

# Structural and personal social processes in disaster

*George Silberbauer* discusses the changes to an individual's social reality caused by disaster

*By George Silberbauer*

The way in which we perceive and interpret our experience of the world around us is a cultural product. It is systematic, but selective, including some events and phenomena, and excluding others as irrelevant or false. It is, thus, an incomplete, somewhat inaccurate reflexion of reality.

Nevertheless, it is adequate for most of our 'normal' needs; it enables us to make enough sense of what happens for us to be able to live as reasonably competent members of the groups and society to which we belong.

This culturally-specific account of reality is a sort of combination of tribal myth and open conspiracy. Our beliefs, attitudes and expectations are guided by it, but we also participate in its formulation, maintenance and amendment. For these processes we are dependent on frequent social interaction with others to learn, and affirm and/or correct our personal versions of Received Wisdom about how to account for, and interpret our experience of reality, i.e. to provide us with sufficient information about the current construct of reality.

As well as the physical damage a disaster does, it also causes critical disruption of the victims' customary relationships and patterns of social interaction. Not only is this emotionally distressing but it also contradicts their expectations of normality, thereby invalidating much of their Received Wisdom, leaving them in a state of painful uncertainty.

Furthermore, a disaster impedes the normal the flow of information as well as that which the unexpected, novel and unprepared-for post-disaster circumstances require. Victims are thus precipitated into a crippling information-deficit that increasingly inflicts psychologically damaging diminution of sense of identity, highly stressful uncertainty about future action and prospects, and difficulty in reaching decisions because of the imponderability of key

factors. Consequently the processes of recovery and rehabilitation are greatly hindered.

Post-disaster information-deficit can be ameliorated by appropriate preparation. Relevant prior experience, whether personal or vicarious, is of the highest value and can be imparted through appropriate training and public education (To illustrate: the Victorian Country Fire Authority's programmes of Bushfire Blitz and Community Fireguard have proven value in post-disaster recovery as well as in preventing, or mitigating bushfire damage.) In the absence of adequate preparation, victims will be principally, perhaps wholly reliant for information on those who render them assistance. In either case a copious flow of relevant, timely and understandable information is an essential element of assistance and its provision should form part of any disaster preparation. As the harm done by information-deficit progresses in a quasi-exponential manner, early and effective mitigation of post-disaster information-deficit is an urgent priority.

## 1. Introduction

There is reasonably clear comprehension (but indifferent quantitative assessment) of the physical and economic harm that disasters do to their victims. However, the psychological problems are less well understood, and we are only beginning to grasp the nature and extent of the social consequences. These various aspects of disasters are interrelated and are mutually compounding. Some psychological reactions are manifestations of, and responses to critical social dislocations occasioned by the disaster. In that sense, social factors are causal vectors of some of the psychological harm. Unless they are remedied, accurate identification and alleviation of those mental and emotional disturbances will be impeded.

The organising principle of this paper is the concept, information (see definition included in this paper). It relates to the psychological, social and cultural aspects of what happens to disaster victims and is the theme that connects these logically and coherently. In an operational context, this approach enables disaster managers to identify, make sense, and keep track of the



*Victims are forever changed by their experience and must adapt to their changed circumstances by building a new set of functional equivalents*

psycho-social and cultural harm done to victims, and of their progress towards recovery and rehabilitation. If understood by victims, it ameliorates some of their confusion and distress and points the way to their further recovery.

What is lost in a disaster cannot be restored. Victims are forever changed by their experience and, if they are to recover, must adapt to their changed circumstances by building a new set of functional equivalents of what previously existed. The more coherently and completely they can replace the lost old with the accessible new, the more successful is their recovery and rehabilitation. This paper describes the shock of dissolution of victims' identity, sense of Self and customary and socially-construed perception of reality following disruption of accustomed social structures, and discusses recovery processes that facilitate victims' construction of substitute functional equivalents.

### **What is a disaster?**

Whatever its agency, a disaster is something that happens to *people*, affecting their persons, emotions, perceptions, expectations and capacity to lead their lives in their usual manner. Depending on the role of the individual during, and after the event, there are different perceptions of it. What is relevant here is the *victim's* perception that a disaster brings about radical and intolerable disruption of the order and functions to which she or he is accustomed but, temporarily or permanently, does not have the capacity to adapt to the

changes caused by the event. Recovery and rehabilitation lie in developing adaptive capability.

A disaster may have a gradual onset, e.g. drought, famine, economic or political dissolution, or be sudden in its impact, e.g. earthquake, flood, epidemic, fire, an act of public violence.

### **What does it do?**

Most disasters cause personal *physical harm* people are killed or injured and survivors are shocked by the experience. Many suffer progressively worsening exhaustion as increased workloads, physical deprivation and emotional strain take their toll. *Economic loss* is suffered when property and other assets are destroyed or damaged and their utility or enjoyment diminished, and when the organisational framework of normal economic activity is disrupted. *Psychological traumata* include impaired cognitive, intellectual and emotional competence and control. Victims suffer emotional distress, e.g. grief, anger, confusion, anxiety, and the uncertainty about identity and sense of Self that follows social dislocation.

Although a sudden disaster is an event, many of its effects are the results of processes set in train by the event. Depending on their level of personal and institutional resilience, victims will have greater or lesser autonomous capacity to halt, and reverse these processes. However, early, appropriate assistance from competent and capable others will help to limit the damage and, where resilience is low, will be essential to initiate and maintain victims' own counter-measures.

Mechanistic *social disruption* is caused by the unforeseen absence of key personnel in relationship networks and by survivors' inability to perform their customary roles because of loss of, or damage to property and other assets, including infrastructure essential to communication, and interruption to the delivery of normal goods and services. Such disruption may extend beyond the geographical area of the disaster, increasing its total impact-space. Causation is linear and it is an empirical phenomenon that can be objectively assessed. Recovery is a matter of replacing the missing personnel and restoring assets.

The inability of victims to make the exchanges that are expected of them leads to structural dissolution. This is a more pervasive and intractable form of social disruption than Mechanistic Social Disruption, as it interferes with the victims' accustomed means of expressing their personal and social identities. Further, it is incorporeal, non-mechanistic and subjective, non-empirical and non-linear in its causation and its effects. If unchecked, Structural Dissolution may worsen in quasi-exponential fashion with the passage of time. Mechanistic disruption and structural dissolution are mutually causal and compounding. However, it is heuristically convenient to distinguish them. Both arise from psychological, cultural and social predispositions endemic in the affected population, aspects of which are discussed below.

## 2. Culture and society

Having few instincts to guide behaviour, humans depend, instead, on learning most of which comes from others. If we are to interact coherently with one another, it is essential that we do so in a context of shared knowledge, beliefs, values, meanings and mutually-comprehensible aspirations. We need not share these with complete uniformity, but with enough in common for each to understand where the other is 'coming from' and 'going to'. The shared corpus of knowledge, etc. comprises a large part of a social group's *culture*, i.e. the learned behaviour, and its products that are characteristic of that group. (The membership of a social group may be only Robinson Crusoe and Man Friday, a household, an association or organisation, or as large and disparate as a nation-state see below for comparisons of these.)

Social theory has coined conceptual tools for understanding and explaining social behaviour. Although very useful, they are abstractions and their meanings vary somewhat with context. They should not be mistaken for what actually happens inside our heads, and between one another.

Culture is the product of individual discovery and invention which is sifted by a consensus of that individual's social group for inclusion in its 'received wisdom', or is rejected as irrelevant ("this committee is

not concerned with the number of eggs laid last summer in that Blackbird's nest outside"), trivial ("George has reinvented the wheel—again") or false ("disasters don't happen"). Such consensus is reached in the context of existing culture, to which the novel element must conformably relate, and of a measure of social solidarity sufficient for its effective communication and bestowal of appropriate cachet and acceptance.

Although it appears likely that humans are 'hard wired' for sociability, its expression within any specific group is another learned trait and achieving solidarity is an uncertain endeavour. The human 'style' is to create bounded social groups (i.e. in which members are distinguished from outsiders) within which interactions are patterned by approximate prescriptions of behaviour to which shared meanings are attributed. Interactions consist of exchanges of valued entities in the forms of energy, materials and information.

**Energy** ("the capacity to perform work") is delivered to the recipient mechanically in the form of physical services performed, chemically contained in food and fuel and as radiation transmitted by power-grids, etc.

**Materials** include all concrete objects, including food and fuel.

**Information.** In its ordinary sense, information is knowledge of a particular fact or circumstance gained or given through communication, investigation or instruction. A wider meaning, more useful in the present discussion, is derived from the mathematician's use of the term: information is that which reduces uncertainty. Information may be false, or valid, i.e. any knowledge that enables one to distinguish the correct or, if you're into fuzzy logic, optimal choice among alternatives of action, identity, value and/or meaning. It may be *intrinsic*, i.e. already possessed by the individual, or derived from another source, i.e. *extrinsic*.

In the exchanges that constitute the substance of relationships, there is approximate prescription of which entities may be exchanged with whom, and how, and in what forms. Their values and meanings attributed in the context of each exchange are also approximately prescribed as are the behaviour accompanying the exchanges, and the sequences of response to each step in the series. (Thus, while it was once appropriate for me to give my wife a birthday present of alluring lingerie and receive a fond kiss in return, the same exchange between me and a fellow fireman might lift the collective eyebrow of our brigade. Furthermore, access to resources that form the substance of exchange is differentially allocated among individuals. (The garments should come from a shop in which I have made payment, and not from the neighbour's washing-line.)

A *relationship* is expressed (my present to my wife), or created (I buy the apparel from the salesperson in that little boutique) between individuals when they interact, i.e. make an exchange. The *quality* and *intensity* of a relationship are approximately prescribed by the social structure in which it occurs. Prescription of *quality* may be strict, with the types of exchange between participants quite narrowly defined (e.g. between professional and client). Other relationships (e.g. friendships) are more nebulously prescribed, leaving it to people to negotiate the appropriateness of exchanges within a broader field of choice. The *intensity* of a relationship is the frequency with which interaction occurs and/or its emotional significance (affect) on the participants. Such is human sociability that frequent interaction of one type between individuals is likely to accrue emotional content and to proliferate to other types (e.g. I become friendly with my regular newspaper-seller and, eventually, with his family). Relationships are not automatically self-sustaining, but depend on continued interaction, or the hope of interaction that will bring exchanges that, even if not very rewarding, are less unrewarding than any visible alternative.

**Symmetry of relationships**, i.e. that the quality and intensity be about equal for the participants, is seldom exact, but gross imbalance sooner or later creates a strain (e.g. as with 'users' and 'bludgers'). A requirement of symmetry is reciprocity that something of equal value be given in return for what is received. Reciprocation may be direct, i.e. recipient reciprocates to giver (my neighbour and I greet one another) or generalised, when recipient passes on something of appropriate value to some to some other party (I make a charitable donation in the giver's name), or negative (a thief steals possessions and receives a custodial sentence).

The types of exchanges prescribed for an individual constitute the *status* she or he holds in the group. Put another way, it is the sum of her or his rights and obligations. Statuses are commonly ranked by their relative *power* (i.e. the capacity that exchanges give the person to move others to act according to her or his will). A person's *role* is her or his performance of prescribed exchanges, i.e. exercise of the rights and obligations. (Clearly, this implies the participation of others, with whom there is *role reciprocity*). *Prestige* is the value placed on status, or role performance. Thus there can be high status with low prestige (politician of your choice) or low status and high prestige (Garbo of the Year). Status may be *ascribed*, i.e. is dictated by the social structure (e.g. kinship, citizenship), or *achieved* by the appropriate actions and behaviour (e.g. qualifying for a trade, marriage). Ascribed statuses are generally predictable and are more often permanent than are those that are achieved.

Social formations vary in their *scale*, which is partly a function of the size of the population within which occurs the full range of roles, and of the median role-density (i.e. number of hats worn by a member). Thus, the smaller the scale, the greater is the number and variety of roles of each member *vis-a-vis* any other member. In an isolated village or on a remote, small island the population is necessarily largely self-dependant (i.e. nearly all the range of roles is filled by locals). The schoolteacher may be the spouse of the shopkeeper, parent of one or more pupils, member of the local council, sibling of the nurse (who does not always minor surgery, midwifery and counselling and dispenses drugs that would make the Australian Medical Association's hair stand on end) and so on, in a dense network of cross-cutting, emotionally rich, mutually-influencing relationships with frequent face-to-face interaction. There is scope for negotiation of the rules of exchanges and their content and compromise and substitution of established practice can often be decided without causing confusion. Much of experience is shared and the people acquire extensive knowledge of one another which, in turn, informs them about themselves. If there is a high level of confidence in the expectations of the population of one another's role performance, and of their reactions to one's own, it is likely to be a healthily-functioning society with strong solidarity among the members. (If not, it's pure hell.) Lest this appear as Rousseauesque romanticism, it must be noted that the safety-net that small scale provides is matched by a hard ceiling.

In a large-scale social formation, e.g. Melbourne, roles are dispersed among a much larger number of people, many of whom have only single-role relationships with one another and the majority have no direct contact at all. Such contact as occurs is mostly infrequent, fleeting, anonymous and of little emotional significance. Mutual knowledge is slight, or non-existent and role-performance is largely mechanistic and impersonal. There is less confidence in expectations of others' role performance and that which exists is derived from faith in structural prescription rather than from knowledge of the individuals' characters. There is seldom opportunity for the type of negotiation of roles that is seen in small-scale social groups. Yet there is a measure of solidarity, as is shown in responses to appeals for emergency, or charitable help and other support for fellow Tasmanians, Territorians, Australians, etc., and in the customary gestures of recognition on discovering that those other tourists in Bangkok are also Melburnians (horrors!... but one must be civil). This is indicative of a vague sense of *community* an abused term that, here, is intended to mean a population among whom there is a significant measure of shared identity and a propensity for common purpose.



*In a community there is a significant measure of shared identity and a propensity for common purpose*

Within these extensive social systems there are groupings that vary along a continuum of scale, e.g. households, neighbourhoods, schools, workplaces, clubs and other associations in which members interact within a network of more varied and intense relationships. Any given individual will probably belong to several of these, each with its set of statuses. In contrast with the village and island examples, it is unlikely that there will be many links between a member's several groups, other than her or his alliance with it. There is, thus, limited scope for reinforcement of individual roles, or for reconciliation of a member's various roles, having the effect of somewhat fragmenting the persona and restricting the individual's amount and variety of coherent information about Self.

All social formations have *sanctions* that are applied to their members to express and reinforce behavioural prescriptions by rewarding the conforming (positive sanctions) and punishing the wayward (negative). Many are formal (e.g. wages and Queen's Birthday Honours, or capital punishment and library fines) but more are informal (e.g. prestige, favour, or disrepute and adverse prejudice).

In short, the social system and its culture operate to tell me who I am, who you are, what to do, and how we should behave towards one another. It has ways of making both of us listen and conform. When its operation is significantly disrupted by a disaster, the entire basis of the human life-support system is threatened.

### **3. Fragile reality**

Let us assume, as did Plato, that 'out there' is the totality of reality, only fragments of which are known to us. We rely on sense-data (i.e. what is seen, heard, smelt, tasted and felt) for information about our surroundings. Not all of it is accessible; some information is beyond the physiological and dimensional limits of our senses, being is too small or too faint, or lying outside the spectra of our sensitivities, or too distant in space or time. Thanks largely to language, we are able to partially overcome these limitations of our senses by including others' accounts of events and phenomena that we miss and, although vicariously experienced, to incorporate them in our personal knowledge and beliefs about the universe. (N.B the universe starts at your navel now, and extends infinitely in time and space to embrace everything that is, was and shall be.)

The filter of cultural conditioning (i.e. specific to each social group) further restricts information about our surroundings; culture defines for us what is insignificant, irrelevant or false, which we ignore, reject, or do not sense, e.g. most white Australians, hard-put to track even a railway-line, are quite blind to the indications left by an animal or person walking over a piece of ground and, if they were pointed out, would be unable to make any sense of them. Yet those signs are easier to see, read and interpret than are the little black marks on this page.

As well as being incomplete, any society's perception of the reality of the universe includes much that is error. Clearly, perceived reality should bear some resemblance to actuality, but social man is startlingly tolerant of evidence that contradicts belief. I could never

understand the firm insistence of Kalahari bushmen, who are superb field naturalists, that steenbok breed only in spring. This small antelope is avidly hunted for its meat and in all seasons the Bushmen were regularly confronted by foetuses in all stages of development in the gravid females they killed, as well as by the sight of the fauns with their mothers. In the world of western medicine, until Struan Sutherland gave us pressure-immobilisation in about the 1970s, professionally-endorsed first-aid treatment for snake bite included a variety of measures that were completely useless, and often harmful. Cytology had the human chromosome number wrong until 1956 and for more than half a century hordes of anatomy students were failed for not finding the mythical 24th pair, and countless individuals classified as abnormal for not presenting them. (Scientific folklore has it that the mistake arose from a printer's error in the paper that originally reported the number in the late nineteenth century.)

The learning on which we depend to guide our behaviour occurs in a societal context and maintaining the necessary coherent interaction requires a common frame of reference, i.e. a shared perception of reality. Incomplete and frequently mistaken as it is, each society's way of construing its experience of the universe serves its members well enough to meet their ordinary survival needs. A flat earth was quite satisfactory until seafarers ventured far enough out to sea for land to sink astern below the horizon and, as wider observation more stridently challenged established belief, the ensuing geocentric universe was replaced by a heliocentric one, and so on. But, as poor Galileo found to his cost, agreement is more important than accuracy. The necessity for a shared frame of reference leads us into a conspiracy to endorse Received Wisdom as Truth.

Much of learned knowledge and behaviour require frequent reinforcement if they are to be retained. Furthermore, we live in an intensely dynamic, inherently unstable social environment and we require a constant flow of information to keep up with the complex, incessant change. New extrinsic information must be incorporated with what is intrinsic, correcting gaps and/or errors in the latter. The inputs are not systematic or of uniform quality, but random and fragmentary. There is seldom adequate information to allow rational certainty or time in which fully to reflect on that which is received. Our grasp of reality is, thus, more fragile than we are happy to acknowledge.

Instead of investigating the validity of new information and the conclusions it leads to, the common solution is to economise and accord authority to selected sources of information and take on trust what comes from them. The readiest-to-hand memories of one's own experience are often the chosen source. But even this mother-lode of sagacity is surprisingly easily drawn into doubt by

conflicting, but untested inputs from Received Wisdom. It is our habit to accept as truth that which the Most Significant Other has proclaimed.

Significant Others are the oracular loved ones, members of skilled trades and learned professions, demagogues and the other people to whose statements and opinions we variously ascribe authority. Their foremost qualification is credibility. Credibility may be an aspect of social status, e.g. the proverbial policeman tells me the proper Greenwich time. It may be demonstrated by competent performance or appropriate experience, or accorded in a sort of chain reaction: e.g. I have faith in the opinion of A, who tells me that trustworthy B considers C to be reliable. Consequently I, too, have faith in C, even though I may not know B.

With great gaps in the information about what is around us, we often misinterpret the environment, getting our facts wrong and attributing wrong meanings to some that we get right. Yet, Thomas Kuhn to the contrary notwithstanding, science and other forms of knowledge do progress – measured as the discerning of valid and significant associations between phenomena and events – but there is a long way yet to go. And not everybody's knowledge and science progress at the same rate. Chaos, i.e. an event of unknown causation, is intolerable to us, so we comfort ourselves by ignoring or suppressing it, or by inventing myths like 'blind fate' a.k.a. 'chance', witchcraft, or your chosen brand of climate change. What we perceive as 'reality' is a cognitively dissonant, spotty mixture of valid approximations, invalid information and ignorance masked by the label, 'irrelevant'. Cruel experience will correct some of the errors ("I'm sober enough to drive") but we have largely surrendered critical objectivity to favour current popular belief; as stated above, in general the truth is what the most Significant Other says it is.

We are conditioned by the experience of a relatively smoothly working social system to sets of habitual actions and responses. The actions and responses of others serve to validate, or coherently amend our values, beliefs and expectations.

#### **4. Paradise lost**

By its nature, a disaster is beyond the control of those whom it afflicts. Even when defences have been prepared against its probable occurrence (e.g. bushfires and floods in Victoria), but are overwhelmed, the event contradicts and invalidates the expectations of ordinary, everyday life. On a small scale such contradiction is a common thing we are accustomed to being surprised. But a disaster goes far beyond surprise; it is a shocking upheaval of normality.

Performance of normal role-sets is impeded or prevented and, instead, victims are precipitated into new roles for which they are largely unprepared. They are confronted



*Victims are precipitated into new roles for which they are largely unprepared*

by behaviour, including their own, that no longer has its old meaning, and by new forms of behaviour with uncertain meaning. Misleading media and other folklore images of their experience compound their confusion. With lost possessions go potent symbols of status, prestige and individuality. The accustomed flow of information about identity and Self is disrupted, replaced by ambiguous signals to the victim about who, and what she or he is.

The undermining of identity, the singularity of the victim's personal experience of the disaster and its consequences, the unfamiliarity of the situation and the unexpectedness of almost everything combine to refute much of her or his socially-constructed reality.

Interruption of normal exchanges through loss of, or damage to goods and facilities for delivering services, the emotional strain of the event, and having to contend with the difficulties of arising from the disaster can destabilise relationships. If the threat is not averted by active counter-measures or by the inherent resistance and/or resilience of the relationships, and they collapse, the ensuing loss of solidarity increasingly compounds the personal and structural harm caused by the disaster. Dysfunction of intimate relationships can do more damage than the event itself.

## 5. Regaining paradise

However much assistance is given, recovery remains an essentially autonomous process. It follows that victims' capacity for effecting their own recovery will be enhanced by alleviation of the debilitating effects of having been unhinged from their accustomed security of reality, including identity and Self.

The work of Victorian Country Fire Authority Critical Incident Stress peer teams is an example of helpful, very early alleviation. Their clients' distress is much reduced by 'talking it through', during which the commonality of their experience and reactions to it become apparent, thus affirming their personal version of reality and reassuring them of the normality of their (to them, peculiar) reactions. Analogously, disaster victims' distress about their own emotional states, new roles and general confusion can be lessened by comparable intervention that serves to re-engage them.

The peers are volunteers, the CFA bearing their transport and other costs. When requested, they usually attend in pairs at the scene or when the crews return to their stations, and informally discuss the incident with the whole group. They receive a small amount of training, during which the limitations of their role are clearly established. Emphatically they are not there as therapists but, where desirable, might refer members to professional help and facilitate the contact. Their principal qualifications are a capacity for empathy and 'having been there', i.e. having been through critical incidents themselves, which serves as a badge of credibility and enables their clients to accept them as Significant Others. Such acceptance is critical, for it is very difficult for victims to communicate with those whom they see as 'living in another world', and not in their own, post-disaster one. Prior experience also legitimises, and makes sense of their intrusion into the victims' privacy.

The success of this service suggests that it could usefully be extended as a general facility for immediate post-disaster short-term deployment. Suitable volunteer

personnel could probably be found among the various emergency services, simplifying selection, training and communications.

Where there is good opportunity for frequent face-to-face interaction a quasi-tribal solidarity often arises spontaneously among survivors. This can be a vehicle for countering the disruption of the pre-existing social organisation but it is an ephemeral and fragile condition, so the moment must be seized early in the recovery process and intervention be delicately handled. Typically there is a lessening of the customary barriers between households and other groupings in the affected population, who come to see themselves as 'all in the same boat'. Perversely they feel stigmatised by their status as victims, but come to see it as a badge of distinction, making them somehow special. In the abrupt absence of customary hierarchies and other structures, the victim population is a socially amorphous, egalitarian community. Leaders of action and opinion arise suddenly and unpredictably. Emotions are volatile and there is a high potential for quick crystallisation of opinion, driven by unassuaged grief and anger and unresolved confusion. Survivor guilt is common. Unless a more positive lead is given (helping others is a sovereign anodyne) it is likely to be expressed in activities like scapegoating, which is a cruelly wasteful and self-destructive pursuit.

In the absence of any fragment of pre-disaster leadership among the survivors, emergent leaders are likely to be 'self-starters'. If they lack wisdom and experience, or have unsuitable motives for putting themselves forward, their leadership can be harmful, giving rise to jealousies, schisms, frustration and quite serious interference with recovery assistance. Unobtrusive, but firm intervention by those running the recovery assistance is needed to back the right horse and support their choice by according authority.

The 'tribe' can be an effective network for two-way communication but, as there is a marked propensity to rumour-mongering, information directed to survivors should be reiterated in verbal and written forms and media statements should be checked for their concordance with that information. It is important that everybody be seen to receive the same information and the more of it that is imparted to groups and at gatherings where questions can be asked and answered, the better it will be understood and used. As there is often marked synchronicity of phases of response and consequent unity of perception of the situation, the information should be tailored to suit the needs, and level of acceptance of the victims (e.g. accurate casualty lists should come before detailed instructions about design criteria for new housing). The well-intentioned should be restrained until their particular form of assistance can actually be put to good use—it simply causes distress for the Gardening Association to dump

replacement trees and shrubs on people who lack sufficient water even to wash themselves and must watch the kind donations wither and die. As far as might humanly be possible, politicians should be restrained from making the extravagant promises to which they are prone after disasters disappointment is more damaging than is deprivation.

As much of the recovery work as they are capable of should be left to the survivors. Mutual assistance does lasting wonders for morale. It restores a sense of Self, establishes healthy relationships and gets the tasks done. Disaster management's principal role is to provide information, materials and unobtrusive guidance. Within the restrictions of privacy, much of counselling can usefully be done in groups. It is economical of specialist personnel, fosters indigenous mutual support and reassures those who mistakenly see their own distress as a unique weakness. Each such group also provides a forum for negotiation of roles, values, etc., facilitating the process of structural reconstruction

To sum up, a disaster may be seen as causing a critical deficit of information among survivors. With inadequate means of resolving the deficit they are left in profound uncertainty about their accustomed experience and expectations of reality, including themselves, their relationships and most, if not all of the several roles that each of them normally performed. Their recovery entails constructing a new reality to make sense of their post-disaster situation and to enable them to adjust their expectations and behaviour to accommodate it and proceed with their rehabilitation, i.e. to adapt by replacing what is lost with its functional equivalents. Disaster management can assist in these processes by providing suitable personnel who can make personal contacts and communication vectors, by facilitating a copious flow of relevant information suited to each stage of recovery and by providing such material aid as is needed. A certain amount of gentle and unobtrusive manipulation of emergent social structures is likely to be beneficial.

#### Author

George Silberbauer. 19.3.1931. Educated Pretoria Boys' High School, Stellenbosch, London and Monash Universities, Gray's Inn, University of South Africa, University of the Witwatersrand., BA, Postgrad. Dip. LL., Higher Civil Service Law, BA(Hons), PhD. 17 (Maritime) Sqdn, SAAF. HM Colonial Service, District Commissioner, Ngamiland, Kasane, Ghanzi, and Bushman Survey Officer, Bechuanaland Protectorate (now Botswana). Senior Lecturer, Dept. of Anthropology & Sociology, Monash University (retd.). Research includes: development of new grazing areas, Ngamiland, Botswana; development of crocodile hide industry, Okavango Swamps; culture, social organisation, languages and socio-ecology of Bushmen of the Kalahari; socio-ecology of Western Desert Aborigines; social and cultural impact of Ash Wednesday fires; aspects of the Berrima/Enfield fire and the 1997 Dandenongs fires. Frequent lecturer, workshop and seminar participant, EMA, Mt. Macedon. Member, Community Recovery Sub-committee, Victorian State Emergency Recovery Planning Committee. Consultant to Shire of Yarra Ranges on fire alert. Firefighter, Upper Beaconsfield Rural Fire Brigade, CFA.