Disaster Victim Identification: A Social Science Perspective

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Abstract : Albeit it is never possible to anticipate the full range of difficulties after a catastrophe, efforts to identify victims of mass casualty events have become institutionalized and standardized with the aim of effectively and efficiently addressing the many challenges and contingencies. Such 'disaster victim identification' (DVI) practices are dependent on the forensic sciences, are subject of national legislation, and are reliant on technical and organizational protocols to mitigate the many complexities in the wake of catastrophe. Apart from such technological, legal and bureaucratic elements constituting a DVI operation, victims' families and their emotions are also part and parcel of any effort to identify casualties of mass human fatality incidents. Take for example the fact that forensic experts require (antemortem) information from the group of relatives to make identification possible. An identified body or body part is also repatriated to kin. Relatives are thus main stakeholders in DVI operations. Much has been achieved in years past regarding facilitating victims' families' issues and their emotions. Yet, how families are dealt with by experts and authorities is still considered a difficult topic. Due to sensitivities and required emphatic interaction with families on the one hand, and the rationalized DVI efforts, on the other hand, there is still scope for improving communication, providing information and meaningful inclusion of relatives in the DVI effort. This paper aims to bridge the standardized world of DVI efforts and families' experienced realities and makes suggestions to further improve DVI efforts through inclusion of victims' families. Based on qualitative interviews, the paper narrates involvement and experiences of inter alia DVI practitioners, victims' families, advocates and clergy in the wake of the 1995 Srebrenica genocide which killed approximately 8,000 men, and the 9/11 in New York City with 2,750 victims. The paper shows that there are several models of including victims' families into a DVI operation, and it argues for a model of where victims' families become a partner in DVI operations.