Socialspychological impactfactors in disasters, crises and attacks

A literature review on impact-increasing and impact-reducing factors in disasters, crises and attacks

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Summary

Disasters, crises and attacks have varying impacts on society. Sometimes incidents that do not cause social disruption nevertheless have a major impact. Factors that appear to increase this impact include the involvement of children, 'man-made' incidents versus more 'natural' disasters and crises, identification with the victims and a feeling of having no control. With the present study the Research and Documentation Centre (WODC) of the Ministry of Security and Justice seeks to gain a better understanding of the factors that, according to the research literature, increase or reduce the sociopsychological impact of disasters, crises and attacks. Sociopsychological impact is defined as:

The reaction of the population, characterised by negative emotions and feelings (such as fear, anger, dissatisfaction, grief, disappointment, panic, disgust and apathy). It concerns the population as a whole – in other words, not only those directly involved but also citizens who experience the incident or process through the media or in some other way. The expressions of these emotions and feelings may or may not be observable (i.e. audible, visible, readable).[1]

A literature survey was conducted to explore the impact of disasters, crises and attacks on society as a whole, focusing on the following questions:

1. *According to the research literature, what factors increase or reduce the sociopsychological impact of disasters, crises and attacks, as defined in the Dutch National Security Strategy? What factors have little or no impact?*
2. *To what extent has scholarly opinion about impact-increasing/impact-reducing factors changed in recent decades?*

The ultimate objective – besides deepening our understanding – is to refine the description and interpretation of the sociopsychological impact of disasters, crises and attacks. Where necessary, identifying the factors may also lead to supplementing or modifying the indicators behind the impact criterion of sociopsychological impact and social unrest in the National Security Strategy. This is because these indicators are part of a chain of relationships that can ultimately lead (or not) to social disruption (see figure below).

The study
Specifically, a search was made for the terms sociopsychological impact, social unrest, social disruption, social impact and collective stress, each time in combination with the terms disasters, crisis and attacks, and in both English and Dutch. This revealed that sociopsychological impact factors relating to disasters, crises and attacks do not fall within a single specific, well-defined discipline. Instead, there are many disciplines (psychiatry, psychology, sociology and their many sub-branches) that have made these subjects their object of study. An examination of 15 review studies from these different disciplines proved to be a vital intermediate step in obtaining a first indication of key sources for sociopsychological impact factors. These were eventually located within five approaches, namely the literature on [1] social unrest, [2] mass panic and self-organisation following disasters, [3] sociopsychological impact, [4] risk perception, risk and crisis communication, and [5] the role of the mass media. In the end, a total of forty publications were examined,

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[1] Ministry of Security and Justice (March 2013). *Werken met scenario's, risicobeoordeling en capaciteiten in de Strategie Nationale Veiligheid*, The Hague: Ministry of Security and Justice p. 67

from which 87 impact factors were distilled. These were then arranged according to theme into 24 impact factors. A preliminary validation by experts resulted in a list of 22 impact factors. The process is shown in the following diagram.
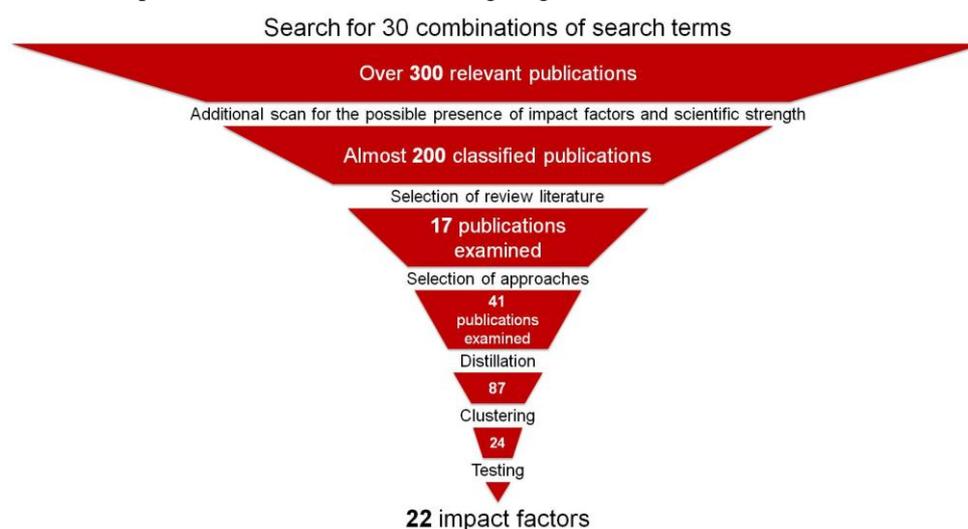
The results

As already stated, the literature survey revealed that factors that increase or reduce sociopsychological impact do not fall within a well-defined research area and have therefore rarely been the subject of a systematic comparison, let alone a systematic comparison over time. Given that the more recent publications do not contain any particularly new research insights,[2] the only conclusion is that it is not possible to answer the question about changes in scholarly opinion. In view of the data set for this literature survey, there is a lack of 'raw material'.

Nor is there raw material to answer the question about possible misconceptions regarding sociopsychological impact factors. Various publications were found, however, on 'disaster myths', which are misconceptions or faulty assumptions about disasters, crises and attacks. Although these myths are not assumed to be direct impact-increasing or reducing sociopsychological factors, they should nevertheless be taken into account for a better understanding of these factors. We will discuss them here briefly.

First of all there is the 'mass panic myth', the idea that disasters or crises always lead to exaggerated and irrational fear, which spreads like an infectious disease and which then leads to rash and hasty flight behaviour. However, mass panic only seems to occur when there are almost no escape options in the face of imminent danger.

A second myth is the 'riot myth', the idea that disasters and crises bring out the worst in people, turning crowds into one big looting and rioting 'monster'. Although looting does occur in the wake of a disaster or crisis, this is the exception rather than the rule.

A third myth is the 'helplessness myth', the idea that survivors of a disaster or crisis are too much in a state of shock to do anything and are therefore passive and helpless. However, survivors of a disaster or crisis frequently emerge as first responders who provide assistance in both a physical (first aid) and mental sense (mental support).

This brings us to the answer to the main question: According to the research literature, what factors increase or reduce the sociopsychological impact of disasters, crises and attacks, as defined in the Dutch National Security Strategy? Following a careful selection process, we were left with a list of 22 impact factors. The list was then clustered by theme, giving rise to four categories – namely, sociopsychological impact factors associated with:

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[2] There are, however, new topics, such as the rise of social media, but this has not yet led to groundbreaking new research insights.

- social groups/society
- the government or authorities
- the risk or crisis
- information

The list of impact factors is presented in the table below, together with the category, title, type of impact and definition for each factor.

A possible follow-up study could focus on a closer examination of the empirical evidence for one or more of the impact factors and/or a closer scrutiny of the mechanisms behind the impact factors. This would involve answering the question: Which mechanisms play an active role in the causal chain of impact factors that give rise to social disruption'? After all, the goal is to gain a better understanding of sociopsychological impact and social unrest in order to prevent too big an impact on one of the vital interests in the National Security Strategy (i.e. social and political stability), resulting in social disruption. This study has made a contribution to such an understanding.

The list of impact factors

Sociopsychological impact factors associated with *social groups/society*	
1. **(Strong) moral judgements** *Potentially impact-increasing*	Moral judgements (such as outrage, contempt, disgust or resentment) that exist about others (such as other groups in society, the government and/or police), often accompanied by feelings of extreme dissatisfaction, injustice and/or belief in the culpability of others.
2. **(Strong) social entities** *Potentially impact-increasing*	Solidarity that develops in contact with others, for example through a shared intense experience, which can have either a positive (supporting one other) or negative (projecting aggression onto others) effect.
3. **Contrasts between groups** *Potentially impact-increasing*	Deeply felt and widely supported sharp (social) contrasts between groups, usually accompanied by strong moral feelings such as outrage, disgust or contempt.
4. **Confidence in authorities** *Both impact-increasing and impact-reducing, depending on context*	Confidence in the government and its institutions and their ability to cope with problems that have arisen.
5. **The degree of exposure/traumas** *Potentially impact-increasing*	The extent to which people are exposed to and/or have actually suffered from a disaster, crisis or attack (or the consequences thereof), for example in the form of injuries, threats to life and/or loss of human life.
6. **Overall impact on normal life** *Potentially impact-increasing*	The extent to which the disaster, crisis or attack affects normal daily life, both materially and non-materially.
7. **Lack of knowledge and/or understanding of the risk/ crisis** *Potentially impact-increasing*	The extent to which there is factual knowledge and/or understanding of a risk or crisis, including possible alternative actions.
8. **Responsiveness of society** *Potentially impact-reducing*	The extent to which groups in society are able, whether or not in consultation with the government and its institutions, to formulate a satisfactory response to the crisis.
9. **Resilience** *Potentially impact-reducing*	One's (perceived) ability to deal with unexpected and/or uncertain crises.
10. **Social capital and social support** *Potentially impact-reducing*	The extent to which people have access to and ultimately receive actual help or support from (social) resources such as family/friends, the neighbourhood, welfare institutions, charitable institutions, social services and emergency services.
Sociopsychological impact factors associated with *the government or authorities*	
11. **(Repeated) false reassurance** *Potentially impact-increasing*	The (repeated) false reassurance of those affected and/or the public when this is inconsistent with the (perceived) seriousness of the situation.
12. **Preparation for and/or experience with crises**	The extent to which the government or authorities are prepared for and/or have experience with previous crises.

Potentially impact-reducing	
13. Government response *Both impact-increasing and impact-reducing, depending on context*	The extent to which the government and its institutions manage to formulate a satisfactory response to the crisis.
14. Openness and honesty *Potentially impact-reducing*	An open and honest approach by the government and its institutions to those who are directly and indirectly affected, the media and the public.
15. Compassion, care and empathy *Potentially impact-reducing*	Compassion, care and empathy shown by the government and its institutions towards those directly and indirectly affected.
Sociopsychological impact factors associated with the *risk or crisis*	
16. (Perceived) destructive potential of the risk or crisis *Potentially impact-increasing*	The (perceived) destructive potential of the risk or crisis.
17. Risks/situations caused by deliberate human acts intended to cause disruption *Potentially impact-increasing*	The extent to which risks/crises arise from human actions, especially situations where there is an intention to disrupt all or part of society and to instil fear.
Sociopsychological impact factors associated with *information*	
18. Media frames *Both impact-increasing and impact-reducing, depending on context*	The way in which disasters, crises or attacks are framed, which can dominate news coverage and eventually lead to 'media hypes' (quick, intensive news waves) and/or 'amplification' (magnification of a particular risk/news event).
19. Human interest *Potentially impact-increasing*	Personal experiences of victims, surviving relatives, eye witnesses and rescue workers.
20. Aspects that appeal to the imagination and have a high emotional charge *Potentially impact-increasing*	Aspects that appeal to the imagination and have a high emotional charge, such as the unexpected nature of an event, a magnitude that beggars the imagination, the iconic status of people or buildings involved, newness or unfamiliarity, secrecy or mismanagement and/or lack of effective communication by the authorities.
21. Confidence in the information source *Potentially impact-reducing*	The level of confidence placed in the information source.
22. Useful, practical information for personal risk management *Potentially impact-reducing*	The provision of useful, practical information that enables people to do what they have to in order to protect themselves or to recover.