

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-03214-9 - The Sociology of Disruption, Disaster and Social Change:

Punctuated Cooperation

Hendrik Vollmer

Excerpt

[More information](#)

1 Confronting disruptions: the nexus of social situations

Disasters can provide an exceptional opportunity for the comparative analysis of social systems. Disaster events are particularly useful for comparative purposes since they activate a variety of structures and processes with which the social system attempts to cope . . . Disaster events are also useful for comparative purposes not only in understanding the immediate adjustment of social systems but also because they are significant in understanding long-term social change. These possibilities, of course, have not been achieved. Russell Dynes (1975:21)

As sociology splintered and specialized, the idea that catastrophe could inspire broad insights seems to have been lost, though some disaster researchers always knew it was there. Still, it is generally true that disasters and perceived disasters have come to be seen as special and exotic. That is a mistake. Disasters and failure are not special and exotic. They are prosaic and ordinary . . . Lee Clarke (2004: 137)

Human life is one mistake after another. We make mistakes, repair them, then go on to make more mistakes. Charles Tilly (2003: xi)

Disruptions are ubiquitous in social life. The fact that things occasionally go wrong, that events frustrate expectations, that situations turn awkward and sometimes horribly awry, is congenial to the experience of everyday interaction. Many disruptions happen and attract little further notice beyond the situation in which people confront them. Only certain types of disruptions are treated as special and extraordinary and are regarded with a peculiar fascination, even by those who are not immediately concerned. It is to only some of the disruptiveness inherent in social life, notably to those disruptions impressing themselves as somewhat more drastic and consequential, that special attention is awarded, while many disruptions are more or less shrugged off as temporary irritations. It is only beyond a certain but hardly exactly certifiable limit that disruptions turn into stickier irritations, maybe into outright anger, possibly into interim confusion, and sometimes into longer collective preoccupations with what it was that turned out so remarkably, disastrously wrong.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-03214-9 - The Sociology of Disruption, Disaster and Social Change:

Punctuated Cooperation

Hendrik Vollmer

Excerpt

[More information](#)

2 Confronting disruptions: the nexus of social situations

With increasing magnitude and relevance of a disruption, there is an intuitive sense that something is different after a disruption has taken place. In attempts to localize this difference, the impact on individuals, their biographies, their sense of order or psychological well-being tends to come into focus. Even when talking about the impact on larger sets of participants, groups and aggregate collectives, the effects of disruptiveness are often addressed in terms that originally characterized individual experience and conduct: shock, stress, frustration or trauma. In exploring disruptions, disasters and the run of punctuated cooperation within a collective, the present investigation will be concerned with developing an alternative characterization of disruptiveness and its effects – one focusing not on the life of individuals but on the state of a collective of participants who are involved in the run of social situations and, more particularly in terms of the perspective offered here, in the *coordination of activities and expectations* in the face of disruptiveness.

Disruptions and their various kinds of effects do of course affect each participant of the activities run at a collective level in an individual fashion, but participation itself, and thus the experience of disruptions to begin with, is a result of individuals being exposed to the run of social situations. Disruptive events, like normal ones, like individual experience, individual or collective action, emerge from social situations as nexus of actual occasions in which activities and expectations are coordinated. This will be the sociological premise of exploring disruptiveness in the present study. The study will attempt to draw together the resources currently available to the sociology of disruption, disaster and social change. Its foundation is a microsociological approach that focuses attention on how events and activities coalesce as actual occasions in social situations, each of which constitutes a microcosm of which individual experience is one, but not the most essential, and surely not the most micro, aspect.

In 1969, Irving L. Janis published a prominent psychological treatise about stress and frustration. Paraphrasing the opening sentences of Janis' book and replacing 'personal' with 'social', 'personality changes' with 'social change' and 'person' with 'collective of participants', the resulting statement does come out as somewhat compatible with the direction in which the present investigation will be headed, that is, towards

a major area of human behavior: [*social change*] provoked by stressful and frustrating events. The discussion is wide-ranging – from everyday frustrations that upset a [*collective of participants*] for a few hours to [*social*] or community disasters that may produce basic and enduring [*changes in the coordination of activities and expectations*]. The common theme is disruptive . . . events and the reactions they typically provoke. (Janis 1969: ix)

That ‘personal changes’ are not merely replaced by ‘social changes’ – an expression which in contemporary sociology could just about mean anything – but by ‘changes in the coordination of activities and expectation’ represents the particular microfocus of the sociological approach to disruptions and disasters developed in this study. Certain central terms in Janis’ mission statement did not need to be replaced in order to switch from a psychological towards this sociological focus: ‘stressful and frustrating events’, ‘everyday frustrations’, ‘upset’, ‘disasters’, ‘disruptive’. The limit of the psychological analogy is represented by one conspicuous omission. The single word which I have deleted from Janis’ opening paragraph without offering a substitute in terms of the perspective offered by the present study is indicated by the ellipsis in the last sentence of the quote. This missing word is ‘external’ in ‘disruptive external events’, and this omission indicates a grave source of trouble for all sociologists, including the more macro-minded colleagues, analysing the impact of disruptions – a trouble with respect to which the present study does not and cannot present an exception. This study will – and indeed has to – address disruptions occurring strictly among participants of social situations and which in absolutely no sense take place outside of such a collective. Rather than being more specific or picky than a psychological account of disruptiveness, a sociological account of disruptiveness has to be more inclusive than a psychological one.

This implies that we cannot consistently externalize psychological processes from sociological accounts of disruptions either – the sociologist has a hard time externalizing anything (Abbott 2001a: 5–6). This sociological account of disruptiveness will accordingly be hard-pressed to distribute and focus analytical attention economically; this is why it calls for a certain amount of theorizing. If the statement by Dynes (1975), at the start of this chapter, about the unrealized possibilities of a comparative sociology of disaster still stands today, despite the common intuition that disastrous disruptions have indeed often been a catalyst for social change (e.g. Kreps et al. 1994: 168–74), then the lack of an adequate sociological theory of disruptiveness clearly has something to do with it (Stallings 2002: 282–4).

As the opening quotations indicate, the topic of this investigation bears upon sociological questions and ideas with a lengthy academic lineage and, many times, analytical promises attributed to social analyses of disruptions and their impact upon collectives have remained unfulfilled. For reasons the consideration of which would require a separate study, sustained sociological investigations of disruptiveness and its impact on the collective have remained marginal within the discipline. At the same time, sociologists have produced a substantial, yet discontinuous, body

4 Confronting disruptions: the nexus of social situations

of theoretical concepts and empirical evidence with which disruptions and their fallout can be analysed with some empirical scope and consistency – if only these resources could be employed systematically. Articulating the present approach by starting with social situations and their participants is supported by contemporary sociological theorizing and by a wide variety of empirical studies; it can draw some support from the wider academic field of the social and behavioural sciences, from psychology, economics and evolutionary anthropology. A considerable share of the ensuing arguments and observations will be directed at mobilizing a share of these disconnected resources. My aim in this introductory chapter is to demonstrate that the microsociological focus on social situations followed subsequently presents an adequate foundation for doing so.

I will start by briefly taking a very general look at collective expertise about disruptions (1.1), then turn to expertise offered by social scientists (1.2). Various concepts have been utilized in order to explore the impact of disruptions: crises and catastrophes (1.3), punctuated equilibrium (1.4), rules and exceptions (1.5), trauma (1.6). This very cursory tour of concepts and potential approaches serves to corroborate and contextualize the focus on social situations as an elementary analytical footing for addressing disruptions and their collective effects (1.7). More specifically, how disruptions are framed in the run of social situations will be established as a suitable point of departure for the following chapters (1.8). The aim here is not to provide a comprehensive overview or a representative sample of everything that has been written about these topics, but to locate the current effort in the broader field of expertise about disruptiveness and to modestly claim a couple of reasons to continue in a somewhat more particularistic manner.

1.1 Events and experts

Mobilizing and categorizing theoretical concepts from a variety of sources is clearly not an innocuous enterprise. Aspects of intellectual competition are inevitably involved, and this competition tends to become particularly fierce once academic expertise for interpreting disruptions is being claimed. Accumulating the expertise which the present investigation would like to offer cannot well be separated from strategic questions of finding allies as well as audiences, of selectively making friends and enemies among experts, clients and bystanders. The question of the comparative standing and reputation of academic intelligence about disruptiveness and its collective effects leads back to the peculiar segregation of disruptions into extraordinary specimen and more or less normal specimen that was noted at the outset.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-03214-9 - The Sociology of Disruption, Disaster and Social Change:

Punctuated Cooperation

Hendrik Vollmer

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Disruptions are, to repeat, often prosaic and ordinary, matters of everyday life and, if at all matters of further concern, subject to more or less routine repair activities within social situations. In most situations, disruptions are handled by participants in ways that do not command longer-lasting attention. Buses fail to arrive or drive off early, people fail to show up or show up surprisingly, shares fail to perform or perform ‘unreasonably’ well, expectations collapse and are rearranged. All of this only occasionally requires more than a modicum of cognitive and behavioural effort from that particular section of the collective taking notice in the first place. When people begin, on the other hand, to talk about ‘disasters’ and ‘catastrophes’, they are alluding to events that are members of a narrower set of disruptions that are considered as extraordinary and severe. Concerns, for example, among couples about potential outside sexual engagements, suspicions about conspiracies or impending revolt among members of political elites, fears about drastic price movements in shares, mortgages, currencies or whole economies direct attention to events that are considered disastrous to a degree which makes their actual occurrence somewhat less than ordinary and worthy of particular vigilance. It usually is the collective interest in this special set of disastrous disruptions that provides much of the market for respective expertise and most of the drive for intellectual competition. Various experts claim to be in authoritative control of specialized knowledge about disruptiveness, struggling to receive or defend collective recognition for their particular kind of expertise.

Whilst many disruptions of everyday life are being managed more or less casually, the narrower set of disastrous disruptions appears to monopolize the collective interest in disruptions, even if events within this set are generally less likely to take place, if they ever actually occur. Collective interest in the collective set of disastrous disruptions tends to correlate with the presence of some form of dramatizing discourse through which the threatening and potentially destructive character of disruptions is articulated. Some share of the drama may be made up for the sole purpose of entertainment (as in movies about earthquakes, alien invasions or illicit sexual engagements) or other forms of general education, and clearly the articulation of disruptions is subject to a wide range of motivations, with epistemic ones overall probably being somewhat marginal, possibly even among experts. In very general historical terms, the discursive resources which participants of social situations, irrespective of their motivations, are able to draw upon in articulating actual or potential forms of disruptiveness have become diversified. Arrays of discourses, disciplines and professions nowadays direct a great deal of collective effort into the marking and characterization of disruptions. Religious

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-03214-9 - The Sociology of Disruption, Disaster and Social Change:

Punctuated Cooperation

Hendrik Vollmer

Excerpt

[More information](#)

6 Confronting disruptions: the nexus of social situations

forms of apocalyptic thinking have been supplemented by discursively supplied notions for crises, revolutions and other kinds of disastrous disruption, for example economic or ecological kinds (Kermode 1967: 93–124). Within the gamut of conceptualizations, experts compete for collective attention awarded to ‘their’ respective disasters and the particular events exemplifying or signifying them, if only potentially. Scientists have gradually managed to dispossess priests, soothsayers and, to a lesser extent, journalists and politicians. Competition among communities of experts tends to escalate once disastrous disruptions are concerned which have yet to occur and once the possibility of their occurrence cannot be assessed by laypersons and politicians. Since the latter are just the ones to be mobilized in generating and maintaining collective attention, successful experts have learned to not only to safeguard their respective bases of expert knowledge about disruptiveness but also to discursively defend the boundaries of their collectively ratified jurisdictions against contenders (Abbott 1988: 59–85).

Maintaining and possibly extending expert jurisdictions about the likelihood, observation or prevention of disastrous disruptions often implies investing considerable energy into taking part in public discourse. Whilst many social scientists have been participating in disaster discourse, exponents of the experimental and laboratory sciences have generally been somewhat more adept in binding the attention of the general public to their expertise about disastrous events in a way that leaves them with unilateral command of more academic interests within the confines of their research institutions. Within these confines, they manufacture expertise with which they are able to surprise the larger collective beyond its common knowledge in fearing, expecting and confronting disastrous disruptions. Scientific resources for producing and regenerating expertise, access to which is meticulously controlled and embedded in networks of academic laboratories, methods, technologies, engineers, scientists, institutions and careers, afford organizational bases for manufacturing knowledge about disastrous disruptions. Climate change, extinction level events, global epidemics and other potential yet invisible or never to be seen disruptions thus are transformed into facts, and are able to withstand efforts at deconstruction waged against them by laypersons or by experts from competing fact-building networks.

Considering the success with which scientists and engineers have been spanning technoscientific networks (Latour 1987) from theoretical concepts to measures and instruments, from fieldwork and laboratories to centres of calculation, and back to theoretical concepts, in support of claiming and forecasting disastrous disruptions, the social sciences, and most notably sociology, appear to have mostly been content with

serving as suppliers of terminological gloss. Among social scientists, experts at discursively rearticulating disruptions appear to outnumber those researching them by a large margin, and social-scientific expertise generally tends to remain vulnerable to challenges by other groups of experts. Numerous disaster myths prevail despite sociological evidence against their validity (Fischer 2008). The present study cannot set out to design or simulate a social-scientific fact-building network that would be able to manufacture facts about disruptions matching the resilience afforded by the facts of contemporary technoscience. Furthermore, facing competition for collective resources, the need for intellectual adversity in this respect is easily overstated. What the present study would instead like to achieve is an improvement in the conditions for forming and extending networks of expertise in which sociologists can claim a role of their own. Where are the intellectual allies for this endeavour?

1.2 Social scientists facing disruptions

Regrettably, much of the blame for sociologists' competitive disadvantages in addressing disruptiveness needs to be laid at the doorstep of sociological theory. The work of Anthony Giddens, perhaps the advocate of sociological theory with the most permissive understanding of its purpose and potential public relevance, is a perfect representative of how theorists have been confronting the phenomenon of disruptive events by claiming significance of the general subject while practising neglect with respect to systematically accumulating conceptual and empirical intelligence about disruptiveness. On the one hand, the potential conceptual and empirical significance of disruptions surfaces in Giddens' discussion of 'critical situations' at a central point in his main theoretical essay. The notion of critical situations serves Giddens well enough to illustrate some of his dearest analytical concerns, like the routinization of social life and the quest of participants for ontological security (Giddens 1984: 60–4). At the same time, he cuts the analysis of critical situations short by contending he has tackled the issue 'in a certain amount of detail elsewhere' (Giddens 1984: 61). Tracking down Giddens' reference to himself, the reader is directed to his *Central Problems in Sociological Theory*, only to find this treatment 'in a certain amount of detail' to make for another five pages (Giddens 1979: 123–8).

The fact that this amount of detail may be considered as appropriate for investigating disruptiveness is symptomatic of a discourse in sociological theory that acknowledges the methodological significance of disruptions for analysing social order but has achieved very little in elaborating it. Do such tendencies represent a conservative interest of sociological theory

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-03214-9 - The Sociology of Disruption, Disaster and Social Change:

Punctuated Cooperation

Hendrik Vollmer

Excerpt

[More information](#)

8 Confronting disruptions: the nexus of social situations

in how social order prevails (Whyte 1956: 28–9)? At the same time sociologists generally do cherish unusual phenomena more than common and ordinary ones (Brekhus 1998), and many instances of empirically focused explorations can be found in the literature. There is, for example, a rich tradition of disaster research (e.g. Kreps 1984; Quarantelli 1994; Clausen et al. 2003; Rodríguez and Barnshaw 2006). There is also ample sociological intelligence about the systemic risks of disaster inherent in the development of contemporary society (e.g. Turner 1978; Pedahzur et al. 2003; Henderson 2004). There is a great wealth of case studies of solid quality, and, of course, these studies involve the use of sophisticated theoretical concepts, some of which will lend themselves to the present investigation quite easily during the next couple of chapters. Particularly within the more specialized genre of disaster research, however, there has always been the ‘seductive lure of “policy-oriented research”’ (Quarantelli and Dynes 1977: 44), and theoretically ambitious sociologists have done little to involve disaster researchers in their discourse (Quarantelli 1994: 41–2). The trend of ‘increased separation between basic and applied research and between theory and empirical research’ (Dynes and Drabek 1994: 20) has been set to continue – and what could possibly stop it? There is not a single theoretical paradigm offering a systematic sociological vocabulary for making sense of disruptiveness across its different manifestations, and no analytical meta-framework would lend itself easily to aligning the diverse forms of empirical data and conceptual offerings.

It is one particular aspect of the failure by sociological theory to welcome and further develop expertise for disasters and disruptions at the heart of the academic discipline that sociologists have not produced an understanding about how disastrous disruptions relate to the ordinary troubles which researchers like Erving Goffman have been investigating. The difference between such types of disruptiveness may be less categorical than is superficially apparent. Ordinary troubles in everyday interaction annoy or embarrass some participants while remaining tangential to a majority of others (e.g. Goffman 1974: 350–8) – but is this not the case with any kind of disastrous disruption? If the house in which you live burns down, this may be catastrophic for you, for your house-mates or your family – but is it a collective disaster? There is no sociological framework able to analyse the incidence of disruptions within a continuum ranging from the trite to the cataclysmal, and little understanding of the social forces driving apart the opposite ends of the continuum. There is, however, also no *a priori* reason why such a framework could not be constructed by utilizing some combination of concepts which sociologists and their colleagues in neighbouring academic disciplines have

been putting to work in exploring disruptions from minor to disastrous ones.

Whilst the following list is far from comprehensive, disruptions have been analysed using notions such as crisis and catastrophe, punctuated equilibrium, the state of the exception, or trauma. A brief and very cursory review of such efforts needs to suffice here to make initially plausible the special promise of reconstructing the field from an analysis of social situations congenial to the sociology of disruption, disaster and social change. The convergence of certain developments within sociological theory that allow this reconstruction to take place will be more extensively explored in the next chapter.

1.3 Crises and catastrophes

Analyses of disruptions are often accommodated in broader historical narratives as distinct episodes within the general trajectory of a collective. A more specific way of providing analyses of a particular class of collectively highly disastrous disruptions is to investigate them as transitory events between specific historical manifestations of social order. Perhaps the most common rubric under which social scientists have discussed such in-between episodes is the notion of crisis. Treating disruptions in this manner not as discrete events but as elements of more extended episodes within a collective history is associated with a couple of analytical advantages and disadvantages.

Reporting the imminence of some crisis has been a major asset of sociological expertise with respect to disruptiveness and it has often been intrinsic to attempts at getting this expertise collectively recognized. Crisis discourse has been congenial to the discourse of progress since at least the nineteenth century (Sztompka 2004: 156). By engaging in crisis discourse, social scientists have been catering to an apparent collective demand (to some extent generated by themselves) for interpreting disruptions, contradictions or paradoxes confronting collectives through various episodes of social change. Notions of crisis have been attuned to reinterpreting discontinuities within various aspects of social life, whether in economic development (Schumpeter 1934; Mandel 1978: 438–73), the history of ‘enlightenment’ (Koselleck 1988; Horkheimer and Adorno 2002), in ‘industrial society’ (Birnbaum 1969), its legitimacy (Habermas 1988) or growth (Meadows et al. 1972), or by combining a selection of such aspects in broader models of crisis systems (e.g. Farazmand 2004: 349–51; Marshall and Goldstein 2006). More than occasionally, it seems that sociology is ‘dominated by crisis talk’ (Holton 1987: 502). Whilst failing to produce a general theory which would account for how

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-03214-9 - The Sociology of Disruption, Disaster and Social Change:

Punctuated Cooperation

Hendrik Vollmer

Excerpt

[More information](#)

10 Confronting disruptions: the nexus of social situations

different manifestations of social order turn critical, crisis discourse within sociology has intimately been associated with a cycle of crisis fashions correlated to fluctuations in public discourse. This has resulted in crisis discourse in which 'fashionable semantic predispositions look out for supporting theories . . . The glitterings of success, of being mentioned, of gaining reputation may have seduced sociologists to deliver the formulations' (Luhmann 1984: 68).

More analytically speaking, crisis discourse is congenial to sociological theories which try to make empirical predictions about the course of history. Investigating disruptions in terms of crisis turns analysts' attention from the specifics of particular disruptions to imbalances and discontinuities inherent within manifestations of social order as explored by the respective sociological theory. This theory allows analysts to award disruptions a meaning that transcends the set of historical occasions immediately associated with their impact. Crisis theories investigate disruptions as predicated by longer historical processes and structures, and often the collectives and elements of social order in question are regarded as having been on the brink of a critical transformation to start with. Disruptions are thus seen as endogenous to social order since their actual occurrence can be determined by structural analyses that identify the relevant disequilibria (e.g. Milburn et al. 1983: 1143–8; Fligstein and McAdam 2012: 176–8). This implies that the historical specificity of the events bringing disruptions about is gradually marginalized, and the understanding of historical discontinuities is primarily determined by a theoretical estimate of alleged continuities inherent in social structures or processes.¹ The contradictions which are deemed critical are considered as temporary correlates of larger continuities, and without assuming some robustness of the structures and processes associated with them, a respective developmental theory incorporating crises episodes would not be possible (cf. Hopkins and Wallerstein 1996b). Crisis theories, with historical materialism the prime exhibit, accordingly run the risk of appealing to deterministic assumptions about historical processes (Popper 1950: 274–81). They turn disruptions into dependent variables within conceptual architectures that tend to be incompatible with one another.

Despite the fact that disruptions as discrete historical events are methodologically marginalized in this line of analysis, it would be too rash to altogether discount the possibility that valuable conceptual leads

¹ Space does not allow here to discuss more comprehensively the general issues of theory construction in historical sociology, e.g. with respect to whether a marginalization of historical specificity inherent to theorizing disruptions in terms of crises is generally defensible or avoidable (cf. Calhoun 1998; Mahoney 2004).