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# Book Review - From Disaster to Destiny: A Review of Methods for Disaster Mental Health Research

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**From the Selected Works of Andrea C. Walker, Ph.D.**

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2008

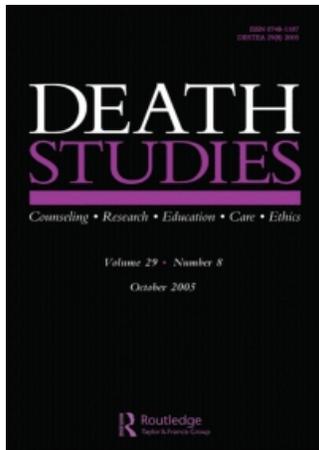
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### Book Reviews: From Disaster to Destiny: A Review of **Methods for Disaster Mental Health Research**

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## BOOK REVIEWS

Edited by  
**DAVID E. BALK**

### **From Disaster to Destiny: A Review of Methods for Disaster Mental Health Research**

A review of *Methods for Disaster Mental Health Research* edited by Fran H. Norris, Sandro Galea, Matthew J. Friedman, & Patricia J. Watson. New York: Guilford Publications, 2006. 326 pp. (ISBN: 1-59385-310-6). \$43.00. Reviewed by Andrea C. Walker.

Fran H. Norris is a Research Professor in the Department of Psychiatry at Dartmouth Medical School. Along with C. Baker, A. Murphy, and K. Kaniasty, Norris wrote “Social Support Demonstration after Mexico’s 1999 Flood: Effects of Disaster Severity, Gender, and Crime,” which was published in *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 2005, 36, 15–28.

Sandro Galea is Associate Professor of Epidemiology at the University of Michigan School of Public Health. With D. Viahov, M. Tracy, D. Hoover, H. Resnick, and D. G. Kilpatrick, Galea wrote “Hispanic Ethnicity and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder after a Disaster: Evidence from a General Population Survey after September 11,” which was published in *Annals of Epidemiology*, 2004, 14, 520–531.

Matthew J. Friedman is Executive Director of the National Center for PTSD and Professor of Psychiatry and Pharmacology at Dartmouth Medical School. With E. B. Foa and D. S. Charney, Friedman wrote “Toward Evidence-Based Early Interventions for Acutely Traumatized Adults and Children,” which was published in *Biological Psychiatry*, 2003, 53, 765–768.

Patricia J. Watson is an educational specialist for the National Center for PTSD and Assistant Professor of Psychiatry at Dartmouth Medical School. Along with F. Norris and M. Friedman, Watson wrote “60,000 Disaster Victims Speak: Part II. Summary and Implications of the Disaster Mental Health Research,” which was published in *Psychiatry*, 2002, 65, 240–260.

Andrea C. Walker, a family studies specialist and a Licensed Alcohol and Drug Counselor in the state of Oklahoma, is an Associate Professor of Psychology in the Department of Behavioral Sciences at Oral Roberts

University. Her primary research interests include family studies and grief/bereavement issues from a multi-cultural perspective. Along with D. E. Balk, she wrote "Bereavement Rituals in the Muscogee Creek Tribe," which was published in *Death Studies*, 2007, 31, 633–652.

### Overview of Book

*Methods for Disaster Mental Health Research* provides an overview of issues related to disaster mental health research and is divided into five parts that address broad areas significant to the topic of conducting research about disasters. Part 1 provides an introduction to the field, an overview of current disaster research in terms of psychosocial consequences, and a comprehensive definition of *disaster* as the term is used in the book, which is "a potentially traumatic event that is collectively experienced, has an acute onset, and is time-delimited; disasters may be attributed to natural technological, or human causes" (p. 4). Each term has been carefully selected, as its meaning contributes significantly to describing the approach outlined in the book.

Part 2 addresses fundamentals of disaster research, addressing the nuts and bolts of question asking, matching design to goals by assimilating congruency through basic answers to why, who, what, when, and how questions, and ethics, a concept that takes on new meaning in its application to disaster research. Part 3 discusses several data collection methods, including telephone-based, web-based, school-based, and qualitative methods, as well as presentations of designs appropriate for epidemiological approaches, namely, retrospective cohort and case-control designs. Part 4 addresses planning, policy, and service delivery issues and provides discussion on mental health surveillance, program evaluation, successful treatments, and methods for training clinicians. Part 5, the last section, addresses a number of special topics, including disaster research issues pertaining to children, military settings, marginalized communities, as well as conducting research in foreign countries. The final chapter of the book, written by Matthew Friedman, integrates information noted in various chapters into an eloquent synthesis of the future direction of disaster research.

A unique feature of this book is the content of the appendices. Appendix 1 provides, in alphabetical order dates, estimated

numbers of individuals killed, and brief descriptions of all the disasters mentioned throughout the text of the book. This comprehensive list is followed by a second appendix, which articulates specific instructions regarding literature searching for disaster and traumatic stress articles. A subject index is also included for quick reference to topics of interest.

### Critical Analysis

Before embarking upon a critical analysis of the book content, a note about the general topic *relevance* is in store. With all of the rich sources available addressing research methods issues, one might ask the question, "Why another research methods textbook?" In light of the growing concern for terrorism in recent years, as well as increased global awareness of disasters, due to media technological advances, the construct of disaster is on the forefront of many individuals' minds. Literature to date has provided numerous articles on the effects of specific disasters, as well as addressing implications for research, not the least of which is the plea for more studies to be undertaken to address numerous, specific questions about disasters. There is no shortage of research methods, mental health, or disaster texts, and some even address specifically disaster mental health issues for clinicians or other practitioners (see Myers & Wee, 2005; Reyes & Jacobs, 2006; Ritchie, Watson, & Friedman, 2006; Ursano, Fullerton, & Norwood, 2005). None, however, take on the primary task of addressing methodological issues specific to the interaction of disaster and mental health. This book is on the cutting edge; it answers the call from much of current disaster literature for more research by providing guidelines and a framework with which many of the concerns preventing development of successful designs, obtaining accurate results, and drawing correct conclusions can be alleviated.

The book's purpose is "to educate the reader about research methods and strategies that can be used to study (1) the effects of disasters on mental health and related constructs or (2) the effectiveness or dissemination of interventions undertaken to prevent or reduce disaster-related mental health problems" (p. xii). The purpose is well served through its presentation of a myriad of topics unique to disaster research and elimination of those topics that are not. This book provides a necessary, parsimonious tool

through which mitigation of the current challenges concerning disaster research can occur.

The unique content of the book also targets the intended audience of both novice and professional researchers in psychology and public-health related fields appropriately. Because the purpose is not to present more technologically advanced methodology but, instead, to address issues within a particular niche, the authors successfully articulate information in language that is easily understood by most levels of graduate students and researchers. The logical flow of discussion on these issues throughout the text, as outlined in the five major sections, provides a user-friendly tool for readers.

Authors present a number of typical research methods topics, such as telephone-based, web-based, school-based, and qualitative methods, as well as researching special groups such as children, military, diverse and marginalized communities, and those in foreign countries, through the particular lens of a disaster researcher. Such chapters incorporate not only necessary basic information but also unique information one would not find in another book. For instance, Greca (pp. 141–157) notes that in school-based disaster research, it should be expected that researchers' agendas are going to take a back seat to the school administration's commitment to regaining order after disaster and establishing safety of students. Schlenger and Silver (pp. 129–140) discuss the potential of web-based collection to provide an easy method of retrieving longitudinal data, a noted rarity in disaster research, albeit with additional sampling challenges. Furthermore, Palinkas (pp. 158–173) addresses the value of incorporating qualitative inquiry into disaster methods, highlighting the benefit of a quick, non-intrusive method of data collection that can begin in the immediate aftermath of disaster, whereas designing large-scale quantitative designs can not only take more time to plan but also can appear to be insensitive to the survivors of disaster.

In addition to these usual topics, the authors address a legion of special topics enveloped in exploratory, explanatory, descriptive, and evaluation research objectives, many of which highlight sensitivity and ethical issues that emerge in disaster mental health issues. Bromet and Havenaar (pp. 95–110), for instance, highlight the added support survivors can feel when researchers use

in-depth, face-to-face, interview techniques involved with epidemiological approaches. A focus on support for disaster workers, in terms of its pertinence for success in research, is discussed in Rosen and Young's (pp. 194–207) chapter on evaluation research. Fleischman, Collogan, and Tuma (pp. 78–92) address ethics issues unique to disaster victims, such as decisional capacity in the wake of a disaster as well as degree of vulnerability. The recommendations of these authors, including assuming competence of participants and using assessment tools when needed, provide practical guidelines through which complicated ethical issues can be conceptualized and potential violations avoided.

A noted strength of this book is its provision of references and supplementary materials. The editors saw no need, beyond what is necessary to synthesize and integrate known material, to provide repetition of content already available in other publications. A chapter on assessment was intentionally omitted because of prevalence of other suitable sources, reference to which one in particular (see Wilson & Keane, 2004) was provided. Supplementary materials of lecture notes, research summaries, a DVD with interviews of prominent disaster researchers (under construction as of the writing of this review), and additional sources were provided via reference to the Research Education Disaster Mental Health website at [www.disasterresearch.org](http://www.disasterresearch.org).

A noted challenge of the book is its generality, which is a natural result of the editors' purpose of an "overview" of relevant issues in disaster mental health research. Because of the quantity of issues presented, indeed only an overview of each topic was possible within the constraints of normal volume length, which exceeded 300 pages in this case. In several instances, authors cut short their discussions, indicating that space would not allow elaboration. On the other hand, minor overlap of content in chapters regarding school-based research and conducting research with children and adolescents brings to question whether the content of these two chapters could logically be fused into one. Although a more succinct approach may be possible, the reason for their separation is clear, and in all other cases the book was nearly void of redundancy. I overlooked these minor shortcomings in favor of the editors' commitments to congruency of guiding objectives and fulfillment of the book's overall purpose.

### Personal Reactions

I appreciate the work contributed by certain authors that highlight the book in ways worthy of mention. In particular, I enjoyed Murphy, Perilla and Jones's (pp. 278–288) candid and somewhat humorous account of the ins and outs of conducting research in foreign countries. Their chapter provides an authentic, insightful, and in some ways lighthearted approach to an otherwise sobering topic. Galea and Norris (pp. 177–193) provide a relevant strategic analysis of a potential public mental health surveillance system, equipped with discussion of its critical components. Their chapter outlines a possible solution to many of the current problems of mental health research and is thus one of the highlights of the book. Friedman (pp. 289–301) synthesizes major emerging themes in the final chapter, noting the current position of disaster research and highlighting directions for the future. This important chapter provides a capstone to the book by articulating six broad challenges, not the least of which is the call for longitudinal research beginning at the wake of disaster and lasting beyond the typical two year follow-up. Other recommendations include incorporation of fluidity in what is currently known about mechanisms of change, treatment strategies, disaster outcomes, and disseminating results to develop a more theoretical and longitudinal perspective to the field. Not another summary of its kind exists in literature, making this succinct, eloquently written chapter another of the highlights of the book.

With the exception of simply wanting “more of it” in terms of depth, there is not much about this book I do not like. Because of several strengths the book offers, I will use its contents in future research and teaching opportunities. One such strength is the comprehensive presentation of topics, which provides a convenient, easy way to approach disaster research. I particularly appreciated the inclusion of discussion regarding diverse and minority populations, characterized by a call for community consideration and involvement in the research process resulting in relationship-building, throughout the various sections rather than its containment to one designated chapter in the “special challenges” section, as has been done in the past.

The authors and editors incorporate a theme of ethical consideration and sensitivity toward disaster survivors, which again is

patterned throughout the book. Discussions on sampling, formulating questions, matching questions to methods, as well as parsimony of the book's contents are testimony to the editors' unwavering commitment to scientific rigor. The integration of scientific method with critical consciousness regarding ethical issues and an overall theme of caring and compassion toward participants reaches a difficult balance that characterizes the more professional research methods texts available. Most importantly, this publication answers the calls in current disaster literature for more research by synthesizing what is known about disaster and providing an effective tool with which this needed research can be conducted.

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### A Practical Guide for Helping Children Cope with Loss

A review of *Without You: Children and Young People Growing Up with Loss and Its Effects* by Tamar Granot. London and Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2005. 240 pp. (ISBN: 9781843102977). \$32.95. Reviewed by Roni Gavish and Nigel P. Field.

For 25 years, Tamar Granot was the National Head of Psychological Services for the Department of Rehabilitation at Israel's Ministry of