
■ CHAPTER 1 ■

What Makes a Tragedy Public?

Kenneth J. Doka

- Greg Harris and Dylan Klebold opened fire at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, killing 13 of their classmates and teachers before turning the weapons on themselves.
- In July 1999, the small plane piloted by John F. Kennedy, Jr., and carrying his wife and sister-in-law failed to land at its Cape Cod destination. An extensive search yielded the wreckage and the bodies of the three occupants.
- A tornado touched down on a small community in upstate New York. Slamming into an elementary school, it took the lives of seven children.
- On September 11, 2001, terrorists hijacked four planes. In attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, approximately 3,000 persons died.

All four of these illustrative events were different. All four had very different death tolls. Each had different causes and consequences. Yet each was a very public tragedy—the focus of national attention and mourning. In each there was extensive media coverage, considerable public attention, and debate.

This raises a critical question. What causes certain events to be perceived as a public tragedy? Kennedy's plane was not the only small plane to crash nor was Columbine the only school shooting. Yet these events were raised to

a level of public attention not shared by every other event. Deaths and disasters touch the lives of others daily. Everyday, hundreds or thousands of individuals experience personal, private tragedies. When and why does a tragedy become public?

DISASTER, TRAUMA, AND PUBLIC TRAGEDY

It is surprising that while there is much literature on specific public tragedies—witness the books published about 9/11—there is little written about public tragedy *sui generis*. There is considerable research on trauma and disaster. Trauma results when individuals directly experience extraordinary events that actually threaten survival (Janoff-Bulmen, 1992). These events, Janoff-Bulmen (1992) reminds, shatter our assumptions, that is, our underlying model of a safe, meaningful, and benevolent world.

Disasters are collective traumas. Barton defines disasters as “a collective stress that occurs when members of a social system fail to receive the expected conditions of life from their social system due to external or internal sources” (1970). Raphael, in her classic study, also notes that disasters test assumptions; they usually are overwhelming events that test the adaptational responses of communities or individuals beyond their capability and lead, at least temporarily, to massive disruptions of function (1986). Both Raphael (1986) and Barton (1970) acknowledge that disasters can be sudden, as a tornado, or gradual and prolonged, as in a famine or drought. Raphael describes the circles of impact ranging from those totally affected to those partially affected to those outside who might, at best, experience vicarious involvement. She also suggests those distinct roles individuals may play in a disaster: victims, rescuers, and helpers. Rescuers, for example, might be emergency personnel—intimately involved in search and recovery efforts (1986). Helpers may include medical personnel as well as those who bring supplies to the effected area. We might expand Raphael’s typology, making a distinction between victims who succumb to death or injury and survivors who are, at least physically, unscathed. We might also include “hidden victims.” These may encompass family members or others who experience loss in a disaster. For example, 9/11 left not only families mourning the dead, but also thousands who were unemployed.

While the literature of disaster can inform a discussion of public tragedy, it is critical to remember that the concepts are not identical. Not every disaster is necessarily a public tragedy. For example, the famine stemming from civil war in the Nigerian breakaway province of Biafra in the late 1960s aroused strong public interest. There were television specials and a major rock concert—all raising public attention, interest, and financial support. Yet only the victims and the relief agencies that attempt to alleviate the suffering notice other famines. Why is one famine a public tragedy worthy of international assistance when another goes unnoticed?

Nor is every public tragedy a disaster. Car fatalities, unfortunately, are not unusual. Few, unless the toll is massive, are perceived as public tragedies. Yet the death of Princess Diana clearly was perceived as public tragedy.

DEFINING A PUBLIC TRAGEDY

The American sociologist, C.W. Mills, once made a critical distinction between “private troubles” and “public issues” (1963). To Mills, private troubles had to do with an individual’s character or circumstances; public issues transcended the individual. For example, someone can drink too much, at some point, though, the fact that too many people drink too much raises a public issue: how does a society deal with alcoholism?

There is a critical question that arises from Mills’ work. How do private troubles become transformed into public issues? There are many private troubles common to a large number of individuals that never are addressed by the larger society. How do individuals transform private problems into public issues? Consider, for example, drinking and driving. For many years, individual families faced a private problem. Someone driving under the influence of alcohol caused a crash that killed a family member. Yet these individuals, sometimes repeat offenders, received minor sentences. Eventually, one mother turned her private grief into activism and formed the group, Mothers Against Drunk Driving. That made drinking and driving a public issue, ripe for social action.

There are numerous tragedies each year, ranging from plane and car crashes to natural disasters to acts of terrorism or violence. Of these numbers, how do some become defined as public tragedy, worthy of attention and action?

FACTORS INFLUENCING THE PUBLIC PERCEPTION OF TRAGEDY

As individuals sort through varied events, there are factors that influence public perception. These factors determine not only whether or not an event will be defined as a public tragedy. They also determine ways that individuals will perceive a tragedy and react and respond to it.

Scope

A significant factor in the perception of tragedy is scope. In any tragedy, there are circles of persons affected—victims, helpers, rescuers, survivors, family and friends, even those indirectly affected (e.g., those experiencing layoffs or dislocation). The larger the scope, the more likely a tragedy will be defined as a public one.

Moreover, large-scope tragedies demand a different response. When a tragedy affects a large number of people, it tends to overwhelm local resources. For example, the shooting at Columbine High School affected so many that local resources were insufficient to handle the needs of grieving and traumatized students and families. Individuals, too, may be overwhelmed by the multiple losses that they experience.

Yet the deaths of Princess Diana, John F. Kennedy, Jr., or Prime Minister Rabin remind us that scope is only one factor. Even small-scope events can become defined as public tragedy.

Identification

We identify with individuals to different degrees. The suicidal deaths of cult members, for example, may not engender as much personal identification as the random victims of a terrorist attack. We may not see ourselves, or even family members, as likely to join a self-destructive cult, but we do identify with the pain of individuals mourning the deaths of those who simply went to school or to work.

Part of identification involves an assumption of risk. Even in risky sports, for example, participants will evaluate the deaths of other participants, offering far less sympathy for a death that others perceive as due to the assumption of unnecessary risks (Doka, Schwarz, & Schwarz, 1990). Thus, the deaths of military personnel may draw less attention than that of noncombatants.

The process of identification is complex. We may identify with Princess Diana not on the basis of her unique status but on shared experiences. Many,

for example, mourned not so much the death of a princess as that of a young mother. We may identify with public figures because their lives were so public. We all watched John F. Kennedy, Jr., grow from toddler to adult. The point is that the greater the identification with the victim or victims, the greater the likelihood that the death will be defined as public tragedy.

Social Value

Every society has assumptions of social value. This means that in any given society, certain individuals or members of a class may have greater attribution of social worth than other individuals or different groups of people. This attribution of social value in any given society can be influenced by a number of variables, including race, age, social class, position, role, or family.

The greater the social value of the victims, the more likely an individual's death will be perceived as a public tragedy. For example, youth has a positive social value. The killings at Columbine sparked more attention than a similar shooting might have caused had it been at a nursing home. The deaths of individuals of such a high social value as Princess Diana, John F. Kennedy, Jr., or other celebrities or public figures are often perceived, in and of themselves, as public tragedy. It is important to recognize that as attributions of value change, so might the original perceptions or the tragedy. While the assassination of Israeli Prime Minister Rabin was considered a great public tragedy, the subsequent breakdown of peace efforts, in some ways a consequence of his death, have given his death even a greater pathos.

Consequences

This suggests another factor: the greater the consequences resulting from a tragic event, the more likely that event will be perceived, even retrospectively, as a public tragedy. The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, are mourned not only for the horrific loss of life but also for a national loss of a sense of safety, and an increased sense of vulnerability. These events are likely to lead to significant and structural changes in security systems. Should these changes erode civil liberties, that, too, will be mourned and contribute to the attribution of tragedy.

Duration

The duration of a tragedy also affects public perception and evaluation of an event. Most tragedies, such as 9/11, take place within a relatively short period of time—hours or days. Others, such as a famine or drought, may

unfold over a much longer time. Duration may have a mixed effect on whether or not an event is perceived as public tragedy. Events, such as a famine, that unfold over time can allow both recognition and organized efforts for support. Conversely, such events may fuel a sense of powerlessness that tax public interest.

The Natural-to-Human-Made Continuum

In an earlier work, (Doka, 1998), I described six factors that influenced responses to violent loss. These factors also affect responses to public tragedy. One of the most significant involves causality. We sometimes think about causality in terms of whether a tragedy is due to natural or human action. In fact, such a distinction is artificial. Most acts have, at least, some degree of human intention or omission. Some, such as the attacks of 9/11, are clearly on one end of this continuum—definitely the result of human action. Others, such as Hurricane Andrew, fall toward the natural end of the continuum. These tragedies result primarily from forces of nature—hurricanes, tornadoes, or earthquakes. Yet even here there may be elements of human involvement. For example, a number of years ago, I went to the Red River Valley of North Dakota to assist in the recovery efforts following the floods. The Red River is one of the rare rivers that flow north. Yet towns over the Canadian border were not flooded. The Canadian government had built a series of dams and dikes to control the floodwaters. The U.S. government had not because its cost-benefit analysis suggested that the likelihood of a devastating flood was remote, a once-in-500-years event. Even here, human decision making played a role.

This continuum affects public perception of tragedy in two ways. First, in rare cases, assumptions of cause, including assumptions of risk, may limit public sympathy and identification. There is little public sympathy for persons who cause tragedy. For example, enraged parents and supporters destroyed two markers placed by a church for all the adolescents and adults who died at Columbine. They wanted no symbol for the students who caused 13 deaths. Similarly, there might be less sympathy for victims of tragedy who are perceived to have had a role in their fate, whether as a result of a suicide pact or as a consequence of choosing to live in a flood plain.

Second, responses to tragedy may differ. Disasters more on the natural end of the continuum may threaten one's spirituality, evoking themes of unfairness, and even generating anger toward God. Those caused by human intention or indifference may direct anger toward others, either as perpetrators or scapegoats.

Degree of Intentionality

Another critical continuum is the degree of intentionality (Doka, 1996). Some tragedies clearly are due to the willful acts of another person. Others may involve the unintentional actions of another human being such as a train engineer inadvertently throwing a wrong switch. Still others, such as a pure natural disaster, may involve little or no human action or intention.

Intention affects public perception of tragedy in several ways. Events perceived as random are more likely to generate identification with victims. In such cases it reminds others that they all share risk—a collective there but for the grace of God go I. When someone or some group is perceived as intentionally causing the tragedy, however, there will be a different social response. The individual or group will be held responsible and face the collective wrath. One of the dangers of public tragedy is the tendency to scapegoat or assign blame on the innocent. For example, in the middle ages, European communities assigned blame for the plague pandemic to various groups—dissenters, heretics, Jews, or lepers—even as they too died of the disease. Assigning blame has social value beyond simply providing a convenient target for public anxiety and anger. By assigning blame, an illusion of safety and preventability can be maintained. It fosters a sense of control.

Degree of Expectedness

Traumatic events and disasters fall as well along a continuum of expectedness (Doka, 1996). Some events, such as a flood, may be predictable. For example, it was possible to predict the cresting of the Red River and ascertain the areas in danger. As a result, despite considerable damage to property, no one died in the flood. Other events, such as the Oklahoma City bombing are unpredictable. The more unpredictable an event is, the more likely it is to be perceived as a public tragedy. There will be retrospective analysis and reassignment of blame. The thought that an event such as 9/11 could not be predicted threatens any perception of future safety.

Degree of Preventability

Related to the degree of expectedness is the degree of preventability. Events such as a tornado may have limited degrees of preventability. Yet even here, blame may be appointed. For example, years ago I worked with a school that was hit by a tornado, killing seven children. In the aftermath, there was considerable debate. Were the walls properly reinforced? Was it wise to bring the children to the cafeteria during the tornado watch? In other circumstances

there may be even greater debates. After Columbine, for example, there were questions about whether or not the perpetrators' parents, friends, or teachers could have prevented that tragedy and the larger debates ranging from the culture of adolescence to the availability of guns.

Generally, the more unpreventable an event is, the more likely it will be perceived as tragic. Nonetheless these debates serve a critical function in public tragedy. Not only do they help define the tragedy, they serve to mediate it. The policies and practices, the lessons learned that emerge from tragedy may prevent future tragedies and reestablish a sense of safety. More importantly, they provide meaning and purpose to the tragic event—a form of “benefit finding” that mitigates grief.

Perception of Suffering

A last element that influences the definition of an event as a public tragedy is the perception of suffering. In some events, such as a plane explosion, survivors may take comfort that victims died instantly, unaware of danger or death. In other situations, not knowing whether family members suffered or being aware that they did may trouble individuals. The attacks on the World Trade Center are full of horrific images of individuals making a final phone call describing the carnage and death. Meanwhile, other survivors are haunted because they cannot reconstruct a coworker's or family member's last moments. The greater the perception of suffering, the more likely an event will be perceived as public tragedy.

HOW DOES A TRAUMATIC EVENT BECOME A PUBLIC TRAGEDY?

Public tragedies, it is clear, are more than simply traumatic events. A traumatic event becomes a public tragedy when there is a collective definition of that event as a significant calamity. This appraisal of any given event is likely to be idiosyncratic, but it involves some combination of the factors of scope, identification, social value of the victims, consequences, duration, causation, intentionality, predictability, preventability, and perception of suffering. Some combination of these factors will arouse public perception of the event, focusing attention and eliciting societal responses and collective actions.

In defining an event as a public tragedy, it is critical to remember the definition of the word *public*—a group of people with a shared interest. Most tragedies have many publics. For example, 9/11 affected victims, families,

survivors, rescuers, military, airline employees, residents of metropolitan New York and Washington, Americans generally, and others throughout the world. Most of these publics shared a definition of the event as an unparalleled and horrendous tragedy. Yet each of these publics was affected differently by the event—some directly, others more indirectly. As time goes on, the interests in the event also will differ. Within the first year, there already has been conflict among some of these publics about the future of the site, the appropriateness of memorials, and the disbursement of funds.

This concept explains as well the differential responses to a tragedy. Some publics or groups may be totally unaffected. For some, the death of Princess Diana was a major tragedy. For others, it was sad and unfortunate but of no major significance to their lives.

ROLE OF THE NEWS MEDIA

The news media play a critical role in defining public tragedy. They report what happened, describe its significance, and suggest social action. Beyond these functions, the news media influence in other ways. By the very allocation of time and space in coverage, the news media help frame the perception of the tragedy. While there may be debate about the degree to which the news media shape or reflect public interest, the amount of coverage testifies to the importance of the event. The fact that 9/11 pre-empted regular television and radio programming and dominated the print media for days was a continuing reaffirmation of the significance of the tragedy.

The news media also create identification. Barton (1970) cites an example of a headline in a Catholic newspaper, early in the 20th century. The headline read, "Tornadoes Strike Southwest, No Catholics Killed." Moreover, the news media select spokespersons, often from among victims or families, thereby validating their role and helping shape public sympathy and response.

CONCLUSION

One of the clichés of public tragedy is that life will never be the same after one. For some individuals, life does not change; they resume the basic rhythms of their lives as the immediacy of the tragedy recedes. But for others, life really does change. Those immediately affected must cope with their losses and grief. For them, basic assumptions of life may be shattered. The world no longer seems benign. This may lead to a sense of anxiety and fear. Individuals may

also experience a spiritual crisis. They may feel that their lives now have no purpose or goals, or that their constructs—the ways they view the world—are bankrupt, that their spirituality is threatened. For many survivors, tragedy leaves a terrible imprint. On a larger scale, some tragedies can fracture a community, creating conflict and division. This, too, can contribute to an individual's sense of loss (Eriksen, 1976).

Yet for others, this may lead to attempts to reconstruct a sense of order, to rebuild shattered assumptions. Sometimes these attempts themselves are illusionary. In an earlier book, Jack Gordon and I (2000) described the phenomenon of “resonating trauma,” in which people focus their generalized anxiety on a specific “expected” event. For example, following 9/11, rumors abounded that there would be a major attack on a shopping mall on October 31. When these attacks failed to materialize, persons could once again feel safe.

Other attempts to reconstruct may be far more resilient. In the aftermath of a tragedy, some persons may experience considerable growth. They may have a changed sense of self—seeing themselves now as stronger. They may reprioritize relationships, developing and enhancing ties with others. Individuals may experience a sense of existential and spiritual growth (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2001). They may find new purposes, goals, and meanings, develop more resilient constructs, and even find secondary gains in their experience of loss such as new skills or insights that mitigate grief (Davis & Nlen-Hocksima, 2001).

Collectively, too, public tragedy can strengthen even as it injures. There may be a new collective unity and sense of purpose. In time, tragedies may lead to collective actions that create new policies and change the social order. The horror of the Triangle Shirt Factory fire not only shocked a nation but also created support for legislation to improve occupational safety.

Grief, collective or individual, can generate growth. This process takes time, however, and that is why hospices, community mental health centers, and funeral grief programs are so critical. They remain in the community long after disaster relief agencies have left, donations have ceased, and public attention has turned to a new tragedy. ■

Kenneth J. Doka is a Professor of Gerontology at the Graduate School of The College of New Rochelle and Senior Consultant to the Hospice Foundation of America. Dr. Doka has written or edited 16 books and published more than 60 articles and book chapters. He is editor of both Omega and Journeys: A Newsletter for the Bereaved. Dr. Doka was elected President of the Association for Death Education and Counseling (ADEC) in 1993. He was elected to the Board of the International Work Group on Dying, Death and Bereavement in 1995, and served as chair from 1997 to 1999. ADEC presented him with an Award for Outstanding Contributions in the Field of Death Education in 1998. In 2000 Scott and White presented him an award for Outstanding Contributions to Thanatology and Hospice. Dr. Doka is an ordained Lutheran minister.

REFERENCES

- Barton, P. (1970). *Communities in disaster: A sociological analysis of collective stress situations*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday.
- Calhoun, L., & Tedeschi, R. (2001). Posttraumatic Growth: The Positive Lessons of Loss. In R.A. Neimeyer (Ed.) *Meaning reconstruction and the experience of loss*. (pp.157-172). Washington, DC: The American Psychological Association.
- Davis, C., & Nlen-Hocksima, S. (2001). Loss and meaning: How do people make sense of loss? *American Behavioral Scientist* 44, 726-741.
- Doka, K.J., Schwarz, E., & Schwarz, C. (1990). Risky business: observations on the nature of death in hazardous sports. *Omega* 21, 215-224.
- Doka, K.J., (1996). *Living with grief: After sudden loss*. Washington DC: Hospice Foundation of America.
- Eriksen, K.T. (1976). *Everything in its path: Destruction of community in the Buffalo Creek Flood*. New York: Simon & Schuster. .
- Gordon, J.D., & Doka, K.J. (2000). Resonating trauma: A theoretical note. In K.J. Doka (Ed.) *Living with grief: Children, adolescents, and loss*. (pp. 291-293). Washington, DC: The Hospice Foundation of America.
- Mills, C.W. (1963). *Power, politics and people: The Collected essays of C. Wright Mills*. New York: Oxford Press.
- Raphael, B. (1986). *When disaster strikes: How individuals and communities cope with catastrophe*. NY: Basic Books.
- Thomas, W.I. (1937). *The unadjusted girl*. Boston: Little Brown.