

Disaster and Environmental Sociology Comprehensive Exam Spring 2014

1. Please choose one of the following two questions:

- a. Identify a major theoretical contribution in the social science of disasters field made over the past twenty years, explain the key components of the contribution – placing it in context with other works and clearly articulating why this contribution is important.
- b. Identify a social problem related to disaster situation in a developing country. Drawing on the literature, discuss how the classic approach to disaster and the social vulnerability approach to disasters would each examine the problem. Be sure to contrast the key theoretical premises of each approach and explain how they would come to very different conclusions about the causes and solutions of the problem you identify.

2. Please choose one of the following two questions:

- a. On your reading list was a 2007 article by Kathleen Tierney (From the Margins to the Mainstream? Disaster Research at the Crossroads) in which she argued,

“The sociology of disasters has developed in ways that have weakened its ties with mainstream sociology. It has remained remarkably resistant to changes in the broader sociological landscape and its strong applied focus has been a barrier to theoretical innovation. This situation is changing, as indicated by critiques of traditional ways of conceptualizing and explaining disasters; greater acceptance of constructivist formulations; willingness to acknowledge that significance of the interaction of disasters and risk with gender, class, and other axes of inequality. However, the field is unlikely to overcome its marginal status without significant efforts to link the sociology of disasters with the related fields of risk and environmental sociology and, more broadly, to focus on core sociological concerns, such as social inequality, diversity, and social change.”

Use your knowledge of the literature to a) illustrate Tierney’s argument; b) discuss examples of recent efforts to overcome that marginal status she mentions, commenting on if you think those efforts have been successful.

- b. A fundamental characteristic of disasters is the occurrence in them of cultural and social emergence, often referred to as collective behavior. Describe Gary Greps’ attempt to characterize emergence (or collective behavior) in disaster; trace the use of Kreps’ ideas (including by others) during approximately the last three decades, since he published them in the 1980s; and compare Kreps’ ideas to E. L. Quarantelli’s writings on collective behavior during disasters and other crises; which approach is more useful and why would you say that is the case?

3. Please choose one of the following two questions:

- a. The political opportunity (or process) approach to political change is the predominant perspective in the study of social movements. Describe the main elements of this approach and then use it to analyze two environmental social movements of your choice. One of these environmental movements should have succeeded while the other would have failed in obtaining its primary goals. In your conclusions give us a sense of the places where the approach seems to have been useful to make sense of your comparison.
- b. One of the major themes in the Environmental Sociology literature is the emergence of community conflict situations.
 - i. Explain how a theoretical knowledge of the Collective Behavior/Social Movements literature informs this area. Illustrate this position by using an example from the literature.
 - ii. What does the CBSM literature overlook or ignore (if anything) with respect to environmental conflicts?
 - iii. Has the area of environmental sociology filled this gap? Why or why not?