

# Book Review

Stallings, R.A. (ed). 2002. *Methods of Disaster Research*.  
International Research Committee on Disasters: U.S. 524pp.

## Book Review: Heidi Ellemor, Emergency Management Australia.

*Methods of Disaster Research* is a much needed volume that will provide both new and experienced disaster researchers with insight into the particular challenges of conducting disaster research. The volume includes a refreshing combination of thoughtful commentary from some of the world's leading specialists in disaster research as well as researchers newer to the field. Importantly, it provides insight into key methodological challenges, as well as grounded advice on the implementation of the research process and particular research methods in the disaster context.

*Methods of Disaster Research* is borne of the breadth and depth of disaster research in the United States, with numbers of disaster researchers, levels of research funding and an institutional history of dedicated disaster research centres that differs markedly from the disaster research context in Australia. Despite, and perhaps because of these differences, the volume offers much of relevance for individual researchers and the collective field of disaster research in Australia.

The volume contains 16 chapters, divided into four sections. Following on from a thought provoking introductory chapter on the question of uniqueness and disaster research methods by Stallings, the first section considers the *context* of disaster research. This section includes a reprint (with new preface) of Killian's 1956 paper of surprising contemporary relevance "An introduction to methodological problems of field studies in disasters" and a chapter by

Quarantelli on the development of the Disaster Research Centre and its role in field studies of organised behaviour in the crisis period of disasters. In the final chapter in this section, Drabek provides valuable insight to the opportunities posed by disaster research, and the art of posing interesting and problem-focused questions and implementing alternative research methods.



The second part of the volume (*continuities*), provides commentaries on particular research specialties and methods including survey research (Bourque, Shoaf and Nguyen), qualitative research methods (Phillips), the economics of natural disasters (Yezer), cross-national and comparative disaster research (Peacock), media studies (Lombardi) and historical approaches to disaster research (Scanlon).

Particular challenges and *prospects* for the field are contained in Part 3 of the volume through discussions of electronic media and the globalisation of data collection (Dombrowsky), the use of geographic information systems in disaster research (Dash) disaster research issues in the developing world (Khondker) and a consideration of social change and the practice of disaster fieldwork

(Tierney). Part 4 (*postscript*) rounds off the volume with reflections on the role of public-private partnerships in disaster research (Davidson). The *appendix* (Part 5) contains a useful annotated index of internet resources compiled by Butler that will prove useful at least in the shorter term.

Above all, Drabek's statements about disaster research methods for the future stand out—that is to always start with an interesting and problem focused question; to select or develop methods required to pursue the question posed, and to "always keep in mind the real promise of disaster research—to prevent or ameliorate human suffering" (p153). As he notes, research is fundamental in developing new theories and testing and revising old notions, "[b]ut insights for practitioners must also be produced as we join other disciplines in the professionalisation of emergency management" (p153). Importantly, this theme is emphasised throughout the volume, for example in Tierney's (chapter 15) discussion of recent trends towards better integration of research and practice and Khondker's (chapter 14) emphasis on the ongoing and parallel importance of education and research in the training of disaster professionals.

Overall, this is an important volume. Whilst providing useful advice on the application of disaster research methods, *Methods of Disaster Research* offers thoughtful commentary on trends in disaster research and disaster management more generally. It is a volume that will be of much interest to new and established researchers and it will prove useful in the professional training of disaster managers.