

Hierarchy, Construction, or Mentality: Capacity-Limiting Government Actions in the 2008 Sichuan Earthquake of China

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Many people criticized how the Chinese government responded to the Wenchuan Earthquake. They focused on how it failed to address the psychological needs of the survivors. The study presented here approached this issue from a human resources perspective. It was determined that the Chinese government approached the situation in a bureaucratic way that limited the government's capacity and barred non-profit organizations and community groups from participating. It was also found that survivors could not contact these organizations for psychological support. This study concludes that the situation called for a more flexible and improvised institution that would respond to the emerging needs of survivors.

Key Words: Wenchuan Earthquake, Disaster Response, Psychological Recovery, Emergent Human Resource Approach

Introduction

On May 12, 2008, an earthquake that measured 8.0 on the Richter scale struck the Chinese province of Sichuan. The US Geological Survey reported that almost 70 thousand people were killed and more than 18 thousand were missing. In addition, more than five million buildings collapsed (USGS 2008). Eight localities, including Chengdu, the capital city of the Sichuan Province, accounted for 77 percent of the casualties (Zhang et al. 2012).

The survivors suffered severe psychological effects. Psychiatrists reported that 45.5 percent of the survivors in Beichuan County suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Kun et al. 2009). About 30 percent of adolescents reported problems sleeping for as long as two years after the disaster (Geng et al. 2013). The Chinese government did not address the survivors' psychological issues. The survivors and first responders, especially emergency medical

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personnel, relied on government support but could not identify available support resources (Chen 2009).

The government's traditional crisis management approach failed to respond effectively (McEntire 2006) and assistance by non-governmental organizations and volunteer groups was suppressed (Shieh and Deng 2011). The government responded to the physical damage the earthquake caused but didn't provide prompt psychological aid to victims, mainly because of the military and government-driven nature of the initial response efforts. The purpose of this study is to help emergency management organizations in China understand and respond to the short-term and long-term psychological needs of disaster survivors and help the survivors identify and access available resources.

The sections that follow review previous studies and identify the major actors that responded to the Wenchuan Earthquake. This study notes the psychological challenges to both the government and the survivors and further notes that these challenges have not been widely studied by academics. This study establishes a theoretical model that links China's traditional government-dominated response to the psychological effects experienced by survivors. This model was derived from information gathered in a survey conducted 5 years after the earthquake (summer 2013). The conclusion notes practical implications and suggests avenues for future research.

The 2008 Sichuan Earthquake of China

In addition to the 8.0 Richter scale main shock, the China Earthquake Administration and Ministry of Civil Affairs documented 243 aftershocks until July 31, 2008—two and half months after the earthquake. Six of these registered more than 6.0 on the Richter scale and resulted in human casualties and property losses that affected 45 million people in approximately 400 counties in a 440,000 sq. km area. They also triggered thirty-four landslides and incapacitated the on-site rescue teams working in the affected area (USGS 2008).

In both the initial response and recovery phases, the Chinese government mobilized resources. Local governments, non-profit organizations (NPO), and contingency groups played vital roles. However, the overall results revealed the drawbacks of a response dominated by the government.

Government Response Operations

The earthquake overwhelmed and paralyzed the local governments in the affected area. Aiming to fill this gap, the central government led the response. It sent Premier Wen to the affected area to be the chief commander of the disaster response effort. He mobilized approximately 6,100 military personnel and airlifted several disaster rescue teams to the area. They consisted of 150 disaster rescue team members, 22 medical personnel, and ten search and rescue teams (Agnihotri 2012). The responders collected images and information for a preliminary damage assessment with Unmanned Air Vehicles (UAV) (Zeng et al. 2009). They deployed 12 cranes and approximately 44,000 military personnel by train and by aircraft. The Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA), deployed 215 medical personnel, including epidemiologists and psychologists, and 7,000 general services personnel. The central government mobilized over 130,000 PLA personnel and paramilitary police within 24 hours of the earthquake (Zhang et al. 2012). They established seven mobile hospitals to provide temporary care for the wounded. Within six days after

the earthquake, the government had also built a comprehensive evacuation corridor system that consisted of highways, railroads, and air routes to transfer the most critically wounded patients (Zhang et al. 2012).

The central government and the provincial governments demonstrated the merits of traditional crisis management to some extent. They deployed resources with few bureaucratic impediments, as the central government commanded the operations (McEntire 2006). The legitimacy of centralized power partially demonstrated its effectiveness in this case (French and Raven 1959). However, the overall response did expose the deficiencies of a “traditional,” centralized approach (McEntire 2006). The personnel involved, especially those in the army, often lacked proper training or equipment (Agnihotri 2012). Some have even argued that the military-based rescue operation was counterproductive and not cost effective (Agnihotri 2012).

Response Operations of Nonprofits

After the Wenchuan Earthquake, the Chinese government allowed other organizations to assist in responding to a politically sensitive event for the first time (Hui 2009). Government-Organized Non-Profit Organizations (GONPO), such as the China Red Cross Society and the China Charity Federation became involved. Private NPOs such as The Friends of Nature and Jet Li’s One Foundation also played supplemental roles where the government could not respond to all needs. Within two days of the earthquake, 57 civic groups launched campaigns to donate blood and raise money. They established a joint office, the 512 Voluntary Relief Service Center, in the city of Chengdu to house volunteers and release information to the public (Roney 2011).

Non-governmental NPOs faced three obstacles even though they were ready to intervene because of the traditional emergency response framework. First, the government only allowed GONPOs to publicly raise money (Shien and Deng 2011). This policy financially cut off civic NPOs. Second, most volunteers didn’t trust lesser-known NPOs, so they contacted local governments for opportunities (Roney 2011). Third, most private NPOs were not institutionalized and were inexperienced and experienced high volunteer turnover rates in comparison to the governmental organizations and the GONPOs.

The volunteers that do not belong to any professional or official organizations cause other problems. More than three million volunteers worked in the affected area. Most of them were volunteering for the first time and did not have adequate training or experience (Shien and Deng 2011). They converged on the scene to aid relief efforts, but they blocked each other and wasted limited resources (Cone et al. 2003). Similar difficulties also arose in the recovery phase.

Government Recovery Operations

On June 8th, 2008, the Chinese State Council approved the Regulations on Post-Wenchuan Earthquake Restoration and Reconstruction while the response proceeded (Dunford and Li 2011). Four days later, the council announced the State Overall Plan for Post-Earthquake Wenchuan to restore basic living conditions. The plan guaranteed housing to affected families. The council budgeted 981.396 billion RMB to restore houses, rebuild urban and rural areas, rebuild infrastructure, reestablish public services, restore ecology system, improve the environment condition, mitigate following disasters, and administer mental health care for the psychologically injured. The plan also included an intergovernmental assistance program under which unaffected affluent areas would aid affected areas. For example, it partnered the Guangdong Province with

the Wenchuan County and Shanghai with the city of Dujiangyan (Dunford and Li 2011). To ensure the affluent governments acted promptly, the central government required each city or province to release its program results (Dunford and Li 2011).

To help individuals and households, the Leading Group Office on Poverty Alleviation and Development (LGOP) initiated a program that would create jobs in the affected area. It based this program on the argument that a higher poverty rate makes communities more vulnerable to a hazard and less likely to recover soon (Dunford and Li 2011). The government initiated, supervised, and financially supported the recovery. It reconstructed the infrastructure, developed the economy, and resettled the survivors. By September 31st, 2008, it had invested 528.322 RMB, 53.83 percent of the overall planned investment (Dunford and Li 2011). The government invested much more in the recovery efforts than non-profits.

Recovery Operations of Non-profits

The NPOs participated less in the recovery phase than they did in the response phase, so most literature doesn't discuss the activities of the NPOs after assisting in mitigating the disaster. However, to highlight the importance of disaster mitigation, the Chinese State Council issued a white paper one year after the earthquake (May 11th, 2009). It stated that the government should strengthen its relationships with NPOs (including GONPOs) so it could respond more effectively to disasters. This statement suggests that NPOs are effective and they should be institutionalized. At the time, several NPOs were still implementing recovery projects because they had provided clear operational plans and had proactively maintained rapport with local governments (Shien and Deng 2011). Although the government recognized the significance of NPOs and advocated their increased involvement in disaster relief, they would not be able to act with full autonomy because only the government can disburse funds. The government insists on controlling how NPO funds are raised, and this is one of the pitfalls of emergency management in China.

An Institutional Pitfall of Chinese Emergency Management

We define the Chinese government's response and recovery efforts as the "bureaucratic approach", which is characterized by formal command structures, clearly defined goals, and set policies and procedures (Schneider 1992, Neal and Philips 1994). However, this response did demonstrate some characteristics of the "emergent human resource approach", which allowed for some non-governmental response (Schneider 1992, Neal and Philips 1994). Unfortunately, survivors suffering from mental disorders have not yet benefited from the emergent approach. The following sections of this paper present a case for improving psychological support and treatment for survivors of disasters in China.

Field research notes

We conducted a survey in 2013 and visited the areas affected most by the Wenchuan Earthquake. We selected the respondents based on their geographic locations, which are officially identified as the most destroyed areas, such as Qiudi, Mianzhu, and Ganbao. We wanted to observe any deficiencies in the response and recovery operations in these areas because we did not have the resources to survey the entire affected area.

We visited government officials at the provincial level before conducting the survey. They introduced us to the localities that they recorded as the most affected. We surveyed 11 households with the assistance of the local government. At our request, the local officials left before we conducted our interviews. The respondents were between the ages of 40 and 60 and they had all lost their homes or at least one family member. The interviewer had to gain their trust and calm them down before asking them to talk about the disaster.

Five years after the earthquake, the respondents had not fully recovered. Some still had nightmares and relied on sleeping pills. Some could not mentally revisit the disaster. Some still suffered from mental disorders and had difficulty communicating abilities. Many respondents still contemplated suicide. However, a few respondents tried to rebuild their lives and recover with the assistance of the government. Unfortunately, the signs of mental disorders were not adequately addressed by the time we conducted this study.

Psychological issues

We discovered shortcomings in China's reaction to the earthquake with regard to addressing psychological issues and treatment. The government only spent .42 percent of the recovery money on mental health care (Dunford and Li 2011). The government built tangible objects quickly, such as infrastructure and housing, but it did not address the psychological needs of survivors.

The American Psychiatric Association (2000) suggests that individuals suffer from several psychobiological or psychiatric disorders after a disaster. For instance, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) usually affects many survivors of disasters. Typical symptoms of PTSD include experiencing hyper arousal, re-experiencing an event, having unwanted memories, and experiencing depression (Wang et al. 2011). Studies have identified all of these symptoms in the Wenchuan Earthquake survivors (Xu and Song 2011). While some studies have focused on PTSD and public psychological interventions at the local level in the earthquake affected area (Kun et al. 2009; Li et al. 2011), the effectiveness of these interventions remains unclear.

This study focused on the survivors and their need for assistance to identify intervention methods that may have helped them. The following sections continue to describe the shortcomings of the Chinese government response to identifying and treating psychological issues of survivors.

Lack of organizational capacity

Critical appraisal of the Chinese government's response to the Wenchuan Earthquake recommended that it increase its transparency, responsibility, and acceptance of volunteers (Hui 2009). The survey data in this study also makes the case that the government's response to the psychological needs of survivors was inadequate and that more could have been done to address their psychological needs.

Most respondents mentioned that they had to attend meetings held by the local government. These meetings addressed public policies on response and recovery efforts, such as housing arrangements, relocation, and healthcare, and most respondents believed that these meetings benefited them mentally by forcing them to be social. Public officials did not notice this unintended effect, assuming the respondents reported honestly toward the meetings. The local authorities focused on their pre-defined roles in these meetings and thus missed opportunities to address the psychological challenges faced by survivors. By coordinating with GONPOs, NPOs and other groups, the government could have used these meetings to allow mental health care providers

to offer treatment, advice, and assistance to individuals and groups once any official business was concluded.

As in the other response and recovery efforts, the Chinese government dominated the management, if any, of survivor's mental issues. As a result, citizen relying on the government received little to no assistance. One respondent family in the study survey had not participated in the Rural Collective Economy programs prior to the earthquake and therefore couldn't receive any assistance from the government. The family lost three sons and their home, and they had to live in a building that didn't have running water or other amenities.

Lack of support to nonprofit and community involvement

Although the government lacked professional knowledge and skills in large-scale disaster response, it didn't support citizen groups or non-governmental NPOs actively. The PLA didn't arrive for three days after the earthquake. Within this critical period, emergent groups from the community could have helped the victims and survivors physically and mentally, should they have received proper trainings and equipment prior to the disaster from the local government. However, the respondents only reported being treated by two emergent groups, students and medical personnel from the local university. They voluntarily assisted to search and rescue the survivors, and offered quite limited mental support to those experienced significant losses, without any identifiable resources from the public authority.

The lack of community support even adversely impacted the first-responder's mental health. One respondent, a physician, was working at the local hospital when the earthquake happened. He and his colleagues had to provide emergency medical services without any food for days. The president of his hospital gave the surgeons bottles of powdered milk from the emergency supply to prevent their hands from trembling due to hypoglycemia. The patients and their families saw this and filed a claim stating that the surgeons had treated them inadequately. The president was dismissed and committed suicide afterward. The respondent also reported the higher hierarchy of the hospital gave him a significant amount of pressure due to overload without compensation. This led him to regret his career choice and occasional thoughts of suicide as well.

Lack of access to resources

The survey respondents indicated that survivors and volunteers didn't know about resources that could have helped them cope mentally. In PTSD recovery, for example, survivors require resources to help them restore social relationships and be empowered (Herman 1998). Social interactions could help the survivors recover from the PTSD and rebuild the mental resilience to future disaster impact. In the City of Wenchuan, once receiving the government-supplied houses and jobs, the survivors could have participated in their social networks and (request) government-organized social events to relieve their stress. However, less than one third of our respondents reported that they have interacted with others actively.

Healthcare providers didn't effectively assist survivors with mental issues either. All of the survey respondents mentioned a fear of seeing others, especially in the crowded places. Nevertheless, they had to visit crowded hospitals to receive mental health treatment. The respondents sought professional psychological help only reluctantly, unless they suffered from a severe mental disorder. Even those who demonstrated great demand to take medication or see a doctor, preferred to stay home alone, creating a barrier between their mental needs and professional help.

Conclusion and Implications

The Chinese government and nonprofit agencies could have responded better to the Wenchuan Earthquake if they had approached the situation from an emergent human resource perspective instead of a traditional, bureaucratic approach. This approach would have benefitted the victim's psychological health. Based on researching the earthquake response and the results of the survey, this study identified three primary issues with China's current emergency management institution: lack of capacity in the government-controls response and recovery operations, weak or no support to nonprofit and emergent community efforts, and ineffectiveness in addressing the mental health issues of survivors.

The national government responded to the disaster with a centralized, bureaucratic organization that primarily addressed only physical damage. It did not respond well to rapidly changing situations that demanded flexibility. This approach emphasizes the role of the military and deemphasizes the role of non-governmental groups. This explains why logistical and infrastructure issues were dealt with effectively, while the social and psychological needs of survivors were not.

We recommend that practitioners and scholars who are interested in China's emergency management practices focus on empowering communities and nonprofit organizations. The Wenchuan Earthquake created a window for us to be aware of the need for psychological first aid in response and recovery efforts. Research and analysis should also focus on improving public policies to improve response and recovery in cases of future disasters. In fact, the Chinese government did manage its relationships with other sectors better during the Yushu Earthquake two years later (2010), and responded a more effectively to the psychological needs of the victims (Liu et al. 2011; Cheng et al. 2010). It is hoped that future research will help further this shift from a bureaucratic approach to an emergent management approach.

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