978)
  - Zero-loop (tool or technology)
  - Single-loop (task)
  - Double-loop (system)
- Societal Learning (Schön 1973)
  - Triple-loop (society)
- Reflective Practice (Schön 1984)

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A Proposed Starting Point

	Anticipation	Access	Attention	Assessment	Action	Adaptation
Structure						
System						
Society			Street-Level Leadership			

Outcome Dimension

Process Dimension

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