

**Writing Disaster:  
Autobiography as a Methodology in Disasters Research**

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*Research in social science has increasingly moved towards emphasis on egalitarian relationships in the research process; attempting to explore and break down the traditional divide between “researcher” and “researched”. With this more reciprocal relationship comes acknowledgement of positionality, intersubjectivity and the need for the “researched” to gain a substantial voice in the research process. In this paper, autobiography is explored as a possible method through which those affected by disasters might be empowered within a research process that is traditionally replete with power imbalances. Such personal accounts of disaster, which draw upon the experiences of the author as the defining characteristic, are not recent developments in disasters research; this paper explores the roles of personal accounts through the letters of Pliny the Younger, as well as the key role of autobiographical data in Islamic environmental histories. The Mass-Observation Archive, held at the University of Sussex in the UK, is used as an example of the scope and limitations of this research method in contemporary disasters research. It is concluded that, in some contexts, autobiographical research has significant potential in enabling those exposed to disaster to have a greater input into the ways their perceptions are recorded, thereby allowing them to have ownership of the research process per se, as well as the practical response to it, for example culturally sensitive mitigation strategies.*

**Keywords:** Autobiography, disasters, research methodology, Mass-Observation Archive.

### Introduction

Disasters research has typically been divided into two quasi-discrete discourses, the physicalist/technocratic approach and the critical response to this, commonly known as the radical critique which, by their inherent nature, tend to apply different methodologies. Generally speaking, the former relies upon quantitative approaches that seek to “monitor”, “measure” and explore “data”, “science” and “technology” (Lechat 1990; Merani 1991; Chester 1993). The dominant approach is thus a fundamentally positivist discourse that typically seeks objectivity in both the disaster events per se and in community perceptions and responses to them.

The critical response to the physicalist approach marked a move away from such objectivity and, instead, suggested a “people-centered” approach, with increasing emphasis on social research methodology. Consequently, a number of different manifestations of the qualitative approach emerged within disasters research such as interviews (both structured and semi-structured) and participant observation. Each of these has its own merits and limitations, extensive discussions of which can be found in other methodological literature (e.g. Hammersley and Atkinson 1995; Peet 1998). Importantly, the move towards qualitative methods was, to varying degrees, accompanied by a shift in power from the researcher providing the agenda and defining the process of the research, to the “researched” having a key role. This is perhaps best exemplified through the process of participatory action research which breaks down the traditional hierarchy inherent within research activities (e.g. Whyte, 1989; Whyte et al, 1989; Greenwood et al, 1993; Gatenby and Humphries, 2000; Choudry et al, 2002).

The focus for this paper, within the context of changing methodological priorities, is the use of autobiographical methods and approaches in terms of exploring perceptions, and responses, to disaster situations. In particular, this approach has some clear potential in terms of the definition of disaster from the perspectives of those who experience it, thus aligning it with participatory action research methodologies. In this context, it is interesting to explore both historical perspectives, from which it has been possible to produce extensive catalogues of disaster in some regions (e.g. Ambraseys et al. 1994; Guidoboni et al. 1994; Ambraseys and Finkel 1995), but also contemporary autobiographies; the Mass-

Observation Archive at the University of Sussex is a particularly interesting and rich resource in this instance and thus examples and discussion of material from it will be given below.

### **Changing Directions in Disasters Research: Towards a People-Centered Approach**

As outlined above, it is possible to identify methodological paradigm shifts within the context of disasters research. At one level it has been possible to discern a move from purely quantitative methods of analysis to the adoption of qualitative research. However, within the latter there has been increasing need identified for more innovative ways of engaging with people; for example, the move away from the straightforward structured/semi-structured interview (Phillips, 1997). Whilst these latter methods are still acknowledged as important, they do not always allow the identification of in-depth causal mechanisms influencing perception and/or behavior, nor do they usually allow for respondents to have an input into defining the research agenda; this has usually been pre-defined by the researcher and in a world where time and resources are limited, there is often little choice but to use these traditional methods. However, opportunity may arise for more longitudinal studies to be initiated that could allow for research participants to have considerably more input into the entire process, from inception to report writing and implementation.

If possibilities do indeed exist for researchers to take a long-term view then the door is open for the use of other participatory techniques, as opposed to the purely consultative methods comprising traditional research. Participatory methodologies facilitate a greater understanding of issues affecting communities both by the “researcher” and by those within the community itself; i.e. research becomes a reciprocal process whereby traditional hierarchies are broken down and all participants become “collaborators” (Greenwood et al, 1993). One such methodological genre is that of participatory action research (PAR) which came to the fore in the late 1970s/early 1980s as a way of promoting “industrial democracy” in private companies where it was felt that traditional top-down management structures were not working to best effect and, instead, a range of stakeholders should become involved in decision-making (e.g. Whyte, 1989). Since this time, PAR has been taken on board as a research method which brings a voice to the disenfranchised and can help community members take ownership of their decisions. In particular, this research method has been characterized as participatory,

empowering, experiential, co-learning, creative, collaborative and politically active (Sarri and Sarri, 1992). These characteristics can be identified through the numerous applications such research strategies have had, but have shown particular success through their engagement of disempowered communities. They have been used extensively in the Third World, and amongst those groups who can sometimes struggle to gain a voice on a local, national or international stage, e.g. women and the disabled. Examples of participatory action research include: popular theatre being used to engage “hard-to-reach” groups in Tanzania on the issue of HIV and AIDS (Bagamoyo College of Arts et al, 2002); the Afya project which has been used to provide health information via the Internet specifically aimed at Black women (Mehra et al, 2002); and assessment of community needs and redressing marginalization and inequalities in Mallco Rancho, a small village in Bolivia (Sarri and Sarri, 1992).

Although conducted in disparate locations, what each of these case studies reinforces is the need to move away from a top-down, elitist research process to one based on reciprocity, collaboration, eclecticism and diversity. The research process should seek to encourage all members of a community to become involved in defining the issues that need resolving and suggesting the best ways in which this might be achieved. As such, the method becomes not merely a means to an end but seeks to provide some solutions through its implementation. The HIV/AIDS example given above not only allowed people to gather further information about attitudes to the disease but also helped in opening up a difficult subject for discussion. This type of methodological approach also emphasizes the need for research to be iterative and long-term rather than based upon short-term surveys which can only provide a snapshot of the community life they seek to represent.

Such acknowledgement of the need to redress existing power structures present within traditional research projects has not just become apparent through strategies such as PAR but also through entire schools of thought. For example, one movement in particular that has progressed the leveling of the research process has been feminism. This has been true of this discourse in its numerous guises, for example feminist geography (WGSG, 1997) and feminist sociology (e.g. DeVault, 1999). In particular, feminists have noted the importance of characteristics such as positionality whereby the researcher acknowledges the values that they may bring to the research process; the move away from the grand-narrative where the “one size fits all” method is increasingly less valid; and the move towards writing personally and thus avoiding the resulting production of “dry and dispassionate” research texts (DeVault, 1999, p. 158).

These methods clearly have important implications for social science as a whole, but also for disasters research in particular. In the case of the latter, the focus on vulnerability reduction and empowering communities in the theoretical literature needs to be matched by a change in the way that understandings and responses to disasters are explored. The PAR techniques, as with those suggested within feminist discourses, emphasize the need to rethink power relations but also to be more creative in the ways in which methods are used to gain further understanding of disaster perception and response. As raised in the introduction, this paper suggests that one possible mechanism might be to use autobiography/life history methods in order to do this. This method is not suggested as definitive but might offer potential for some members of disaster prone communities to effectively communicate their ideas in a non-intimidating environment.

### **Autobiography as a Research Method**

Autobiography is a genre that has become increasingly popular within social research (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995) and amongst the most fundamental aspects of the accounts generated are the following:

They can be a source of ‘sensitizing concepts’...they can suggest distinctive ways in which their authors, or the people reported in them, organize their experiences, the sorts of imagery and ‘situated vocabularies’....they employ, the routine events, and the troubles and reactions they encounter (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995, p. 160).

In the light of recent discussions in anthropological and sociological literature relating to positionality (e.g. Hammersley and Atkinson 1995; WGSF 1997), situatedness (e.g. Atkinson 1990; Sidaway 1992), dialogue (e.g. Atkinson 1990; Sayer 1992, 2000), representation (e.g. Radcliffe 1994) and the double hermeneutic (e.g. Sayer 1992, 2000), autobiographical accounts have the potential to be an empowering research tool because they are predominantly controlled by the individuals providing them. A written text, abstracted from the face-to-face contact familiar within much ethnographic fieldwork, provides a unique and potentially different perspective of the issues concerned, in which people may feel less inhibited or worried about providing the “right” answer.

Autobiography, however, also has problems and limitations to the descriptions and accounts given. For example, one clear limitation is

that of literacy; autobiography only provides a “voice” for those who are able to write. Furthermore, in terms of historical perspective, it tends to be only the exceptional accounts that survive. Whilst this means that there tends to be a rich diversity of accounts of events such as natural disasters, i.e. those events that have had a considerable impact on people’s lives, it might mean that “ordinary” accounts, that would help contextualize these extreme events, are lacking.

There are also issues with regard to the age and gender composition of those who take part in autobiographical exercises. As one example, that will be explained further below, the Mass-Observation Archive (an autobiographical project in the UK) represents a number of inherent biases: more women write than men (69% of respondents are women); respondents tend to be from older age groups; there is under-representation from ethnic groups (see Sheridan et al. 2000); and over half of the contributions come from the south of England. The exact composition of participants in such methodologies will clearly differ according to particular context, for example in many countries literacy among women may be lower than men and therefore participation will be skewed differently. It might also be issue-dependent, e.g. some topics offered for writing might be gendered or appeal to a particular ethnic group. Therefore, in the context of justified concerns for maximizing inclusivity in contemporary social research, it is important to note that there are likely to be “absent voices” within autobiographical/life history accounts.

### Looking to the Past: Historical Examples of Autobiography

The role of historical processes, such as colonialism, as well as historical accounts have gained increasing credence with respect to natural disasters research (e.g. Oliver-Smith 1999; Alexander 2000). In partic-

**Table 1: Age characteristics of the Mass-Observation correspondents 1981-1998.**  
(Adapted from Sheridan et al 2000, p. 244).

	Born 1973 or after		Born between 1972 and 1948		Born between 1923 and 1947		Born before 1923	
	<b>Total</b>	%	<b>Total</b>	%	<b>Total</b>	%	<b>Total</b>	%
Men	26	1.04	261	10.53	278	11.21	178	70.18
Women	42	1.69	539	21.75	802	32.36	258	10.41
All	68	<b>2.74</b>	800	<b>32.38</b>	1080	<b>43.58</b>	436	<b>17.59</b>

**Table 2: Regional location of the Mass-Observation correspondents. (Adapted from Sheridan et al, 2000 p. 243).**

<b>Regional location</b>	<b>Percentage of total correspondents</b>
Scotland	3.4
Northern Ireland	0.56
North England	18.0
Wales	3.8
Midlands	18.7
South England (inc. London)	<b>55.0</b>
Abroad	0.52

ular, it has been acknowledged that we can no longer regard societies exposed to disaster ahistorically, instead it is necessary to consider social and cultural context in a temporal way, as well as spatially (Alexander 2000). Indeed, many people construct awareness of disaster through stories that have been passed down through generations, as well as through folklore and analogy; many of these “stories” can be autobiographical in nature; a member of the older generation remembers “the big earthquake” that struck 50 years ago or remembers their own parents telling them of such an event. The result is the development of a collective memory regarding large-scale natural disasters in the past which will temper contemporary awareness and response mechanisms; whilst disasters do not occur in a social vacuum, they do not occur in an historical vacuum either.

One of the most well known historical examples of disaster autobiography is that dating from the eruption of Vesuvius in AD79, and the letters of Pliny the Younger written to a friend, Cornelius Tacitus. Whilst it has been used to corroborate archaeological evidence (see Sigurdsson et al. 1985; Alexander 2000) as well as to provide some scientific insight into the eruption, it also gives a personal perspective on loss and perception of a disaster, as the following personal recollection illustrates:

We had scarcely sat down to rest when darkness fell, not the dark of a moonless or cloudy night, but as if the lamp had been put out in a closed room. You could hear the shrieks of women, the wailing of infants, and the shouting of men...People bewailed their own fate or that of their relatives, and there were some who prayed for death in their terror of dying. Many besought the aid of the gods but still more imagined there were



no gods left, and that the universe was plunged into eternal darkness for evermore (from Radice 1969, p. 172).

As well as the personal experience, Pliny the Younger also records details of his uncle's (Pliny the Elder) death. Pliny the Elder, a well-known natural historian, was first motivated to approach the volcanic eruption by boat in order to satisfy a scientific curiosity; later it became a mission to save friends from the impending disaster. The description given of the eruption has enabled contemporary scientists to classify it, and painters and writers to represent it (e.g. Martin; Turner; Bulwer-Lytton). Indeed, from letters, we know what the eruption looked like: "an umbrella pine, for it rose to a great height on a sort of trunk and then split off into branches" (Radice 1969, p. 166); there is a description of the ash, "sometimes it looked white, sometimes blotched and dirty;" we know that there was a considerable volume of lava, and subsequent fires "broad sheets of fire and leaping flames blazed at several points;" there were earth tremors accompanying the eruption "the buildings were now shaking with violent shocks, and seemed to be swaying to and fro as if they were torn from their foundations;" and, finally, that there was a large volume of tephra, "there was the danger of falling pumice stones."

However, further to the physical descriptions, there are also personal accounts of what people did to try and mitigate the disaster, for example Pliny the Elder and his friends tied pillows to their heads to protect themselves from the falling debris. The account is a vivid description of the progress of the event, but also an insight into perceptions and behavior of people during disaster. However, ironically, Pliny the Younger himself did not regard his account with particular consequence, finishing his second letter to Cornelius Tacitus with the following:

Of course these details are not important enough for history, and you will read them without any idea of recording them; if they seem scarcely worth putting in a letter, you have only yourself to blame for asking them (ibid, p. 173).

Individual accounts are of personal interest in themselves, however, and when such autobiographical accounts develop for a particular region over a period of time they can become an indispensable part of the disaster planning process, aiding the construction of hazard zonation maps, for example. Such a chronology exists for both the Middle East region (e.g. Ambraseys et al. 1994) and also for the "Near East" (e.g.



Ambraseys and Finkel 1995). The quality and detail of some of these first-hand accounts can provide for in-depth analysis of particular regions within countries, for example there is a detailed regional account of earthquake activity in the Istanbul/Sea of Marmara region in Turkey (e.g. Ambraseys and Finkel 1991; Homan and Eastwood 2001).

The Middle East region has a catalogue of particular longevity and Ambraseys et al. (1994) note that, from an early period, Muslims took great interest in history and that, “to a great extent, Muslim historiography arose out of biographical literature” (p. 7). The Muslim writers drew from the Byzantine methodologies of recording history and thus, in order to ensure a chronology was adhered to, paid particular attention to the occurrence of extreme “natural” events such as earthquakes, plagues and famines. Furthermore, survival of the records in many of these regions is aided by the diversity of authorship. Travel to parts of the Middle East and Turkey, was common for trade (and, with regard to parts of the former, as part of the European imperial project) and latterly for tourism. This allowed for a multilingual/transnational hazard record to be developed where people wrote of personal experiences in travel accounts.

### **Contemporary Autobiography as Disasters Research Methodology: The Mass-Observation Archive**

The historical accounts of disasters facilitate the development of a disasters chronology, however, it is also interesting to explore the role that (auto)biography might have in contemporary disasters research. In order to explore this theme, the Mass-Observation Archive (M-OA) at the University of Sussex, an existing repository of “autobiographical”<sup>1</sup> accounts on a range of issues from the UK population, will be used. The initiative for Mass-Observation came from a group of British surrealists based in Blackheath, London (MacClancy 1995) who were “less concerned with revolutionary rhetoric as such and more socially committed. Instead of merely talking about the need for social change, they also wished to try to bring it about” (ibid., p. 496). By 1936, the Blackheath group were conducting observations of their own and published this in a letter to the *New Statesman* in 1937. The letter, written by Charles Madge, concluded with the following:

The group for whom I write is engaged in establishing observation points on as widely extended a front as can at present be

organised. We invite the co-operation of voluntary observers, and will provide detailed information to anyone who wants to take part (Madge, cited in Sheridan et al., 2000, p. 24).

Along with this letter was a poem by Harrison, a “popularizing anthropologist” (MacClancy 1995), who was conducting work of his own in Bolton. On seeing the letter from Madge he came to visit the group in Blackheath and agreed to work with the surrealists.

Mass-Observation was thus crystallized as a concept in 1937 by Harrison, Madge and Jennings (an artist, photographer, writer and filmmaker) “to create, in their words, an “anthropology of ourselves”- a study of everyday lives of ordinary people in Britain” (M-O A leaflet). The earliest work done was collected in Bolton and London and involved research by investigators who recorded people’s behavior; and also work done by volunteers who kept diaries and responded to monthly questionnaires. Contemporaneously, the program has 2478 volunteers who are sent Directives, asking a number of questions identified as significant in contemporary British life, three to four times a year by the Archive to which they write a response<sup>2</sup> (Sheridan et al. 2000). The Directives<sup>3</sup> are:

quite long and discursive, often disclosing a great deal about the author, and are designed to give people both guidance in helping them to write, and also the freedom to explore the subject in the way that best suits them....The emphasis is...on self-expression, candour and a willingness to tell a good story and be a vivid and conscientious social commentator as well as an open and thoughtful autobiographer (Sheridan 1994).<sup>4</sup>

The research method used here thus allows for a great deal of flexibility. Although there is guidance by those conducting the research process as a whole, the power relations that are so explicitly manifest within the fieldwork situation are different here. Indeed, as Sheridan (1994) writes, “correspondents are not seen as subjects of research, but rather as collaborators and participants, and their ideas on the project are taken very seriously”.

### **On Being a Mass-Observation: Perspectives on Producing Autobiography**

The correspondents can forge a number of relationships through their writing, despite being removed from the researcher. In this respect

the correspondence with the Archive remains a process of negotiation (Sheridan 1993), as with much field research. The possible relationships constructed by the correspondents may either be of an abstract nature, for example with the “Archive” or with a more distant researcher, or on a more personal level, for example with the Archive staff or with a particular individual, especially the Archive Director, Dorothy Sheridan (*ibid.*). Thus a dialogic relationship may be constituted in a number of ways and will mean different things to different people, resulting in a plethora of different writing styles. These varying writing conventions used will convey different meanings to what is written (Sheridan 1993):

If a writer chooses to construe the directive reply as a personal letter, then the register will be free-flowing, personal, self-disclosing, intimate. If, on the other hand, the directive reply is tackled as if it were a school essay, it will be structured, formal, abstract and contained (*ibid.*, pp. 34-35).

Indeed, to return to the historical context, this was also echoed in the example of Pliny the Younger’s letters in relation to the eruption of Vesuvius. He writes in the first of his letters:

It is for you to select what best suits your purpose, for there is a great difference between a letter to a friend and history written for all to read (Radice 1969, p. 168).

There are also issues of identity involved with the Mass-Observation Archive and what it means to be a Mass-Observer. This is an issue highlighted by Sheridan (1993) who identifies the idea that the process of negotiation is not just external, where the correspondents interact with another party, but it is also a function of their own persona:

the correspondent also enters into a process of negotiation with his or her own understanding of what the writing ought to be about, even what a proper Mass-Observer should be (p. 36).

Therefore, people generate their own ideas about the topics that the Archive should be provoking people to write about, sometimes even commenting on whether they believe the relevant Directive to be covering the “right” questions (Sheridan 1993). This develops over time as people build up their relationship with the Archive and they “begin to

develop a set of assumptions about what we are all doing” (ibid., p. 36). Therefore, the research process involving the “invisible” researcher generates some of the same issues as that of fieldwork, for example, in terms of the process of negotiation. However, there are also a number of differences, for example the imaginary nature of the audience for whom the research is being undertaken and the identity of the Mass-Observer, which is more open to a process of self-construction than in the field situation where, if uncertain, questions may be asked of the researcher in a more reciprocal, interactive process.

An important insight into the nature of the autobiographical process comes from the Mass-Observers themselves. In particular, they have evaluated the Archive, and the Mass-Observation process, in terms of its intrinsic value, but also in terms of personal satisfaction and fulfillment. The responses indicate the perception of a reciprocal relationship whereby the correspondents feel that they are contributing to a worthwhile resource but that the act and process of writing also has personal benefits. For example:

The value [of M-O] is a person’s own words of what they themselves saw and felt on different subjects. If some of the things you read surprise you, then you are uncovering new ground and attitudes (B1443, female, 64).

Indeed, for many, participation in Mass-Observation is an empowering process; it allows people to take ownership of the material they are presenting through what they write and how they choose to write it (for example in an informal or formal way, in a report style or in a more free-flowing or creative account). In this way, the method facilitates subversion of the stereotype of the passive research subject as the correspondents attempt to forge their own identities through their writing:

It [M-O] is a good way of affirming identity and maybe of influencing exterior matters where one would otherwise be powerless... (A1292, female, 58).

Thus, the notion of gaining a “voice” is one that is all pervasive within many people’s minds; the need to be heard by those that are in “authority” is clearly an important aspect for many of the correspondents.

### **Mass-Observation and the Hazardous Natural World**

In terms of a methodology for disasters research, Mass-Observation has explored both event-specific perceptions as well as more generic people-nature relations. Two Directives in particular are used as examples here. The first of these (Autumn/Winter, 1987, Part II) is based on the “hurricane” of 1987 that hit the south coast of England (Figure 1). This is an interesting Directive as, given the southern bias of correspondents, many were writing from an experiential perspective. Whilst many of the questions were focused on particular aspects of disasters, such as buildings and community participation, the nature of the method allowed for people to bring in other issues that they felt were relevant; either autobiographical in character or based on mediated knowledge.

The second Directive used (Spring, 1989, Part I) refers to the reporting of disasters (Figure 2). It deals with many of the parameters that are linked to the intrusive nature of media reporting, such as voyeurism and explicit detail of elements of suffering, as well as the ways in which people deal with these. Furthermore, it also explores many of the issues that are being seen as increasingly important within the literature on risk such as blamism and responsibility.

### **Hurricanes in the UK**

The fact that this was a disaster with which many people had personal involvement, meant that many opinions were experiential rather than abstract. For those who had been directly affected there were many personal stories, including some by those who were angry that the hazard had not been predicted. There were also comments about the inherent bias and divisiveness of media reporting of events in the south compared to the north of Britain, with many complaining that when severe storms hit the latter they receive considerably less attention than the 1987 storm received. For example, the following from a Scottish respondent:

My boss is a bit anti-English and says it was the wrath of God on them (M1507, female, 52, Autumn/Winter Directive, 1987, Part II)

Further, as with the letters of Pliny, many people gave very personal accounts and understandings of what happened during the event, perhaps using writing as a catharsis:

Nature had gone mad, out of bounds – destructive, irresponsible, racing to its death, dragging everything with it. This was it. The end of the world was here – now, at this moment and nothing could stop it. Breaking glass, falling and breaking objects and the all-powerful noise that would not tolerate anything above it or mitigate it took over my brain....

All reason and life had stopped as we know it (C1922, female, Autumn/Winter Directive, 1987, Part II)

Others gave various explanations for the storm including religious, “New Age” and scientific explanations. Some used Mass-Observation as a “soap box”, a tool for communicating their thoughts on the media, the weather forecasters, the UK government, and sometimes their own communities. In terms of this disaster, the Archive was used less frequently for factual descriptions of the event, instead the accounts tended to be more perceptual and emotional than potentially useful scientifically, as was the case with the Pliny letters. However, the personal insight that people provide is very important for social disasters research, particularly in anthropologizing the West in the context of disaster perception (Homan, 2003).

### **Disasters and the Media**

A further aspect of disaster research is opinion of the ways in which events are broadcast. Contemporary society tends to be voyeuristic, and disasters and risks are known to be “amplified” through the media. In a society where a considerable amount of knowledge is mediated, some have even suggested the existence of a “disaster pornography” (Sardar 1998). The 1989 Mass-Observation Directive sought to gauge, from personal perspectives, what people thought of the role of the media in disasters and the way in which they are reported, as well as issues of apportioning blame and post-disaster relief work.

Some trends in disasters are negated as media hyperbole by some of the respondents; the fact that trends or patterns of occurrence appear in the media means that they must necessarily be false:

It is this on-the-spot and extensive media coverage, which can give rise to the belief that the number of disasters has increased over the years... (R1167, male, 72, Spring Directive, 1989, Part I).

To my way of thinking, events such as earthquakes, floods, droughts, forest fires, volcanic eruptions and the like, are not really disasters at all. They are made to appear so only from the viewpoint of, and their effects on, the human species (R1418, male, 67, Spring Directive, 1989, Part I)

This Directive thus provoked a range of opinions on an issue, but also encouraged people to write in a much more anecdotal way on disasters that they themselves had experienced. For example, the following which is a personal, reflective account of a typhoon experienced by one of the correspondents whilst in a boat off the coast of Hong Kong:

All actions were performed with an un-natural lack of comment. Perhaps we had arrived at the realization that nothing further could be done by ourselves for ourselves. Now each man and woman was in the care of whichever God they trusted. One thing I do know. Suddenly atheism was taboo. Something was needed by all, and it sure as hell wasn't the vacuum or void of the unbeliever.

Our silent prayers were answered. At the cheap price of a few broken limbs, ship, crew and passengers survived (B1392, male, 72, Spring Directive, 1989, Part I).

Some directives thus give scope not only for expressing personal perspectives on contemporary issues but can also be a stimulus for personal reflection on experience.

### **An Insight into Disaster Response?**

As well as the accounts inspired by the Directives providing a forum for people to provide opinion on the disaster event, it is also possible to discern ideas relating to disaster response and participants' perception of the role of government in disaster management. The responses show how UK society has come to see technology and prediction as central to coping with disaster, as opposed to any form of self-help strategies and, as such, the success or failure of disaster management is judged by how well computers and satellite systems, for example, perform. Two examples of responses placing responsibility with technological solutions are as follows:

...a hurricane of such intensity [discussing the 1987 storms] in 'British waters' surely can be easily predicted or forecast as the



men from the bureau [referring to the UK Meteorological Office] prefer (C1225, female, 40, Autumn/Winter Directive, 1987, Part II)

Natural disasters such as hurricanes usually give plenty of warning and modern technology enables protection or evacuation to take place before the event (P1433, male, 62, Spring Directive, 1989, Part I).

In addition to the accounts outlined above, which are clearly optimistic regarding the possibilities technology might have to offer disaster management, there are also those who are sceptical that this offers a solution:

What of the Met. Office! . . . . . With their £75 million a year they receive from the Defence Ministry, and in the computer age, one wonders! (A1412, female, 58, Autumn/Winter Directive, 1987, Part II).

As we rely more on the hi-tech in our lives, then the fallibility of man becomes more apparent. I believe tragedies and disasters will increase as we rely more and more on technology (P1980, male, 60, Spring Directive, 1989, Part I).

The responses here indicate an interesting pattern emerging with respect to disaster response in the UK, i.e. a dependency culture emerges whereby people seem to be complacent about initiatives and steps that they themselves can take to reduce disaster and instead prefer to rely on technological solutions. In this regard, technology is used in two ways, either optimistically in providing the solutions to problems posed by disaster or as the focus of blame when things go wrong. Ironically, these responses emerge at a time when those working in disaster management or prevention are trying to empower communities in Third World countries by directing them towards self-help whilst communities in the UK are drifting towards complacency and dependency. This might be a question of priority:

I don't think it's possible to have detailed contingency plans for such situations which may only happen once or twice in a lifetime and in cases of dire need (H1695, female, 42, Autumn/Winter Directive, 1987, Part II)

Alternatively it might be apathy symptomatic of living in an “expert” culture whereby the assumption begins to prevail that there is nothing “we” can do; that the solutions are beyond the scope of “ordinary” people:

...it was a one-off sort of thing that happens once in a hundred years, there is no way one can prepare for a manifestation of that sort (W1480, female, Autumn/Winter Directive, 1987, Part II).

With regard to the 1987 storms, the government were also almost wholly vindicated in terms of any blame:

I doubt whether freak weather problems like this can be altered in any way by government action – they are, after all, things that happen very infrequently (B1518, male, 35, Autumn/Winter Directive, 1987, Part II).

...one has to realise that no one can control the elements—not even the Prime Minister—so one has to be sensible and take whatever precaution is necessary (B1440, male, 69, Autumn/Winter Directive, 1987, Part II).

The latter example represents an instance, which is most definitely in the minority, of the importance of self-responsibility. The role of the individual is taken one stage further by a respondent who suggests that “laypeople” should be involved more at a strategic level:

I think the weathermen, and other powers that be, should at least listen to ordinary people when they issue warnings of this sort... (H283, female, 40, Autumn/Winter Directive, 1987, Part II).

The M-O A responses given here provide an overall sense of the thrust of public opinion towards disaster mitigation at all levels – from that which they expect others to take on their behalf (the “experts”); the relative optimism with regard to how this might be achieved (predominantly through the application of science and technology); and where they see their own role in terms of reducing the impact of disaster. What emerges is a general trend towards a dependency culture where people seem to feel more at home either placing their trust in, or blaming, the experts whilst being apathetic towards self-help. The responses indicate the important role autobiography can have in terms of revealing trends in a small section of the UK population. This then provides a starting

point from which it might be possible to redress some of the more problematic issues, such as apathy towards disaster management and, through so-doing, reduce vulnerability to future events.

### **Other Contemporary Examples of “Autobiography” in Practice**

The examples given here represent isolated cases of a more widely used technique of exploring experience of natural disaster. Whilst not as popular as other methods of qualitative research such as interviews, there are other instances where autobiography, applying the term loosely, has been used as a technique that seeks to promote inclusivity of disaster experience. Such examples include life history/oral history accounts that generate rich anecdotal experiences of an event; a move towards Geertz’s “thick description” (Geertz, 1973, 1983).

In particular Bhatt (1998), Poniatowska (1995) and Bunbury (1994) have used techniques of personal testimony and writing/speaking of disaster in their exploration of specific events. The outcomes have variously allowed for people to explain the disaster in their own words without the pre-determined framework of an interview. For example, Poniatowska’s collection of accounts following the Mexico City earthquake of 1985 maintains that:

the voices from the earthquake reassert the primacy of human dignity over the production of wealth, affirming the capacity of ordinary people to make history... Their voices must never be forgotten (Poniatowska, 1995, p. xxv).

As such, the life history/autobiography technique used here, recorded in a journalistic way, allows people the platform to describe their own experiences without the contrived bureaucratic or academic conventions that change people’s experiences into a theoretical argument or policy document.

In a similar way, Bill Bunbury, an Australian radio journalist, explains why he too decided to present accounts of Cyclone Tracy which struck Darwin on December 24<sup>th</sup> 1974 using life history techniques:

What came through most strongly was the sense that the cyclone had blown away not just bricks and tiles and family photos. It had taken lives and in the long-term was to reshape many other lives. Marriages grew stronger or fell apart. Canberra planners came to rebuild the new Darwin in the likeness of the Federal capital and met fierce opposition from the locals. Some stayed

on but many went away. Nothing was ever quite the same in the new Darwin.

This book doesn't attempt to be any kind of official history of Cyclone Tracy. Rather it tries to tell the story of the cyclone through the eyes of people who went through it... (Bunbury, 1994, p. 12).

This *raison d'être* for the anthology of people's recollections of disaster indicates that with an in-depth exploration of attitudes, and a more longitudinal methodology, it is possible to gain a greater insight into the personal impacts of an event and the ramifications that this might have for the future. In particular it allows more chance of understanding the causal mechanisms for particular reactions to attempts at management and may provide insight into the most culturally-appropriate solutions.

As a final example, Bhatt (1998) indicates, the way in which the "life story" method might be used in a pragmatic way to reduce vulnerability through understanding the "disaster victim's" perspective as they express it in their own words. In particular, he stresses the importance of this method as people tend to see a disaster as part of their life cycle, not as an exceptional/isolated event. In this way, autobiography helps researchers gain insight into the relative impact disaster has, relative to other events in everyday life, and in comparison to the interview which tends to focus on the event *per se*. The autobiographical method sits well with the sociological approaches that were first introduced to disaster studies in a critique of the previous technocratic approach (e.g. Hewitt, 1983).

Bhatt's work in India, through the Disaster Mitigation Institute, typically follows a 3-day cycle with writing, recollection and discussion. As such, autobiography can become part of a PAR approach where the account is not necessarily a research technique but can allow issues to be raised for small group discussion and might also draw attention to aspects of mitigation that the community could address, i.e. it can be the first step in setting a communal vulnerability reduction strategy. In total, this project in India has comprised 20 different writing sessions with 500 participants in Gujarat and the city of Ahmedabad on a range of disasters such as flood, drought and plague (Bhatt, 1998).

The method can also draw attention to cultural differences existing between outsiders to the community and those writing; this highlights the importance of recollection/discussion sessions. For example, the positionality of the researcher and the values/personal writing conventions they bring to the process might mean that misunderstanding could

take place between what has been written down and what is interpreted in the reading. As such, the multi-faceted approach whereby writing and discussion are used minimizes the likelihood of misinterpretation.

### **Discussion**

Autobiography and personal reflection are most commonly explored through interview and oral research methods, however, this paper has demonstrated that in some cases it is also effective to gather this information through the written word. While only a small selection has been presented here, both the Mass-Observation material, as well as the historical examples, indicate that personal accounts enable researchers to have significant insight into interpretation of disaster; people have the freedom, and the time, to reflect on what they want to convey and the way that they want to express it. This is further demonstrated by the example from India whereby people who might be in danger of becoming invisible in more traditional research techniques are able to contribute through writing, e.g. the establishment of women's writing groups.

The material provided by autobiography differs from that gathered from the traditional interview context because the "correspondent" can indulge themselves in a purely personal research account. Whilst this may be deemed by many to be an "unscientific" approach (WGS 1997) there is clearly much to be gained from devolving autonomy for the recording of ideas to the "researched". In particular, the individual becomes empowered through the process per se, and not just its products, such as more culturally-sensitive mitigation strategies, and this is significant in terms of redressing power imbalances inherent within the traditional research process.

Coincidental to the approach of the "researched" writing personally, is the importance of the position of the "researcher". The importance of acknowledging who "we" are is also becoming increasingly pertinent in disciplines where there is focus on exposure of the relationship between those actively seeking responses from people on particular issues (the "researcher"), and those who are, in many ways, expected to supply the insights and the answers (the "researched"). One such discipline is human geography whereby some researchers are more prepared to reveal a little of themselves in their formal writing as an integral part of the research process; our interactions with those we encounter through research is now considered to be dependent upon our own positionality.

The longitudinal accounts that might be provided by autobiography also facilitate an insight into trends/wider attitudes within society that

might otherwise be hard to reach with a survey. For example, the M-OA material indicates a growing dependency culture within UK society with regard to hazard mitigation. As such, it is important that the technocratic approach is not over-emphasized to the detriment of, and increasing apathy towards, self-help amongst the wider population. Autobiography thus emerges not only as an important additional tool that can be used within communities as a catharsis after disaster, or a way to gain recognition and a voice within the management process, but also as an important tool from a strategic perspective; it allows policy makers and planners to see, in a detailed way, the attitudes within society that might become a barrier to effective mitigation strategies.

In the latter sense, autobiography also has potential to be a contributory methodology within a participatory action research approach, i.e. that the engagement with an issue through writing is not an end in itself but might be used to provoke discussion or identify issues that need to be addressed within a community. Significantly, it is the people themselves who are addressing and defining the agenda; autobiography allows people to express ideas in their own way, using their own words, and identify issues that they might not have the ability or confidence to do at a public meeting or in group discussion. Writing can be anonymous in a way that an interview is not which may provide for more explicit analysis of, or opinion on, issues pertaining to disaster management in affected communities.

Whilst there are many benefits to autobiography as a methodology in disasters research, there are some inevitable problems. The most significant is that to date it has tended to be an exclusive process; many of those who have historically provided a “voice” on disaster have been the most influential/educated members of society; Pliny the Younger was not representative of the majority of Roman society, for example. Such problems persist with contemporary autobiographical accounts; for example, it is clear from the data provided that Mass-Observation writing is biased in terms of age, gender and location; the “average” Mass Observer is a middle-aged woman in the south east of England. However, there is also evidence that autobiography is beginning to be used in a more inclusive way with regard to disasters in other societies, for example the cases study from India.

In order to develop such a methodology for use in disasters research, therefore, there are a number of issues that are important to consider, for example, multilingual communities; literacy; disability that precludes either reading or writing. Most of these issues are generic problems that potentially extend to all communities experiencing dis-

aster, although others might be more spatially confined. In order to surmount some of the problems associated with the method, therefore, it is important to consider the scale and aims of the research. For example, the method might be applied to a section of the population that is typically disenfranchised from the research process and its outcomes and thus the style, language and means of communicating the method can be targeted. In effect, the more extensively this methodology is applied, the more barriers and problems potentially exist and the more resource intensive they are to overcome.

Autobiography therefore provides for a more detailed, bottom-up approach to research. It might be the case that in contemporary examples of this methodology, the issues and the prompts for the accounts tend to be provided by the researcher or by an organization, such as the Mass-Observation Archive, but the accounts themselves are no less personal or insightful than the more spontaneous historical examples. They offer researchers an opportunity to engage with detailed and reflective accounts of perception and response to disasters in a more creative way than may be gained in an interview situation, although, considering some of the limitations and resource implications, the potential of this method is most likely to be realized in a small-scale intensive study.

### Conclusions

In the past, disasters seem to have lent themselves to the autobiographical method, as well as in the writing of history, because these were often the events that had the greatest impact upon communities; they were little understood; they were felt, by some, to have a religious significance; and, because they were so well remembered within societies, they were used to relativize other events that took place—they were significant historical markers. As such, there was often spontaneous written recording of these events, such as in the Pliny letters, for example.

In contemporary society, it is arguable that manufactured/technological risk is slowly becoming the main concern of global, particularly First World, society. Therefore, the benchmarks we use are no longer natural disasters but events like the Hiroshima bomb or the Chernobyl disaster and, as a result, natural disaster is less likely to be the subject of well-preserved autobiography. However, as the Mass-Observation Archive and examples from Australia, Mexico and India have shown, there is an important place for “autobiographical” accounts within the context of disasters research.

Autobiography as a method has potential to empower people to write on perception of disaster candidly and, in many cases, without



self-censorship. It introduces a different relationship between “researcher” and “researched” and enables greater involvement in driving and constructing the research process and questions; people can maintain a constant flow of ideas and conceptualizations without interruption. Whilst it does not subvert the efficacy of “traditional” research methods, and its scope is likely to be limited due to resource constraints, it could be a useful resource in developing a “deeper” and more longitudinal understanding of perception and response to natural disaster.

### Acknowledgements

Extracts from the Mass-Observation Archive are made with the permission of the Trustees of the Mass-Observation Archive, University of Sussex. Permission is gratefully received from Hampton Press to reproduce the material in Tables 1 and 2 which was first published in “Writing Ourselves” by Sheridan, Street and Bloome, 2000. I would also like to thank the suggestions made by one anonymous reviewer which opened up some very interesting further references on life history research and disaster.

### Notes

1. Some of those who contributed to the Archive have resisted the approach of writing about themselves referring to see themselves as social commentators instead (Sheridan et al, 2000)
2. The written response means that the Mass-Observers are termed “correspondents”.
3. The use of the Directive is only one method adopted by the Mass-Observation Archive but is referred to here as the predominant research tool as this was the sole way in which the information for this part of the paper was derived.
4. This is from a double-sided information sheet produced on the 1/9/94 by Dorothy Sheridan, the Mass-Observation project Director.

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Figure 1: Autumn/Winter Directive 1987 (Hurricane and Floods).



## AUTUMN/WINTER DIRECTIVE 1987

Dear Observer,

The response to the Summer Directive on holidays was very impressive indeed. In sheer quantity it was one of the biggest in six years, and the quality of the reports was deeply satisfying. My only regret has been the consequent delay in sending out individual thanks. This has resulted not only from the volume of mail (about which, be sure, I don't complain) but also from some long-standing trouble with my writing arm which makes handwriting impossible and typewriting not much better. I have now started to experiment with the word processor: the results may be politely described as mixed. However, I shall persevere because I attach great importance to these personal contacts.

And now to business. This Directive is in two parts. Please begin your answer to Part II on a separate sheet of paper.

## PART I: THE CAR

The theme for Part I is the car from all possible points of view, including that of the pedestrian and non-driver. This topic may not interest you immediately but keep on reading.

Different people will obviously find different aspects of the Directive interesting, but no one is unaffected by the existence of the car in our society. Please read it through before you write anything and please try to write as concretely as you can from your own experience. First a few facts: If you own a car please give details of your present one: how old is it, how long have you had it, what did you pay for it? What are its good and bad points? And a 'sky's the limit' question: What car would you ideally like to own and why? what colour would you choose? Also please log mileage and all costs for a period of thirty days from receipt of this Directive. You may care to note the extent to which either mileage or costs are not typical. If you used to own a car but do not now please say when and why you abandoned it.

Now some more general points that you might like to consider.

Your experience of Driving Tests - your sensations when you passed yours - should people be required to take the test again? If so, on what basis?

The social effects of the car on your relations with kin and friends; to what extent does your life depend on the car - driving as part of your job - driving to work - driving children to school etc - and more general social effects, e.g. is the use of public transport a more sociable activity?; effects on shopping habits; effects on health, e.g. lack of exercise and effects of long-distance and motorway driving.

Driving and drinking: what are your personal rules about this? What about other people's rules - give details but name no names.

The effects of the car on the environment - economics of lead-free petrol - the demand for roads and effects of new roads. Questions for non-drivers: Do you find that universal car ownership is all too commonly assumed? Locally, do you think that pedestrian amenities, pavement repairs, attention to overhanging trees etc are properly catered for? Are car drivers inconsiderate?

Parking: what's it like in your street? How does the quality of facilities for parking affect your decision to travel anywhere? Other people's parking habits.

'Car Psychology' - the image of the car and its owner in car advertising - the language of car advertising and associated images - instances of good and bad driving manners - instances of 'motorway madness' - dreams in which cars feature.

May we have observations on and from hitch-hikers, cyclists, motor-cyclists, and equestrians?

Speculate about the future: Can the number of cars on the road continue to increase indefinitely? What kind of public transport (if any) would reduce your own driving? Feel free to fantasize about travel in this country in the year 2087.

I have certainly not exhausted all the possibilities of comment about the car, and its role, and its effects in Britain in the 1980s. I hope that I have got you started.

#### PART II: THE HURRICANE AND FLOODS

The theme of Part II is the hurricane in the South East and the floods in Wales. Even if you were not directly affected, please feel free to interpret the questions in the light of comparable experiences that you may have had. Personal experiences, please including feelings during and after. As regards the South East do you think that the media reflects a North/South divide?

Tidying up: local community support - the insurance angle - experience of 'cowboy' repairers and charges - coping with mess, and lack of electricity, gas, water, telephone etc.

After effects: Is there any action about your way of living that you will now take as a result of the disaster, eg moving house, felling large trees, increasing insurance etc? What government action, short or long term should be taken? In what ways has your immediate environment changed?

The next Directive will be in the spring so all of us here wish you a happy Christmas, a peaceful New year, good health and fair weather.

David Pocock

#### POSTSCRIPT (from Dorothy)

You should find enclosed a leaflet about our next M-O publication, Mass-Observation at the Movies which is to be published on 10 December. It's a large book and has turned out to be very expensive I'm afraid but there is a special discount for current Mass-Observers. Please use the form to order copies and send it to the address on the form - NOT to the Archive.

like  
We would also like to thank everyone for putting their numbers on their contributions and attaching their names and addresses separately. It really helps Judy and Ann's work at this end. If possible, could you send in your answers to Part I and Part II at the same time: this not only helps us deal with your contribution more quickly but also keeps postage costs down. And remember, NO staples, please.



Figure 2: Spring Directive 1989 (Reports of Disasters).



### SPRING DIRECTIVE 1989

Dear Observer,

The first theme of this Directive is suggested by the succession of public disasters - manmade and natural - over the last few years. Not I grant as enjoyable a theme as some but certainly one that cannot be ignored in the history of the 1980s.

Secondly, we would like comment on the 'food news' from the salmonella panic onwards (see Part II over the page).

Please be sure to read the whole thing through before you set pen to paper or finger to typewriter. As so often I have put points that you might care to think about in question form but I hope that other angles of approach and aspects will occur to you. Please don't treat the Directive as a questionnaire. Take up and develop points that interest you. Finally, do try to be as specific as possible; your reflections on one particular event or aspect of the whole matter are of greater value than generalisations.

#### ~~PART I:~~ REPORTS OF DISASTERS

How do we define such disasters? Is it a matter of scale, intensity of suffering, unexpectedness, or the fact that it receives wide media coverage?

How does reporting shape our reactions? Does visual reporting have a greater impact?

Distance in time and distance in space: if you feel urged to make a cash donation when you first hear the news, how strong is this impulse later? Are you more affected by such events occurring in the U.K. than abroad? Do you react particularly if you hear that British people have been involved in, say, an accident abroad?

Are your travelling plans and activities significantly affected by news of air, sea (ferry), rail or road accidents?

How interested are we in misfortune? Is there a voyeur in us all? Are we likely to linger at the sight of an ambulance outside someone's house, or where there has been a road accident? Or are there particular events that we hurry by or, if reported on TV, switch off because they upset us? If so, can you describe what is it precisely that upsets you?

PLEASE TURN OVER...



THE MASS-OBSERVATION ARCHIVE    FREEPOST 2112    THE LIBRARY    UNIVERSITY OF SUSSEX    BRIGHTON BN1 1ZX

What do you think of on-the-spot interviewing of the wounded, the bereaved, the starving? Should there be limits on what may be shown? If you think a public interest is served, could you define this interest?

Closely related is the systematic use of suffering in appeals for charity, both one-off disaster appeals and ongoing needs. Does this stimulate you to donate? Or is compassion numbed by over-exposure? Do you think that the 'public at large' seems to need a violent stimulus if it is to respond at all? And when people do respond to a disaster appeal, what do you think is the most common motive?

Is there do you think an evident need to identify, blame, punish those who are responsible, in any way, for what has happened? Does the call for compensation, as distinct from relief, spur you to comment?

Have you observations to make about the behaviour and motives of the Royal family, the Prime Minister or other public figures on such occasions?

I heard it suggested recently that the bereaved and the shocked are helped by being interviewed on radio or TV; would you care to comment? A connected matter is the development of professional 'counselling services' to cope with the sudden and relatively large-scale bereavement. Do you think this reflects on modern society?

People say that 'disasters' are becoming more frequent? Why do you think this is?

P5. If the recent storms in the Northern UK are uppermost in your mind, please tell us about them.

#### PART II: FOOD NEWS

Please report your own reactions to the first reports on salmonella in eggs - did you stop eating eggs and if so, for how long?

Next came the soft cheese scare; how are you affected? More generally, please, your views on the dangers inherent in modern food production. Or is it the case that the danger lies more in our kitchens? Have your ways of storing food changed at all?

How much do you think politics enters into the reporting of the handling of these issues?

David Pocock

\* Please start your reply to Part II on a separate sheet of paper.

[Dir.28 13.2.89]