

Kelman, I. 2007. "Operational Ethics for Disaster Research". Philosophy of Risk Newsletter, vol. 8, no. 3, December, email only.

Full text:

In the last edition of this newsletter, Per Sandin had an excellent article on "Ethics of Disasters, Crises and Crisis Management". In addition to the ethical challenges inherent in managing disasters, crises, and risk, research into these topics poses ethical questions. The following paper was a first step towards formulating some of these questions:

Kelman, I. 2005. "Operational Ethics for Disaster Research". International Journal of Mass Emergencies and Disasters, vol. 23, no. 3 (November), pp. 141-158.

The phrase "operational ethics" aims to suggest that ethical concerns are not abstruse philosophy suitable for only learned debates in academic institutions. Instead, these issues are day-to-day concerns which must be considered on the ground, including by researchers who are conducting field work.

Of particular interest is that even if researchers do not wish to operationalise their research, for instance by keeping it confined to scientific journals, the act of researching inevitably has operational outcomes. With regards to disasters, crises, and risk, a wealth of research material can be obtained by being operational in a disaster situation in order to conduct research and to gather data. That means carrying out research during a disaster event, as the crisis or emergency unfolds.

Yet several immediate questions arise:

1. Could carrying out such operational research interfere with disaster and risk management activities?
2. Could publishing operational research interfere with disaster and risk management activities?
3. Should researchers take responsibility for the operational outcomes of their research?

These queries are not new. In fact, similar ones have been debated for decades for topics such as weapons research, including the development of the nuclear bomb, and the risk from chemicals. By using examples of technical rescue (such as water, ice, or cliff rescues) and research on active volcanoes (which has led to the deaths of several volcanologists), this paper is a first step towards introducing these ethical issues and outcomes into disaster and crisis research.

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Reference:

Kelman, I. 2005. "Operational Ethics for Disaster Research". International Journal of Mass Emergencies and Disasters, vol. 23, no. 3 (November), pp. 141-158.