

Preface

Global media coverage of devastating disasters like the 2004 tsunami in the Indian Ocean, the 2010 earthquake in Haiti, and the recent disasters in Japan in 2011 lead us to recognize the continuing challenge faced by humanity when coping with disasters. Even beyond these colossal events, disasters are ubiquitous and historically persistent phenomena that have gained even greater relevance in the context of climate change. Of macroeconomic concern also is the fact that in recent years the world experienced the highest disaster losses ever recorded, which has resulted in continuously rising economic costs over the past 30 years (World Bank 2012).¹ In response to this heightened awareness about the collective impact of disasters, disaster research has grown into a transdisciplinary field, with discipline-based contributions ranging from engineering and geography to sociology, anthropology, history, and psychology. However, as we argue in this book, disaster studies lack a distinct cultural psychological approach, which conceptually connects research on subjective disaster coping to sociocultural approaches to disaster. Disasters are experienced and coped with subjectively, while embedded in sociocultural, historical, and environmental contexts.

The field of disaster research is still dominated by technocratic and universalist approaches (see Hewitt 2012), most often developed in high-income countries from the Global North and intended to be applied anywhere else, including middle- or low-income countries in the Global South. However, over the last decade, awareness about the value of local cultural resources has emerged and evolved in disaster research and international disaster management policies (see UNISDR 2005). The need for translation and transfer of expertise between the globalized field of disaster intervention and specific forms of local knowledge has gained increasing recognition (e.g., Mercer et al. 2010); however, the realization of such transcultural exchanges continues to be challenging in practice. For example, it is often the case that local knowledge is superficially acknowledged as isolated elements of culture which are

¹ Between 1980 and 2011, disasters have caused more than 3.3 million deaths and US\$ 3.5 trillion in economic damages and losses across the world. Extreme weather events account for over 78 % of the events recorded over the same period and are responsible for two-thirds of the losses (US\$ 2.6 trillion).

then integrated into strategies of disaster-risk reduction. Fundamental and implicit cultural assumptions about individuals, their social contexts and basic worldviews remain untouched in the application of globalized intervention strategies. However, in order for disaster aid and risk reduction to be sustainable and effective, planners and practitioners need to be sensitized to local practices, values, beliefs, social structures, and dynamics.

The main psychological contributions to disaster research have focused on psychopathological outcomes of disaster: the mechanisms and conditions by which disasters affect mental health and the effectiveness of associated psychological interventions (see MacFarlane et al. 2009). Other psychological approaches assimilate disaster into the broader theme of coping with stress, for example in cases of job loss, illness, or bereavement (see Chap. 2). The disaster psychopathology and coping approaches both identify universal psychological mechanisms that determine human behavior and experiences under challenging or threatening circumstances. Although these approaches turn our attention from a macro-level of analysis to a micro-level of subjective disaster experience, they operate with universalist assumptions which are built upon the individual as a separate entity. Social and cultural aspects are conceptualized as external moderating factors and a presumption is evident of clear boundaries between inner or private and outer or public realms. Thus, these theories fail to address how the sociocultural is intermingled with the individual inner, private, or cognitive aspects. Little research has examined the actual subjective experiences of people living and coping with disasters as individuals embedded in sociocultural settings. For this endeavor, the theoretical tools for disaster or coping research in psychology need to be expanded, which is the main goal of our book.

To bridge this research gap between sociocultural and psychological disaster approaches, we turn to cultural psychology and argue for a cultural psychology of coping with disasters. We develop our argument and approach by reviewing a broad range of theories, conceptual analyses, and policy-based arguments from anthropological disaster research to psychological coping theory and complement this discussion with findings from our research project in Indonesia. Our book provides a critical reevaluation of the complex phenomena of coping with disasters on a general level by applying an integrative theory of disaster coping to a specific context. The conceptual basis of our approach can be sketched by the three key terms of disaster, culture and coping.

Disasters are characterized by their large-scale impacts, causing loss and destruction in entire communities or regions that exceed available coping capacities and thus require outside assistance. Disaster coping always implies collective affectedness and the presence of or at least a need for external aid. Natural hazard agents such as earthquakes demonstrate how human existence (and social life) is embedded in physical environments. Disasters are framed as a long-term process of human–environment interaction, and, accordingly, coping with them needs to be understood within this relationship and framework.

In this book, culture is defined as the way people relate to the world and to themselves through meanings and practices. Culture is shared, (re)produced, and negotiated in multiple social contexts. For example, even though there are

representations of Javanese culture as a monolithic corpus of knowledge, artistic, and social practices, there is not actually one single Javanese culture. The way people behave and view the world around them is shaped by their social stratification, political affiliation, transcultural interaction, or general life experience. We therefore follow the cultural psychological approach which situates the psychological subject in multiple contexts, while person and context mutually constitute each other.

Coping is a complex material–symbolic, cognitive–embodied, and individual–social process. It is embedded in structural and sociocultural contexts that not only produce or inhibit (forms of) agency, but also interpretatively frame the very “stressor” that is to be coped with and structure the embodied experience of suffering. Coping can neither be reduced to an “objective” material sphere nor be considered solely in symbolic terms. Subjective experiences, perceptions, emotions, and interpretations are socioculturally mediated or constructed *and* also bound to a biophysical materiality. The way people cope is significantly shaped by their actual access to resources. We further argue that coping processes are contingent upon micro- and macrodynamics of the individual life-course, community processes, and global histories. Research needs to consider the multiple (potentially contradicting) interests that actors bring to coping processes and practices, which do not necessarily relate to “coping” itself but to other dynamics that are not necessarily disaster-related.

Our theoretical argument is based on a review of the theoretical literature *and* grounded on an in-depth case study. Complexity cannot be captured by even the most elaborate theoretical model, and needs to be made clear and explicit through detailed explorative, qualitative case studies. Our strategy in this interpretative research was to turn the causal models of conventional coping theories into heuristic devices which are used to draw out the symbolical and practical meanings of concepts and their referential relations as used by people in a specific sociocultural setting (see Sect. 3.3); that is, instead of correlating strictly defined and categorized quantifiable variables, we chose an interpretative approach, asking our respondents for relevant concepts and explanations while posing questions about conventional coping themes. Our discursive and dialogical approach to theory and the empirical study resulted in the formulation of a multidimensional coping framework (see Part III), encompassing the material, social, religious, and life-conduct dimensions. In our case study, these dimensions serve as a productive analytical tool in which each dimension provides a particular lens to look at the complex phenomenon of coping. Instead of thinking about these dimensions as separate spheres or in terms of a hierarchical importance, we understand the dimensions as analytical perspectives that complement each other in gaining a deeper understanding of coping processes. We present our multidimensional coping framework as a research strategy to untangle *and* represent the complexity of coping processes.

The villages examined in our case study are located in Central Java, Indonesia, a geographical region with a long history of natural disasters. The study focused on the 2006 earthquake in the Yogyakarta province, which resulted in the destruction of 300,000 homes, 20,000 injuries, and almost 6,000 deaths (OCHA 2007). We examined the process of coping with disaster and related relief efforts in three affected

villages, 2–5 years after the incident.² Our book reports the results of an international research collaboration, inspired by collaborative interdisciplinary and transcultural dialogue and reflection in the fields of psychology and anthropology between German and Indonesian authors and an author from Australia/New Zealand.

Our research was guided by the question of how people subjectively experienced, interpreted, and dealt with the disaster and the subsequent dynamics revolving around external aid resources. We also integrated a long-term perspective on coping and the local ways of dealing with persistent threats. Our analysis captures material, social, psychoreligious and emotional–habitual aspects of these coping processes in a four-dimensional framework and we demonstrate how contextual conditions influence these processes. We draw attention to the sociopolitical structures and relationships individuals have with different stakeholders, for example, the extent of trust that exists in a context of corruption. Within disaster studies, the 2006 Java earthquake is of particular interest because the large-scale governmental reconstruction program had a community-based approach. Financial resources were provided by the government and the program was administered and organized locally, drawing on the Javanese cultural resource of community self-help (*gotong royong*). The disaster gained global media attention and many local and international relief agencies were involved in a wide variety of interventions. Governmental and nongovernmental institutions combined social change agendas such as gender mainstreaming with their delivery of aid. The region, as is increasingly common in the current state of international disaster aid, became a laboratory of varying cultural influences and normative concerns, which generated new mixtures of “glocality”.

This book illustrates the perspectives of disaster survivors and their life contexts. It is intended for many audiences because it contributes a theoretical argument to coping research, but it may also prove to be particularly useful for disaster researchers and practitioners. It provides a cultural psychological approach to understanding the psychosocial responses of people living in disaster-prone areas and to informing disaster management practices by including perspectives from disaster-affected communities.

Structure of the Book

This edited book is a result of a collaborative research process, with the full theoretical argument unfolding throughout the book. The first part introduces the theoretical foundation of our approach. Chapter 1 offers a critical and transdisciplinary

² The research with the title “Individual and collective ways of coping long-term with extreme suffering and external help after natural disasters: meanings and emotions” was funded by the Fritz Thyssen Stiftung from November 2008 to October 2011. The research project was carried out between the International Academy for Innovative Pedagogy, Psychology and Economics gGmbH (INA) at Freie Universität Berlin, Germany, while the responsibility for the implementation of the research project was in the hands of Prof. Johana Prawitasari-Hadiyono, Universitas Gadjah Mada, Faculty of Psychology, in Yogyakarta, Indonesia.

introduction to key paradigms, approaches, and controversies of disaster research and management. The authors examine a range of exemplary disaster research literature, pursuing core questions relevant to the overall goal of the book. Issues of human agency are addressed in relation to socioeconomic structures and exosemiotic or extradisursive forces of “nature”. The authors further examine how these approaches conceptualize the processes of human interaction with and adaptation to environments and identify the roles of cultural frames and forms of knowledge. Chapter 2 addresses the behavior, thoughts, experiences and feelings of individuals and communities exposed to strain and stress, introducing the various approaches associated with both psychological and broader social science-based understandings of coping. These models are similar to goal-based models of human nature, which understand human beings’ basic motivation as moving toward goals while avoiding threats. This developing theoretical discussion is then used to analyze the extent to which these approaches can be applied in a disaster-related context. Our framework for a cultural psychology of coping with disaster is formulated in Chap. 3, beginning with the basic premise of how a cultural psychology approach highlights our understanding of the mutual constitution of person and context. We clarify understandings of subjectivity and agency and their relation to contexts before transferring these concepts to disaster contexts. A framework for coping that accounts for cultural specificities is developed by expanding upon appraisal-based and other coping models. We transcend the focus on cognitive and biologically founded processes, account for collective and locally specific modes of coping, and complement clinical and medicalizing approaches to disaster-related suffering with a focus on resilience and local forms of coping.

Part II of the book connects the theoretical considerations with the case study. Chapter 4 contextualizes our research in the ethnographic setting of Java, while Chap. 5 elaborates on the methodological basis of a culture-specific coping approach. Following Charmaz (2006) and Clarke (2005), we understand the research process, including data collection and theorizing, as a process of social action in which researchers construct the results in dialogue with others in particular places and times. We conceptualize the 3-year research process as a mutual process involving changes in views, conceptions, and methods. This transformation included the researchers as people, the organization of responsibilities and distribution of tasks, the management of financial resources, and the representation of the project at local and international forums. Our research in Java which exemplified this framework with its reflection process involving different research parties including participants, serves as a background for a general discussion of knowledge production, ethics, and empowerment in disaster contexts (see Chaps. 6–8).

In parts III and IV, we turn to our empirical case study of the 2006 Java earthquake. Part III uses the multidimensional coping framework to present the data. The Material Dimension (Chap. 9) refers to the biophysical side of disaster coping, which includes perceptions of physical destruction, rescue, relief, and reconstruction efforts, and subjective experiences of all of these features of the disaster. In the Social Dimension (Chap. 10), coping is understood as a social phenomenon that extends the understanding of traditional social support dynamics found in mainstream psychology. Communal coping efforts, power dynamics, and the re-negotiations of

sociocultural-specific values and practices are all examined to explore the dynamics of a village struck by disaster. The Dimension of Life Conduct (Chap. 11) emphasizes the intertwining of sociocultural features with personalized, enacted codes of conduct. Differing local concepts of self and related control patterns are investigated here. The last chapter covers the Religious Dimension (Chap. 12). In disaster contexts, religion is an important resource for meaning-making, which helps people to find metaphysical explanations of events in addition to understanding their personal significance. Part IV then focuses on specific aspects of coping, which are analyzed across the (previously introduced) four coping dimensions. Chapter 13 contrasts the theme of “suffering” with the more common theme in international and Western contexts of “disaster mental health”. Chapter 14 highlights the cultural-specific aspects of coping with the social conflicts resulting from aid distribution processes, a topic long neglected in individualistic and apolitical psychological approaches. Chapter 15 deals with risk management, before Part IV closes with a critical evaluation of gender mainstreaming issues in disaster contexts (Chap. 16). We conclude by weaving together our empirical findings with the theoretical considerations and addressing the general contributions a cultural psychological approach to coping with disaster may offer to the fields of psychology and disaster research and practice.

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Cultural Psychology of Coping with Disasters

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