

inSocialWork Podcast Series

Episode 84 - Dr. Joshua Miller: Connection and Hope: Psychosocial Capacity Building in Response to Disasters

[00:00:08] Welcome to living proof a podcast series of the University at Buffalo School of Social Work at www.socialwork.buffalo.edu. We're glad you could join us today. The series Living Proof examines social work research and practice that makes a difference in people's lives. I'm your host Adjoa Robinson and I'd like to take a moment to address you our regular listeners. We know you have enjoyed the living proof podcast as evidenced by the more than 150000 downloads to date thanks to all of you. We'd like to know what value you may have found in the podcast. We'd like to hear from all of you practitioners researchers students but especially our listeners who are social work educators. How are you using the podcast in your classrooms. Just go to our website at www.socialwork.buffalo.edu forward slash podcast and click on the contact us tab. Again thanks for listening and we look forward to hearing from you. Sorry Boston San Jose Seattle and Austin. Buffalo has been ranked number one by Forbes magazine as the best city for working mothers for the year 2011. Oh by the way Buffalo is also home to one of working mothers Magazine's Best Companies the State University of New York at Buffalo. Hi again I'm Peter Sobota. In this episode Dr. Joshua Miller discusses the many types of disasters that affect people around the world and how to help individuals and communities recover.

[00:01:58] In the course of his conversation Dr. Miller contrasts the traditional individually focused disaster mental health response with what he calls the psychosocial capacity building an approach that highlights the social ecology of a disaster and which takes a Multisystemic approach that addresses the social support and connections that exist in groups and communities. Dr. Miller calls for a collaborative approach that goes beyond traditional clinical interventions to something in the truest tradition of social work. A response that utilizes the social ecology of the environment the disaster has occurred. Dr. Miller concludes his discussion by describing what he believes is the role of social workers in psychosocial capacity building and offers recommendations for coping with vicarious trauma and self care for social workers engaged in practice in this area. Dr. Joshua Miller is a professor at Smith College School for Social Work where he is the cochair of the human behavior in the social environment sequence. His academic and research interests include anti-racism and responding to disasters. He has worked with survivors of many disasters on the local national and international level including Hurricane Katrina. September 11th the Asian tsunami and various communities affected by armed conflict around the world to name but a few. He has published numerous articles and presents regularly at conferences and community organizations regarding anti-racism and disasters. Dr. Miller received his MSW from the University of Washington and his Ph.D. from the University of Connecticut School of Family Studies. Dr. Miller was interviewed by Dr. Lisa Butler associate professor here at the School of Social Work. Today we'll be speaking about psychosocial capacity building in response to disasters. Let's sort of started the beginning with some basic questions. What do you mean when you use the term disaster and what are its consequences. Good question.

[00:04:04] I think one thing I want to stress is that a disaster is not just an event like a hurricane or an earthquake or a nuclear power plant meltdown it's a process. And what I mean by that is that there's an event like the ones I just mentioned but there is something I call the social ecology of disaster which are the surrounding socio cultural historical variables and processes that shape what happens. So for example if we look at Hurricane Katrina there was a history of racism that led to African-Americans living in New Orleans living in poorer neighborhoods having less access to jobs et cetera. And they were therefore more vulnerable when the hurricane struck and certain things collapsed like the levees. Therefore there was a process that has affected New Orleans that is still continuing to this day. So it's not like a disaster is just something that happens that there's a

beginning and a clear and there are conditions that shape it from before it even occurs. This sounds like it's related to the term I've heard used about the disaster after the disaster the second disaster the consequences of the event of a hurricane. I get from trying to stress that there are even things before it happen that make people and communities more prone to what we would consider a disaster. But you're right the response to a disaster the narrative that emerge after a disaster the resources available the amount of social cohesion or lack of social cohesion all of those things shape and influence how people respond and recover when this type of thing happens. This sounds like in some ways the before the events factor sound like risk factors for communities.

[00:05:58] Is that how you think of them risk factors is certainly one aspect of it. But I guess there are things like resources and capacities social networks and social capital there are things that divide communities or unite communities. Things like racism sexism homophobia inequalities in wealth and there are political dynamics as well. And then there's also the history of the community so that some communities are used to hurricanes. They had them all the time. Wow. The same event in another community would be a major disaster. But getting back to the question you asked me about how I would define a disaster I think some of the things about it are that it affects multiple people. It's not just something that affects one or two people. There's a lot of damage. There's a lot of destruction Lot's wife. And I think there are private and public dimensions to it so that there is private suffering. But it always unveils itself in the context of public suffering that disaster tends to be outside of the normal experience of most people who are engaged with it and people find that overwhelming and normal usual social supports and social systems are disrupted. So what would help people recover from a disaster given all that what's a really good question. Because there's different schools of thought and the kind of prevailing way of responding to disasters in the United States particularly by clinical people like social workers or psychologists has been something called the field of disaster mental health which is offering things like psychological first aid which I could tell you more about and other types of kind of short term crisis intervention responses.

[00:07:38] But what I've been working on and a lot of people around the world have been thinking about is something called psychosocial capacity building which really integrates the psychological and the social in a way that social work has stressed from its inception where you don't just focus on individuals but it's important to focus on communities families using groups helping people feel connected. So there's research that shows there's about five to eight things that really seem to help people after disaster and psychosocial capacity building in response to all of those things in a multi-dimensional multi systemic way. This sounds like something that would be started as a prevention prior to these kinds of events. Or is it only in the aftermath. No no absolutely. And I think it's hard to even separate prevention from intervention and response because like when I was working in Taiwan where there are typhoons that happen all the time and affect the lodges people feel a sense of mastery and feel less vulnerable when they are working on prevention when they're working on early warning systems and evacuation plans. So that having just survived the typhoon it helps them to feel as if they are more able to withstand the next typhoon which is likely to come sometime over the next few years. So prevention is really important but it also is actually an intervention. At the same time it's more like a circle. Sure training understand the range of what's encompassed by psychosocial capacity building. Can you tell me a little bit more. Well for example the first thing I talked about disaster mental health is really based on kind of Western psychiatric approach where there's a focus on trauma.

[00:09:24] Although in almost any disaster the minority of people who experience that develop full blown post-traumatic stress disorder. This is focused on the individual at the expense of the family group and community. It relies on experts like us to diagnose and to treat people which can create hierarchy's. There's a Western notion of professional boundaries which doesn't seem to fit when there are disasters and it's not sustainable because a lot of times when disasters occur like in Haiti there aren't psychotherapists so that once the outside therapists come in and help people they will

leave at some point. And it's also culturally often not the way that people like to be helped. They're not used to talking about their feelings for example with strangers. Second social capacity building in contrast to this strength and resiliency base it's based on the premise that everybody has inherent strengths have sources of resiliency have encountered crises before in their lives. And even if they're temporarily overwhelmed they can access these with some help and support. It connects psychological well-being with social well-being. You can't really separate this. If a community is starting to recover it helps individuals to recover and vice versa. It respects natural healing processes so that if there are spiritual practices or indigenous practices that people are used to then second social capacity building would think about how can those be reconstituted and reactivated rather than bringing in an alien type of healing process. So local people and local resources are utilized strongly in psychosocial capacity building and culture is very much centralized rather than seen as an add on to go back to a definitional question use the term resiliency.

[00:11:26] And I'm interested in how you think of that term I think resiliency like everything else is culturally bound. So what is considered resiliency one cultural context is not necessarily the same in another in the West. There's a real emphasis on taking matters into your own hands. You're responsible for your own faith and in other cultures there's sometimes more of an emphasis on collective empowerment or on karma so that the same value system doesn't apply. So when we think of what is resiliency it can be difficult to come up with a universal definition but there's a guy named George Bonanno at Teachers College. And his definition is the one that I try to use which is basically the recovery and maintenance of adaptive meaningful life trajectories in the face of disruptive overwhelming or life threatening events. What do you see the role of social workers in psychosocial capacity building and enhancing resilience. Well I think that social workers first of all need to take a stance that is collaborative and work with local people affected by a disaster and really seek their wisdom and ask questions and I'll go through a few other points. But if you'd like I can give you a case example might be able to flesh this out a little bit so it's not come in as the experts. That's a really community partners. Second thing is that I think accessing and fostering positive emotions has been shown by a lot of research to really help people recover. So not just focusing on what people lost and their suffering which is incredibly important. We have to be able to listen to that to help people process that and to understand what happened to them. They also need to engage with other people.

[00:13:19] They need to do activities. One of the things I've found is the group work helps a lot. Particularly with kids but also with adults whether it's doing crafts together drama music storytelling activities like that can feel good. The Empowering connect with traditional cultural practices and kind of re-establish a sense of normalcy that has been lost by the disaster. And they also enhance social connections between individuals families and social groups like mutual aid and support groups. Very much do that. And again research shows that social connections are among the most important things that help people recover and other things social workers can do is just help people tell their stories whether that's listening to people individually whether that's working on a quilt or some kind of mural where people are basically describing what happened to them in a collective way and something that Wessells and Monteiro stressed which is really important. People lose their social roles after a disaster whether that's being a parent who's a breadwinner and caretaker or a social role in the community. So helping people to reclaim and re-establish social roles is something that can be very empowering and very helpful. And the last thing I want to just say is that there's a woman named Judith Wireman who wrote a really great article called The link between emotions and economics and basically that social empowerment economic development and individual well-being Go Together Again social work ethic as a profession. Well positioned to engage with all of those different types of activities how your interest in disasters and and resilience develop. Do you mind giving me some background on this.

[00:15:09] The truth is there was I'm 63 years old and there was a fairly major event that happened

to me when I was 25 I was working as a social worker in London. I had just graduated from the University of Washington School for Social Work and I was working with a woman who was trying to leave her husband and he murdered her in front of her six children. And that's a pretty catastrophic event. But for me what happened is that I developed what we would today call vicarious trauma or secondary trauma. But back then which was in the mid 70s there was no recognition of that. So that was something that affected me and I processed it and I went through it. But it really kind of sensitized me to what it's like to experience overwhelming types of events and worker. So I became involved with community teams that supported firefighters and police officers and clinicians and other people who were experiencing some kind of vicarious traumatization or compassion fatigue from their work. And from that I started expanding out volunteering with the Red Cross and moving from local tragedies and disasters to national and then eventually international disasters. So when you're teaching your students now about disaster do you do a special segment on secondary traumatic stress. What do you teach them about working with individuals have been traumatized because certainly caring professionals are at risk themselves. Absolutely yeah. No I in the book that I have coming out there's an entire chapter that focuses on the risks of helping people when there had been disasters or other trauma inducing situations.

[00:16:53] And I really focus a lot on how people can protect themselves before they're exposed to this how they can identify when they are experiencing things that are overwhelming and where they really need to seek help. And what are the ways they can care for themselves whether it's exercising or hanging out with friends or listening to music that type of thing. So I teach my students that every class I begin with a mindfulness activity and I end it with mindfulness activity. And I do that with each chapter in my book as well. You can't stress self care too strongly. I think in our profession in general particularly when you're doing the kind of work that we're discussing I absolutely agree. I've been actually very involved in developing a software program here at Eubie and so I'm particularly interested in this issue of students and ultimately professionals being exposed as part of their work and how to avoid that how to limit the consequences of that. I'm very interested about how you got involved with this how your views have changed over time from going from this initial dreadful event that you described early on. And I guess I'm interested in how you develop this idea of psychosocial capacity building as being essential to helping people cope. You know it certainly began doing this work by doing again I would call disaster mental health types of activities. So I learned how to do debriefings and I still use them and they're very helpful particularly for uniformed people who have experienced overwhelming situations. I would do psychological first aid when I would go out with the Red Cross so and a lot of psychological crisis intervention types of approaches.

[00:18:39] Could you describe a little bit about what psychological first aid involves psychological first aid involves immediate engagement with the person to relieve their suffering. And that's offering compassion. It's offering information. It's responding to their immediate emotions and trying to help them to calm themselves and themselves. Connect them with their usual support systems and if those aren't available to help reconstruct some support systems for them. It's really all of the things that we do with crisis intervention. But in a disaster kind of setting it's very short term and if you're responding to a disaster with the Red Cross and you're walking through a neighborhood you might be doing psychological first aid with 50 people in a day who you're not going to see again but you're just trying to help them get through the initial stress trauma and feelings of being overwhelmed that they are experiencing from a disaster and also helping them on a concrete level. How can they find out about missing relatives if they're diabetic how can they get insulin that type of thing. I think when I really shifted as when I went to Sri Lanka for two months after the Asian tsunami which I think was about five or six years ago I was working with camels in eastern Sri Lanka where there was also a civil war going on and I realized I don't really know anything. I think I know all this stuff about like this helps to talk about your feelings. Well they didn't believe it did help them talk about your feelings. If somebody would be standing there talking

to me about how he lost two children and he'd be smiling and I realized there was something going on culturally that I didn't get.

[00:20:20] I started to shift my approach then I was training volunteers about how to help people recover and I realize training them how could I train them. I didn't really know about Tamil culture I didn't really know about Hinduism. What I needed to do was ask questions and I would ask questions and I and I started to develop this method which for example I used in Haiti where there were so many deaths from the earthquake that people couldn't grieve and mourn in the way that they traditionally do in Haiti. And I realized that I don't know how Haitians grieve and more. But what I do know is that it's important to grieve and mourn when so many people have died and that that wasn't happening. So I would ask questions like how the Haitians usually have funerals. What kind of rituals do you have. And people were really happy to tell me about that. They were experts about that. And then I have to ask a question like well what's gotten in the way of doing that since the earthquake. Well they knew a lot about that too many bodies. We didn't recover a lot of bodies. Neighbors can't visit neighbors because they're overwhelmed by the volume of deaths etc. and then the big question was OK given how you usually grow even more and given what's gotten in the way of your ability to do that what can you as a community or as a group creatively do to reconstruct grieving and mourning rituals that will reconnect people with one another. And people respond to that.

[00:21:47] And so what I realized is I'm not sharing my expertise about how to grieve and mourn what I'm doing is providing a kind of container an inquisitive presence and witness basically to try and help people think it out themselves. And then the more I did the more I realize this doesn't just apply internationally the United States has an incredibly diverse country with many different cultural traditions and local and regional variations and that it's really important for those of us responding to disasters to not go in and tell people what to do or directly try to help them but rather to try and set up a process where their rivers start to flow again and that they can then start floating what they've created. It sounds like it's a matter of in part coming in and saying what you need. How would you do this with a framework like framework like you'd asked me earlier what helps people to recover. There was a study by Haab fall and about 25 collaborators that was an international study about what are the things that essentially help people to respond after they've encountered from antigenic events fall and his colleagues found is that one of the most important things is to help people to reclaim a sense of safety and prevention planning. For example can be a way that people can start to feel safer. Although there are lots of other things that can also help people feel safer. The second thing is to help people to be able to calm themselves because that's often lost after there's a disaster. And most of us know ways to do that whether it's through being with other people whether it's breathing exercises meditation with lots of ways to help people calm themselves. Whatever the rage. The third thing they found is a sense of self and community efficacy.

[00:23:43] So the kind of questions that I was sharing with you earlier very much helps people whether it's individuals or groups or communities to feel like they have knowledge. They have the skills they have understanding where they can help themselves so that helps create a sense of efficacy. The first thing they found with connections with people and resources so as I was saying all the things like groups and these kinds of meetings and discussions helped connect people with other people. And the last thing they found is people feel a sense of hope that you can lose your hope. There's a woman named Judith Landauer who talks about the disruption of transitional pathways where after a disaster people lose their connection with their past because they can't practice their cultural practices and they lose their connection with the future because they lose their hope. So I think reconnecting people with their past and helping people to see a future is an important aspect of helping people recover from disaster. How does one instill our enhance hope in somebody who's experienced one of these disasters. I mean how does one lose from hopelessness to

hope. Let me give you a case example that I think ties together a lot of abstract things I've been talking about. So when I was in Haiti I went to a small village in the southwest that was affected by the earthquake. It was a rural town that didn't have electricity water and it was basically subsistence farming that was the major economic engine of that community.

[00:25:20] And almost as soon as I got there I met a young man who had been a university student in Port au Prince and he had been at the University when the earthquake occurred. He had invited his fiance to visit him at the university. The earthquake happened. The building collapsed. She was killed so he could see her body. He couldn't get to her. He was injured but not in any kind of major way. When I met him was living in this community. He got back to his home and he was depressed. He was anxious. He was agitated. He had no hope for the future whatsoever. He said that over and over again my future has been taken from me. I have nothing left. And he had survivor guilt. He felt that he was responsible for his fiance's death. So I did some of the kinds of things I described earlier psychological first aid. I listened to him. I normalized his reactions. Helped him to develop strategies that he could go into buildings and manage panic attacks. And I confronted some of his beliefs about having caused his fiancé's death but that couldn't give him hope. So in this village one of the reasons I went was that there was a local non-governmental organization NGO in this village trying to get volunteers to help the village recover from the earthquake. And I talked to the leader of this organization and I said and we'll call this guy Wilson. But he talked about Wilson being a volunteer. What about Wolf from telling his story about what he's been going through and sharing this with other people and seeing if he can help other people who have gone through similar things.

[00:27:06] And the leader of the volunteers said Yeah great idea. So that fits in with what psychologists who study positive emotions have found which is that not only connections with other people but altruism helping other people. It gives people hope it helps them to feel better about themselves. It helps them to move and to do things and to get active and they can see that they're helping other people. And so Wilson became a volunteer. And as it turned out he was actually a very talented volunteer. And so he did things like he organized volunteers to do skits about the earthquake and the skits were incredibly vivid. They had people lying on the ground and moaning and bodies. I mean in some ways he was playing out what he experienced and what other people had experienced. But they would always end on a more hopeful note. There would always be something about Haitian character or Haitian culture or Haitian history that led them to believe that they were going to rise again that they had encountered a lot of adversity not only in their own lives but as a country and as a people and that they had the capacity to withstand this kind of adversity and to continue to move forward. He developed a rap contest between different groups. But the thing was that each rap song had to talk about something that happened to people during the earthquake and something that was hopeful. And so then the small groups working on the rap songs had to think for themselves what those things were. So in a sense Wilson was doing with those small groups.

[00:28:44] What I was describing to you I try to do within a community when I come into it I'm still in touch with Wilson by e-mail and this is what about a year and a half since I've worked with him. He's the leader of this organization of volunteers now and he says basically that doing this as he put it gave him his life back. Those are his words. That's just an example of how hope can be rekindled through engagement in helping other people and connection with others. That's terrific example in thinking about psychosocial capacity building if you had an opportunity to briefly speak with disaster mental health folks and make a pitch for the sort of broader idea of psychosocial capacity building what would you say what do you think the most important thing is that needs to be heard. The most important thing is that every village every community every family and every person have learned things in their lives that about how to deal with adversity. Some of the things are not particularly functional and other things have gotten them through real challenges in their lives. And I think that as experts or as responders our job is to help people to rediscover what those things are

or to reconstruct them in a way that is meaningful and useful in the face of a changed landscape of a community that may have been destroyed of cultural practices that have to be reworked because they can't be used in the same way. So it got to be the main thing that I would really want to stress. Well thank you so much for speaking with us today. It's been a great pleasure hearing about your work. Well thanks for asking me about it.

[00:30:37] You've been listening to Dr. Joshua Miller discuss psychosocial capacity building in response to disasters and living proof. Hi I'm Nancy Smyth Professor and dean at the University of Buffalo School of Social Work. Thanks for listening to our podcast. For more information about who we are our history our programs and what we do. We invite you to visit our website at www.socialwork.buffalo.edu. AT UB we are living proof that social work makes a difference in people's lives.