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Cultures and Disasters: Understanding Cultural Framings in Disaster Risk Reduction by F. Kruger, G. Bankoff, T. Cannon, B. Orłowski and E.L.F. Shipper

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Abstract

Book review of: Cultures and Disasters: Understanding Cultural Framings in Disaster Risk Reduction F. Krüger, G. Bankoff, T. Cannon, B. Orłowski and E.L.F. Shipper. Routledge, London and New York, 2015, xv + 282 pp, ISBN 978 0 415 74560 4 (paperback).

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Cultures and Disasters: Understanding Cultural Framings in Disaster Risk Reduction

F. Krüger, G. Bankoff, T. Cannon, B. Orlowski and E.L.F. Shipper (2015) Routledge, London and New York. 2015, xv + 282 pp. ISBN [http://dx.doi.org/978 0 415 74560 4](http://dx.doi.org/978_0_415_74560_4) (paperback), £31.99

Why are people still so vulnerable to natural hazards, even after decades of scholarship, information raising and capacity building on Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR)? This question opens the book and sets the scene for an edited collection of theoretical and practical case studies that use culture(s) as an entry point for analysis of hazards, vulnerability and resilience as social constructions.

The introduction provides an insightful discussion of the cultural embeddedness of risk. Risk is positioned as a precondition for an effective response to threats rather than a threat in and of their own right; risk is a social construct rendered a spatial quality. Cultures are lived and lived-in at the same time; defined by fluidity and multiplicity of social practices that result from shifting experiences, social arrangements and situations inscribed into society. While cultures are shown to underpin people's level of risk engagement and coping capacity, the book also usefully highlights how the risk of disaster can be a potential catalyst for cultural change.

The book is divided into three parts. Part 1 provides a discussion of both theoretical and practical considerations of research into cultures and disasters, from 'the global village' (by Kenneth Hewitt) and neoliberalism (by Anthony Oliver-Smith) to seismic architecture (by Greg Bankoff), historical lessons (by Gerrit Jasper Schenk) and climate change (by Terry Cannon). Part 2 explores aspects of culture that shape resilience in everyday life, such as contra-cultures (by James Lewis), HIV/AIDS and the cultural act of defining disasters (by Klaus Geiselhart *et al.*), religion (by E. Lisa F. Schipper), and psychosocial consequences of disasters (by Andrew Crabtree). Part 3 challenges social norms by examining the effectiveness of scientific frameworks for understanding cultures in DRR as manifested in celebrity culture (by David Alexander), how disaster managers value and deploy local

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knowledge (by Brian R. Cook), efforts to combine knowledge systems (by Ilan Kelman *et al.*), gendered dimensions of disaster (by JC Gaillard *et al.*), perception geography and tsunami risk (by Jörn Birkmann *et al.*), and the problematic power tensions between indigenous world views and official development assistance (by Martin Voss and Leberecht Funk).

A strong theoretical foundation that discusses the methodological challenges of cultural diversity, dynamics and differing agendas underpins the book. The various case studies are mainly focused at the local 'community' scale where livelihood and lifeworld realities trade-off risks and benefits, which are compounded further by mismatching priorities (within communities, official vs. local, insiders vs. outsiders, multi-media, gender, class, belief systems, *etc.*). As such, the book is a great teaching resource. The chapters average 17 pages per chapter (including references for further readings) and provide good standalone topics to work with within a classroom environment, as well as theoretical pillars that build greater awareness of the importance of cultures in emergency management and DRR.

The book points to important cultural dimensions of risk, such as religion and belief systems that affect vulnerability and resilience in ways that are hard to untangle from other everyday priorities, and threats that are often magnified when disaster strikes. The importance of local knowledge in DRR is emphasised throughout, yet the book does not escape the uneasy tension that often exists when Western academics/institutions write about the everyday lives and abilities of people in so-called 'developing countries'.

The relative shortness of some chapters results at times in a sense of lack of detail, which in the interesting chapter on gendered dimensions of disaster (chapter 13) has the unfortunate effect of conflating gender, sex and sexuality. The conflation has a similar effect as when some people equate gender only with women, as it suppresses the prominence the sheer diversity of narratives gives to why and how gender, sexuality, and the experiences of LGBTI (lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, intersex) communities matter in DRR and recovery. This is despite the authors highlighting the need to reconceptualise gender and gender relations, which exist at individual, institutional and interactional levels. Sex, for example, is shown to matter less than gender in the identity of the significant minorities of Southeast Asians and Pacific Islanders that share similar gender identities beyond the male – female binary, which has considerable implications in disasters.

While a range of disciplines is represented in the various chapters (e.g. the humanities, social sciences, environmental studies), the overall set-up of the book is structured on the field of DRR studies. This may explain why the editors consider it necessary to include a starting premise that states: "the significance of 'culture' must be understood and incorporated into any attempt to deal with natural hazards, rather than being viewed as largely irrelevant" (p.2). The 'cultural turn' has long been an established fact within human geography, where considering culture is a given in most cases and the focus instead in on the real challenge of how to understand and apply culture(s) (Gill 2006; Eriksen *et al.* 2011). The collaborative and applied research approach of many geographers focusing on, for example, hazards mitigation, disaster resilience, and natural resource management has much to offer scholars and practitioners within the field of DRR.

These shortcomings aside, in general *Cultures and Disasters: Understanding Cultural Framing in Disaster Risk Reduction* is a comprehensive textbook that exposes readers to theories and practices that shape cultural norms and underpin disaster resilience and vulnerability. It is important to understand that many people choose to live in dangerous places for good reasons, while power relations and poverty forces many others to live in unsafe locations. The book is therefore an important read for students, academics and practitioners alike.

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