

DISASTER SUBCULTURES IN EARTHQUAKE COUNTRY:
BETWEEN EARTHQUAKES IN SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA

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From his investigations of hurricanes along the United States coast on the Gulf of Mexico, Harry Moore [1964] concluded that a region subjected frequently to the same disaster agent develops a disaster culture, which "serves to define situations and thereby to determine to a large degree the sorts of actions persons and institutions and communities will take when they find themselves in the stressful situation" (pp. 212-213). The disaster culture includes "those adjustments, actual and potential, social, psychological and physical, which are used by residents of such areas in their efforts to cope with disasters which have struck or which tradition indicates may strike in the future" (p. 195). Paradoxically, the disaster subculture (or more correctly, subculture themes) served both to define an appropriate emotional response to hurricanes, consisting of an often self-destructive pride in one's ability to face the danger, and rational elements that facilitated survival. Similarly, anthropologists (e.g., Cove [1978]) have pointed out that cultural myths are often the repository for disaster survival lore. In a comprehensive and systematic elaboration of the disaster subculture concept, Wenger and Weller [1973] and Wenger [1978] stress both organizational and subjective subculture components, and both adaptive and maladaptive aspects.

In the course of investigating community response to earthquake threat, following announcement by the U.S. Geological Survey of a vast uplift along the San Andreas fault that might be the precursor to a great earthquake in the Los Angeles region, we asked whether there was evidence of earthquake disaster themes in the regional subculture of southern California. Our data include a series of sample surveys of adults in Los Angeles from early 1977 to early 1979, a detailed record of newspaper and other media coverage, and reports on selected organizational and grass roots responses [Turner et al., 1979].

Wenger and Weller [1973] and Wenger [1978] have suggested three conditions that are crucial for development of disaster subcultural themes. Southern California earthquakes fit one of these conditions in producing "salient consequential damage," that cuts "across class and status lines in the community." While earthquake impact is repetitive, which is another of the proposed crucial considerations, disastrous quakes are relatively infrequent. And the seasonal periodicity that facilitates development of tornado, hurricane, and flood subculture