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BUILD BACK BETTER? LOCAL VENTURES ALLEVIATING SUFFERING AFTER DISASTER IN A LEAST DEVELOPED COUNTRY



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ABSTRACT

Disaster events threaten the lives, economies, and wellbeing of those they impact. Understanding the role of emergent organizations in responding to suffering and building resilience is an important component of the grand challenge of how to effectively respond to disasters. In this inductive case study we explore venture creation initiated by locals in response to suffering following the 2010 Haiti earthquake. In exploring six ventures we found that two distinctive groups emerged in terms of their identification of potential opportunities to alleviate suffering, their access to and use of key resources, the action they took, and ultimately their effectiveness in facilitating resilience. We offer an inductive, grounded theoretical model that emerged from our data that provides insight into and an extension of literature on resilience to adversity and the disaster literature on emergent response groups, opening pathways for management scholarship to contribute in a meaningful way to this grand challenge.

INTRODUCTION

Organizations and communities face high-risk events that are difficult, if not impossible, to prepare for (Beck & Holzer, 2007; Gephart, Van Maanen, & Oberlechner, 2009). Natural disasters (Shah, 2012; USAID, 2015)—“acute collectively experienced events with sudden onset” that result in a “catastrophic depletion of resources” (Kaniasty & Norris, 1993, p. 396)—are a particularly devastating form of high-risk event. Despite representing an unlikely event for a specific community, disasters are quite common and occur once per day somewhere in the world on average (Norris et al., 2002). Given the challenges in preparing for disasters and their devastating consequences, responding to disasters represents a grand challenge.

Most of the research on managing disaster response has focused on the effectiveness (or ineffectiveness) of the *command-and-control* approach of first responders—that is, coordinating individuals and organizations to respond to a disaster through “clearly defined objectives, a division of labor, a formal structure, and a set of policies and procedures” (Schneider, 1992, p. 138; see also Anderson et al., 2005; DHS, 2004; Majchrzak et al., 2007). Recent work has highlighted the challenges of implementing the command-and-control approach (e.g., Drabek, 2005; Marcum et al., 2012) and its inability to sufficiently protect communities from disasters (McEntire, 2014) and has begun to highlight the importance of building community-level resilience (Aldrich, 2012; McManus, Seville, Vargo, & Brunsdon, 2008; van der Vegt, Essens, Wahlström, & George, 2015). Resilience is a *process* (Southwick et al., 2014) by which individuals and/or groups avert maladaptive tendencies and maintain “positive adjustment, or adaptability, under challenging conditions” (Sutcliffe & Vogus, 2003, p. 99), such as in the aftermath of a disaster. There is more to learn about how *organizing*, as

an important mechanism linking individuals and broader communities, facilitates adjustment in the aftermath of disasters (Majchrzak et al., 2007; Marcum et al., 2012).

In the context of disaster response, the *creation of local ventures* refers to the arrangement of resources and organizational structures in novel ways by those within the disaster zone to alleviate the suffering of victims and can take the form of *de novo* (new independent) or *de alio* (new corporate) ventures (Shepherd & Williams, 2014). These two forms of ventures are consistent with extant conceptualizations of entrepreneurial venture creation, which is “a process by which individuals—either on their own or inside organizations—pursue opportunities without regard to resources they currently control ... [where] opportunity is defined ... as a future situation which is deemed desirable and feasible” (Stevenson & Jarillo, 1990, p. 23). The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to explore the processes by which local ventures emerge following a disaster and the consequences this has on community members’ post-disaster functioning.

In this study, we provide a context for inductively generating a deeper and richer understanding of these issues by examining how locals engaged in venture creation in Haiti following a disaster. In January 2010, Haiti—already struggling with chronic poverty (UN, 2015)—was hit with an earthquake that leveled approximately 80% of its capital (Port-au-Prince), killing hundreds of thousands of people; displacing hundreds of thousands more; and significantly increasing the population’s vulnerability to disease, poverty, and thus mortality (International Crisis Group, 2013; Zanotti, 2010). We focus on how Haitians organized to help fellow community members. Specifically, there is reason to believe that Haitian-led organizing contributed to solutions to the grand challenges presented by the large-scale suffering in the aftermath of the disaster.

THEORETICAL GROUNDING

Resilience to adversity

Disasters are crises that create adversity for those in their path (Bonanno et al., 2010; Shrivastava, 1987; Turner, 1976). Disasters deplete resources (Kaniasty & Norris, 1993); break up and isolate communities (Bonanno et al., 2010); and can be appraised as traumatic (McFarlane & Norris, 2006, p. 4) as people experience and witness “horrors that are almost inexplicable” (Erikson, 1976, p. ii, 186) including injury, death, and destruction (Bonanno et al., 2010). Although disaster management is often used to try to protect communities from disasters (McEntire, 2014; Turner, 1976), these attempts are rarely successful (Özerdem & Jacoby, 2006; Hewitt, 2013). Thus, rather than focusing on vulnerability and protection, a re-orientation toward resilience appears to provide a path to more desirable outcomes in the aftermath of disasters (Kuhlicke, 2013; Matyas & Pelling, 2015).

Much has been made of communities’ inherent resilience—that is, the qualities a community possesses prior to a hazard that enhance its ability to mitigate threats and function positively in the aftermath of a natural disaster (Cutter, Ash & Emrich, 2014), such as their set of networks (Norris et al., 2008), economic and social capital (Alawiyah et al., 2011; Aldrich, 2012), local knowledge and values (Shepherd & Williams, 2014), and community capital (Miles & Chang, 2011; Peredo & Chrisman, 2006). These resources are important, yet resilience also involves processes for creating or retaining “resources (cognitive, emotional, relational or structural) in a form sufficiently flexible, storable, convertible, and malleable” (Sutcliffe & Vogus, 2003, p. 98) to deal with and learn from the adversity created by a disaster. However, how are these processes constructed and enacted in the uncertain environment created by a disaster?

Emergent response groups—Post-disaster venturing

Disasters often generate such considerable destruction that they motivate responses from a number of actors including governments, non-profits and emergency first responders (Anderson et al., 2005). However, despite these organization's efforts, many needs go unmet, given the often widespread scale of destruction (Drabek & McEntire, 2003). *Emergent response groups* refer to a collection of individuals “with no pre-existing structures such as group membership, tasks, roles, or expertise that can be specified ex ante” and are characterized by “a sense of urgency and high levels of interdependence” (Majchrzak et al., 2007, p. 147). These emergent response groups appear to be able to deal with the unexpected by remaining flexible and adaptable by creating new ways of organizing, such as using non-routine resources, non-routine structural arrangements, and non-routine roles and tasks (Bigley & Roberts, 2001; Drabek & McEntire, 2003; Gardner, 2013; Majchrzak et al., 2007).

Although we have an increased understanding of the attributes of emergent response groups and the desired outcomes of their actions, much remains to be learned about their “internal dynamics” (Majchrzak et al., 2007, p. 151). Our curiosity to explore the abovementioned areas critical to disaster management lead us to the following research questions:

- (a) how do new ventures acquire, combine and use resources to pursue post-disaster opportunities and (b) how does venture creation facilitate resilience of community members, and why are some ventures more effective than others?*

METHOD

To address our research questions, we base our work on a qualitative inductive methodology (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Locke, 2001; Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Van Maanen, 1979). This approach enables a detailed exploration of how actors behave in the aftermath of a disaster and to what end. We used the method described by Gioia, Corley and Hamilton (2013) (e.g., Corley & Gioia, 2004; Gioia, Schultz & Corley, 2000) to collect and analyze our data, focusing on the contextual interrelationships regarding new ventures to address existing theory.

Data collection

Our primary data collection spanned nearly two years, including preparation for data collection, interviews, observation, follow-up interviews, secondary data collection (which also included contemporaneous data in the weeks after the earthquake), and transcription/translation activities. We used multiple sources of data for the purpose of triangulation (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Data analysis

We structured our analysis following following method described by Gioia and colleagues (2013), which builds on established procedures for open-ended inductive theory-building research and has been successfully deployed in recent studies (e.g., Huy, Corley, & Kraatz, 2014; Kreiner et al., 2015; Nag & Gioia, 2012; Sonenshein, 2014; Pratt, Rockmann, & Kauffmann, 2006). This process involved identifying first-order codes, aggregating first order codes into theoretical themes, and again aggregating those themes into overarching dimensions.

ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Case Separation: Sustaining and Transforming Ventures

Sustaining ventures. Beyond the initial response, ventures differed in long-term efforts to alleviate others' suffering. Generally speaking, some ventures continued to emphasize providing for basic survival needs (food, water, and shelter) in seeming perpetuity. Given the focus on sustaining individuals' most basic needs for the long term, we began calling this category of cases *sustaining ventures*. These ventures were formed to provide a systematic approach to seeking resources and providing for others' needs. This included establishing semi-permanent shelter structures on farmers' land; searching for and diverting resources to their location; and, eventually, organizing to have individuals provide services for sale, including food preparation, hair cutting, and so forth.

Transforming ventures. Another group of cases described the alleviation of suffering as helping individuals transition toward autonomy and self-reliance, suggesting that "success" would mean those they helped no longer needed their services. As this group repeatedly emphasized the need to help people transform their lives toward an objective of self-reliance, we began calling cases in this category *transforming ventures*. Again, in the earliest days following the disaster, these ventures (like many individual Haitian citizens) focused on pressing needs to help people fighting for survival (as described above). However, as time progressed, these ventures transitioned to other core operational activities. Transforming ventures provided for a *broad set of immediate and evolving needs* because while they recognized the initial need for resources simply to survive, they transitioned victims toward autonomy and self-reliance.

Identification of Potential Opportunities to Alleviate Suffering

Sustaining ventures' potential opportunities to alleviate suffering. When conducting our interviews, we were struck by how sustaining ventures described their decision to offer relief with "no end in sight," how their customers shared this view, and how they arrived at this decision almost from day one (field notes). Specifically, these ventures began their operation by performing basic (yet essential) post-disaster activities, such as burying the dead, procuring water, and helping people obtain shelter on nearby land (SO-F1, SE-F2, SA-F2). After engaging in these initial activities, we found that sustaining ventures organized to access basic resources (from donors) in perpetuity.

Transforming ventures' potential opportunities to alleviate suffering. In the earliest stages of the disaster's aftermath, transforming ventures acknowledged the need for immediate relief (e.g., food, water, shelter); however, we also found that they recognized that they could not (and should not) support people with basic needs over the long run (as they did not view it as sustainable [TR-F1; TA-F1; TO-F2]), but that they needed to empower victims to "stand on their own feet" (TR-F1). As one founder described: "Initially, we gave people hygiene kits, food, and medical care. . . . This was intended to be done in the short term. . . . Our focus on everything [food, shelter, etc.] was transitional"—that is, moving people from one stage of recovery to the next until victim autonomy was realized (TO-F1, TR-C2, TA E2). Therefore, in contrast to the POTAS identified by sustaining ventures, transforming ventures had a *broader, longer-term orientation* when responding to others' suffering.

Social Resources

Sustaining ventures and social resources. Sustaining ventures described their relationship with potential resource providers as "distant," "transactional," and even "hostile." While this did not

preclude these ventures from pursuing and accessing resources, it did alter the nature of resources (and conditions of distribution timing and volume) outsiders were willing to offer (SO-F2; SA-F1; field notes). We found that sustaining ventures had *limited influence and control* over resources both locally and internationally (SO-F1, field observations) and were therefore highly reliant on transaction partners (as opposed to mutually-reliant partners).

Transforming ventures and social resources. One founder explained that he “immediately rallied with those in his community ... identifying the missing and the dead while setting up plans for the future” (TA-F1). Similarly, another founder explained that “friends in the US contacted me asking ‘what can we do?’ I told them and they acted immediately ... ranging from medical supplies to transportation and training” (SE-F2). Consistent with these quotations, our informants emphasized that founders relied on strong local and international relationships, as well as loose connections through mutually shared groups (e.g., church membership, NGOs, etc.). Consistent with theory on social networks (Burt, 2005), The founders of transforming ventures highlighted their use of and heavy reliance on deep connections with locals (i.e., *local ties*) as well as their extensive access to and use of both *strong* (i.e., long-term, reciprocal interpersonal relationship) and *weak* (i.e., limited-time acquaintance-oriented relationship) (Granovetter, 1995) *international ties*. These connections resulted in multi-national teams led and directed by locals who were on the ground, with locals and outsiders seen as key collaborators, allowing ventures to leverage existing personal relationships toward new ends.

Founding mindset

Sustaining ventures’ founding mindset. Founders of sustaining ventures explained their motivation was “natural” because “we are Haitian! The Haitian people will always keep their heads up and keep on fighting to survive no matter what, because our national identity is what makes us strong as a Haitian people” (SA-F2). Several founders began the initial interview explaining that their story “could not be understood without first explaining Haiti’s unique history of overcoming adversity” (field notes).

Transforming ventures’ founding mindset. In contrast to sustaining ventures, informants from transforming ventures described their mindset and motivations for action in terms of “doing what was right,” “fulfilling obligations to the community,” and “helping those who suffered more than we had” (field notes). In particular, these individuals emphasized the need to enable others to achieve self-reliance. Even after repeatedly asking these informants if national pride or historical injustice factored into their founding mindset, they all responded with a similar description: that they were just “doing the right thing to help other people” (TO, TA, and TR) as “people from all countries help one another; Haitians are no different from others in this sense” (TO-E2).

Resourcefulness

Sustaining ventures’ resourcefulness activities. As we analyzed our data, we recognized that sustaining ventures employed resourceful strategies in ways that were consistent with their founding mindset and social resources. Many indicated they pursued resources in ways their ancestors had, fighting for rights through peaceful (yet aggressive) means to enable survival (field notes). Therefore, sustaining ventures resourcefully *appropriated non-owned resources for the long term*, which influenced both the subsequent identification of POTAS and entrepreneurial actions; while these actions offered victims access to services that provided some of the basics of life, they also made it less likely that people would leave this largely “makeshift” setup.

Transforming ventures' resourcefulness activities. Similar to sustaining ventures, transforming ventures also described many different actions that could be identified as "resourceful activities" that they argued were critical during the recovery process. Our informants explained that they drew upon their networks to provide impromptu medical services, use non-owned buildings and land to gather and provide resources to fulfill basic needs, and so forth (field notes). In contrast to sustaining ventures, transforming ventures emphasized the importance of transitioning from a resourcefulness mindset to more of an "investment mindset" (TO-F1, TR-F1). That is, they recognized that creatively making do with what they had could only take them so far and that for people to truly recover, they would need to make difficult transitions requiring money, time, and other investments (field notes).

DISCUSSION

Contributing to Theory on Resilience to Adversity

Recent research on managing risks caused by disasters has emphasized developing resilience (McEntire, 2014), or the capacity to not only overcome adversity but to create and/or retain resources while facing the challenge (Sutcliffe & Vogus, 2003). While resilience is recognized as valuable in overcoming external disturbances, there is much to be learned about the *processes* of developing resilience (Sutcliffe & Vogus, 2003; van der Vegt et al., 2015), particularly in *response* to disasters rather than as a result of centralized planning (Drabek, 2007; McEntire, 2014). As a result, our findings and grounded theoretical model extend theory on resilience in three primary ways.

First, social resources are essential for new organizations as they are generally resource constrained and require external support (Burt, 2005; Stinchcombe, 1965). Therefore, it might be assumed that most relationships are useful, especially in the aftermath of disasters, when seemingly any available resource might be good. However, we found that when it came to alleviating others' suffering and promoting the preservation and development of resources (i.e., resilience), the nature of social relationships in our context played a critical role in determining whether or not a resilience outcome could be achieved. These findings extend research on resilience in an important way and suggest that while many resources provide value for disaster-struck areas, some resource exchanges can limit and even potentially obstruct resilient outcomes. Second, prior research has generally assumed that the possession of extensive and diverse reserves or resource slack can be useful in weathering difficult challenges (Meyer, 1982; Page, 2014). However, perceived resource positions change over time (Dolmans, van Burg, Reymen, & Romme, 2014) depending on the individual actor (or organization), his or her perceptions, and the nature of the environment (Bradley, Shepherd, & Wiklund, 2011), all of which influence decision making. We found that even in the most constrained of resource environments, ventures were created to alleviate suffering. In all cases, ventures were highly creative in what they perceived as an available resource. Our findings suggest that these resource perceptions (and subsequent actions) can influence resilience.

Finally, our findings extend research focused on relief from suffering by uncovering ventures that focused on transforming victims to facilitate resilience and build back better than prior to the disaster. This study opens up the possibility for deepening disaster research that focuses on how to foster and support transforming ventures (rather than sustaining ventures).

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