

People: Stronger than Earthquakes, Fiercer than Tsunamis

A social psychological analysis on social behavior and attitudes
on the aftermath of the earthquake and tsunami in Japan

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Abstract

Almost two weeks have passed since an 8.9 magnitude earthquake hit Japan, making it the 5th strongest earthquake in the world, and the most devastating quake to hit the nation. Sendai is the city that is most brutally hit by the earthquake and tsunami, wherein the waters swept away whole lands, creating sorrowful sights in place of once vibrant towns. This in effect, has disrupted the dynamism of economies and caused significant distress in humanity as a whole, as countless people struggle to make sense of what may be one of the most unsettling events that has recently occurred in today's rapidly-growing society.

This social analysis paper attempts to discuss thoroughly the social issues faced by both the survivors and the people around the world who are witnesses to the tragedy that struck Japan, and to paint a picture of the aftermath through the perspective of a student taking social psychology, by making use of relevant concepts and theories to explain what exactly is happening to the people, and to understand people's behaviors and attitudes to this particular social issue.

"What would happen if everyone cared?" This is an advertisement from CNN calling for aid to all over the world in Japan. In reality, it is virtually impossible for every single one of 7-billion people living in this planet to extend help for Japan in the same way. One of the main sections of this paper aims to discuss the different motivations and reasons for people to help.

The body of this paper consists of three main sections, each attempting to answer a question concerning the aftermath of the disaster and the people involved, by exploring the concepts involved in social thinking, social influence, and social relations.

I. Catastrophic calamities in Japan

A. What happened?

An earthquake with a 8.9 magnitude on the Richter scale and a massive tsunami shook Tohoku, the northeastern Pacific region of Japan, wiping away whole cities and destroying thousands of homes, lands, and industries. Another major threat the quake has caused is the nuclear power plant leak, spurring fears of radiation exposure that will endanger the health of thousands of residents in Japan. Prime Minister Naoto Kan said that this crisis was the worst that Japan ever encountered since World War II.

The cost of the damage of the quake has hit billions of dollars. Newly-manufactured cars ready for shipping were swept away by the water like toy cars, while houses were flooded to the rooftops. Hundreds of dead bodies have been found washed away on the beach shores. More than 125 aftershocks, including a 6.8 magnitude tremor, followed massive quake.

B. Where did it happen?

The earthquake hit the country with the world's third-largest economy: Japan. One of the hardest hit cities in Japan is Sendai, the capital of the Miyagi prefecture. The city of Rikuzentakata, found in the Irate prefecture, the second largest prefecture in Japan, was also among the hardest hit. This city lost roughly 75 percent of roughly 8,000 households. On March 14, The Mainichi Daily News declared, "Rikuzentakata has been erased."

C. Who are affected?

About 9,000 people have died and more than 13,000 people are still missing, half of which are feared dead. 380,000 people are currently staying at 2,200 shelters. Rescue operations are under way, prompting countries from all over the world to donate goods, medical aid, and financial assistance. Governments, corporations, celebrities, and other individuals are currently raising funds to help the people greatly affected by the quake.

II. How do people think about and react to their situation?

Staying calm, cool, and collected

The Japanese are well-known for their steadfast stoicism, which may be the prevailing attitude of people belonging to this collectivist nation. Japanese stoicism is illustrated by their endurance of pain or hardship without any display of feelings or complaint, as well as being remarkably patient and exerting effort to recover as quickly as they can. They do not show significant distress over their ordeal during this calamity.

Perhaps their stoic attitude towards troubling times like these have roots in their collectivist culture. Instead of focusing on their well-being, they channel their energies in rebuilding the lives of their community, and putting their own selves as a last priority. They in turn nurture the interdependent self,

wherein they value more their relationships with the people in the community and to the environment rather than focusing on their own self-interests.

For example, when volunteer firefighter Takao Sato learned that both his brigade chief and brother-in-law were missing, he did not stop to look for them. Instead, he continued his job of retrieving corpses. "I have a duty to the community," he said.

An 85-year-old woman named Sakiko Kono lost her brother to the tsunami, and has ever since been sheltering at an evacuation centre in Rikuzentakata. She said, "Everyone is having a difficult time, so I just need to carry on."

This sense of stoicism may also have developed from their lifestyle in that region, wherein farms and fishermen were the main source of sustenance and livelihood. "At the core of a farming community is the realisation that however much you work, one weather change can cost you everything," says writer Kundo Koyama. "It is a culture of the powerless." This then expresses the learned helplessness of the people because they have had repeatedly experienced so many natural calamities throughout their lifetime. Moreover, this country is known to be one of the most earthquake-prone regions in the world.

Therefore, the locus of control of the people in Japan as they experience the earthquake has shifted from the internal, such as personal decisions and actions, to the external, such as chance, or outside forces, attributing outcomes as entirely uncontrollable by their own efforts. This completely makes sense because no one can thoroughly predict when exactly an earthquake would occur, and that the physical strength of any natural calamities have the utmost potential to shake the foundations of communities and cities.

Self-schemas, social identities, and social roles

The self-schemas of the Japanese are greatly influenced by culture, which in turn shapes their social identity. This social identity is what other people, such as the media, people belonging to other nationalities come to understand their behavior and attitudes.

Amidst the havoc and trauma that the Japanese are going through, they have kept their social roles intact, acting upon the expectations of others. For example, Japanese women have rolled up their kimono sleeves, procure some rice and fed the injured, wounded and hungry. In Ishinomaki City, Miyagi Prefecture, where 70 percent of the populace are now in evacuation centers, a few wives and daughters whose houses

were left unscathed immediately got together and made hundreds of onigiri (rice balls), a traditional staple dish, to feed the people there. On the other hand, many men became heroes, wherein their stories of how they have come to save many lives of friends, neighbors, and strangers continue inspire and give hope to people across the nation.

III. How do people in Japan respond and cope?

Perceiving events rationally

Losing one's livelihood is often the result of major catastrophes, and most people would perhaps expect this to have an enduring negative impact on their emotional lives. However, with the endurance, focus, and collectivist nature of the Japanese, they might have little immune neglect, wherein they overestimate the impact of terrible events, and could recover more quickly than other people in the same situation. These predictions about their emotional states are then the guiding stars in which people make decisions and long-term goals.

The Tokyo electric company started rolling blackouts around the city in order to save electricity, and therefore, commuting became a problem as trains run on irregular and reduced schedules. Remarkably, most people have stayed calm inspite of these system lapses.

Inside one evacuation center, children sat drawing with markers. A boy drew a picture of a town with a wall of water sweeping in. A six-year-old girl asked him, "Did you house fall down?" "Ours did," she said. Then she went back to drawing a cartoon cat.

These little stories may serve as examples in which people in Japan perceive events in a less judgmental manner, and that they behave according to their internal values, attitudes, and beliefs, rather than responding to the distressing and difficult situations they find themselves in.

Overconfidence

On a grander scale, how people responded whole earthquake may exemplify a kind of overconfidence phenomenon, wherein people tend to become more confident rather than correct in interpreting events that happen to them, or overestimating the accuracy of their beliefs and memories.

For instance, Ookawa Elementary School was hit by the tsunami, killing 94 students and teachers. It was reported that for nearly 45 minutes, the students stood outside and waited for help, then, without warning, monstrous waves swept in, and only twenty-four people survived. "Those children did everything that was asked of them, that's what's so tragic. For years, we drilled earthquake safety. They knew an event like this wasn't child's play. But no one ever expected a killer tsunami." said Haruo Suzuki, a former teacher. The teachers were confident about the usefulness of doing fire and earthquake drills, but after an actual earthquake struck, they find that these drills were insufficient in saving the lives of the children.

IV. How do people extend help in the Japan quake?

Social responsibility is the norm that Japan finds more useful than ever before, as countries all over the world hustle to extend their help to Japan, wherein people are moved to help because of the social expectation that when a nation, however far apart they are, is mired with tragedy, nations will give out whatever they can, even when Japan is a richer and more prosperous nation than other countries. The Philippines, for example, intends to donate food to Japan, starting with a shipment of bananas.

Moreover, shifting perceptions also occur as China and Japan forget their differences for a moment. China has sent 15-member rescue team, 20,000 tonnes of fuel, and 2 million yuan to help Japan recover from the quake's aftermath. "When China suffered earthquakes, Japan gave a helping hand. Now, it is time for us to help them," said a Chinese surnamed Liu who participated in the survey.

China also suffered an earthquake, particularly in rural Sichuan province that killed nearly 90,000 people three years ago, and in turn, a Japanese search-and-rescue crew was there to help in rescue efforts. This has been a historic gesture, wherein Chinese and Japanese relations have begun to grow deeper, more than 70 years after the Chinese people who suffered under the hands of the Japanese in World War II. China helping Japan also illustrates the reciprocity norm, the expectation that people will help those who have helped them. "I think action like this has a positive impact on relations between countries," said Chu Xiaobo, a Sino-Japan relations expert in Peking University. "Humans have become more dependent on one another and bilateral relations are not just about politics and economics anymore. It's about connections on many deeper levels," he said.

About 180 nuclear power plant workers have been working on fixing the plant in the hopes that they would help prevent a nuclear meltdown, risking their lives in the process. "They see it as doing their job," he said. "The Japanese in particular are dedicated to duty, and they will see it as their duty to do what they are doing." This is one vivid example of an altruistic act, wherein the workers are willing to put their lives on the line for the benefit of other people. "These workers are trained to understand the risks, but that only makes it all the more heroic that they have agreed to stay and work to prevent a disaster," said Dr. Ira Helfand, a member of an organization called Physicians for Social Responsibility.

People all over the world feel empathy towards the victims of the earthquake as they read and watch the developing news stories on television, prompting them to donate money even though they live far away from the site and that they do not have any obligation to do so. This then may be deemed as a kind of empathy-induced altruism. The donations that foundations have earned such as Red Cross have exemplified that genuine altruism exists, as people do not make themselves known, and that the money is pooled in a way that the donated amount of each benefactor cannot be distinguished.

The Philippine Red Cross has collected over 17 million pesos in through bank deposits, text and online donations. Through the different websites found on the Internet, people are able to find access to many other different methods and ways of sending out donations. This exemplifies the powerful notion that people will help when they also know that others like them are helping.

Moreover, it is seen that people high in self-monitoring will help more, which is one indicator of who will most likely help. Striking examples of these are celebrities, who may be motivated to help in order to attune to other people's expectations, in this case, their fans. To illustrate, award-winning actress Sandra Bullock has donated \$1 million of her personal cash for the Japan on March 17 through American Red Cross.

V. What can this tell about Japanese society in general?

Group influence is clearly seen in the way the Japanese have responded to the aftermath of the disasters. People who have lost their homes and possessions begin to practice conformity, changing their behaviors in order to acquire basic needs among thousands of other disaster-stricken people. For instance,

ven though basic supplies are running low, lines at gas stations and grocery stores are orderly and there have been no reports of stealing. The rationing of petrol and water has accepted without complaint.

The values and traditions of the Japanese have also prevailed amidst turmoil and tragedy. Emergency centers are neatly organized, with people constructing origami boxes made of newspaper for them to nestle their shoes. This is a country where people do not wear shoes inside, and the habit extends to the little islands of blankets that each evacuated family claims in their emergency shelter.

Tsunami survivors observed a minute of silence to mark a week after the quake has struck. Most of the time, the strength of cultural norms overpowers the “power of the situation,” one of the factors that influences conformity and obedience.

The evacuees conform to the system in the evacuation centers, to the rationing of food and other basic needs because of normative influence, or the need to avoid rejection and to be able to develop a stronger sense of belonging in the community amidst stressful and dire situations.

People going through the same experience also foster cohesiveness, another factor that breeds conformity. The survivors are all undergoing the same kind of loss and sorrows, enabling them to form friendships and liking for each other regardless of little similarities among each other, whereas they would definitely stay as strangers if all this did not happen.

The Japanese exhibit self-efficacy, the sense of being important and effective, in times of trouble. “The instinct is to stockpile, help each other and be a self-sufficient community to survive,” a Japanese survivor said. Japanese are more likely to look inwards for their strength and even become embarrassed by an offer of a helping hand. “As polite as we are, we resist accepting outside help,” said Tomoko Hirai, a Japanese student.

Perhaps the patient, orderly manner of how the Japanese are coping also display the just-world phenomenon, wherein they believe that the world is just, that even though they are experiencing harsh realities, they believe that they will get what they deserve, and they deserve what they get, such as the rationing of electricity and food, as well as the amount of donations they receive. They definitely feel extreme sadness and grief over the loss of their loved ones, but in other areas such as the procurement of basic needs, they do not complain as much about their situation, as compared to individualistic cultures.

Japanese society may perceive these events as more of a challenge that they must face with courage and optimism, rather than as a misfortune that smacked at them by nature. By understanding the different social issues surrounding a natural calamity and how people respond to these, there is every reason to remain hopeful that this collectivist country will once rise up again, and show the world that humans, who are by nature social beings, are equipped with the strength, perseverance, and the innate social skills to endure any hardship and challenge they encounter throughout their lives.

“We will not be beaten by the rain or the wind or the storms.”

This was an inscription by renowned Japanese author Kenji Miyazawa that the students handpainted long before the tsunami that lies on a now broken wall of Ookawa Elementary School.

Sources

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