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From Individual to Community: The "Framing" of 4-16 and the Display of Social Solidarity

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On April 16, 2007, a lone gunman killed 32 people at Virginia Tech. In this essay, we discuss what we personally experienced on 4-16 and what we did as faculty members of the sociology department in the first few weeks after 4-16. We place these events in the context of framing theory and the social construction of reality. We then offer insights regarding the surge in community spirit we witnessed immediately after the event. We discuss the well-documented relationship between tragedies and social solidarity. Although the surge in solidarity witnessed at Virginia Tech after the shootings often occurs after tragedies, we argue that social solidarity does not automatically follow tragedy. Instead, the tragedy must meet at least four specific conditions that allow individual interpretations of the event to blend with collective interpretations in a manner that produces a synergistic effect.

Keywords: mass trauma; school violence; mass media; community; disaster recovery

In the physical world, distance is often required to obtain a broader view—a sense of scale and proportion needed to expand horizons. Often it is the same with social events, where mental horizons limit our view of events (Zerubavel, 1997). On April 16, we experienced the unfolding events in a confused and partial way. Our experience was confused and partial not only because of a lack of information about what was happening, but also because the events did not fit neatly into available schema for understanding, doing, and feeling.

In this essay, we will discuss what we saw and experienced on 4-16. We will then discuss what, as faculty members of the sociology department, we did in the wake of 4-16. We also offer an interpretation of what others, particularly students, did in the weeks that followed the tragedy. We then offer insights we have gained from experiencing and witnessing the events of 4-16 and observing the response to those events. Our insights deal with the well-documented increase in social solidarity that often follows tragedies (Carroll et al., 2006; Collins, 2004; Drabek, 1986; Durkheim, [1915] 1966; Erikson, 1976; Pijawka, Cuthbertson, & Olson, 1987; Quarantelli & Dyanes, 1976; Sweet, 1998; Turkel, 2002). However, we argue that social solidarity does not necessarily follow tragedy; instead, a set of specific conditions allows individual interpretations of the event to blend with collective interpretations in a manner that produces a synergistic effect.

What We Saw and Experienced

For us it began with a rumor of a shooting in the Ambler-Johnson dormitory. Our administrative assistant's daughter has an office in that building, and she called her mother to say that the building had been "locked down." She cautioned her mother that the gunman may still be at large and to lock the doors to the main office. Sometime later we heard from another daughter of our administrative assistant. She had been listening to a police scanner, and there was a report of a shooting in Norris Hall. About the same

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time, we heard sirens and watched from our office windows as police surrounded Norris. Almost simultaneously, we received e-mail and phone messages from university officials to lock our doors and stay away from the windows. The events seemed more appropriate to a nightmare than a state university. We watched as law enforcement officers swarmed Norris Hall. We watched as waves of students, faculty, staff, and administrators fled the building with their arms waving above their heads. We watched as the wounded were brought out on stretchers or carried out by their bloodied limbs. We watched a community transformed before our eyes.

As we watched, we struggled for meaning—what *is* this? To follow our earlier analogy, there was struggle to gain the appropriate perspective, the wider view, or what in sociology is referred to as a "frame"—a concept somewhat analogous to the concept of "schema" in cognitive psychology (see DiMaggio, 1997 for a review of the utility of findings from cognitive psychology for sociology). As Goffman notes, frames are critical to being and action: "*self . . . is not an entity half-concealed behind events, but a changeable formula for managing oneself during them"* (Goffman, 1986, p. 573). Or, as Gitlin (2003, p. 6) writes, "Frames are principles of selection, emphasis and presentation composed of little tacit theories about what exists, what happens, and what matters." So, behind the question, "What *is* this?" was the fundamental question, "What should I be *doing*?" Am I in danger? Are my loved ones in danger? Are my colleagues/friends in danger? The most fundamental aim of these questions undoubtedly deals with self-preservation. However, as we analyze further throughout this essay, catastrophic events are undeniably social. Later we will talk about the social effects at the community level, but at this level of personal experience, the event is experienced socially as a threat to identity.

Fortunately for these authors, the answer to each of the above questions was, "My family, friends, and I are alive and unharmed." These conclusions seemed to leave us with no required action but to theorize,[1] empathize, and experience the breaking down of our normal frame for university life. But in fact there was more. Goffman's careful analysis of social interaction is again instructive. Goffman (1967) terms events like those of April 16 as "fateful events" that disrupt the routine of everyday life. In this disruption, carefully built-up notions of self, reputation, status, and resources are in jeopardy. The challenge during fateful events is to demonstrate "strong character" or "self-command." In other words, and although we did not articulate it, those of us witnessing these events, along with those participating more directly, felt the pressure to make an adequate demonstration of our ability to control our reactions and prove our character. At the same time, the situation called for more than presentation of self; it called for deep emotion work as we attempted to determine the proper "feeling rules" for what we were experiencing (Hochschild, 1979, 1983). This was undoubtedly true for law enforcement, administrators, bystanders, the perpetrator, and victims. For human beings, even threats to biological survival give little relief from social expectations.[2]

Prior to April 16, there were multiple frames available for thinking about Virginia Tech. These frames varied along numerous dimensions, including: academic-athletic; just-unjust; homogeneous-diverse; research oriented-teaching oriented; rigorous-easy; elite-commonplace; cultured-uncultured; autocratic-democratic; pastoral-isolated; and so on. These dimensions are probably typical of large state universities in rural settings, and it is likely that there was considerable variation in their resonance for individuals.

The events of April 16 may have destroyed the potency of these frames, at least temporarily. Swidler (1986) explains this phenomenon in terms of the importance of cultural assumptions and strategies of action in "settled times" versus "unsettled times." In settled times, culture schemas fade into the background of normalcy and remain largely unquestioned. She calls this a "loose coupling" between culture and action and describes daily life this way: "People profess ideals they do not follow, utter platitudes without examining their validity, or fall into cynicism or indifference with the assurance that the world will go on just the same" (Swidler, 1986, p. 280). However, in periods of change or in "unsettled lives," common sense background assumptions may be questioned and multiple cultural frames may compete for dominance. In Swidler's terms, then, the shootings turned the settled lives of Virginia Tech into unsettled lives with a corresponding struggle to fit new information into existing mental and social schema. Similarly, but focusing more directly on the potential effects of traumatic situations, Janoff-Bulman (1989, 1992), in her cognitive theory of trauma, argues that trauma is at least in part the result of the shattering of basic assumptions about oneself and the world.

By the afternoon of April 16, a master frame had apparently emerged and was being disseminated widely by the media and university spokespersons. The key components seemed to be:

1. This was an isolated incident carried out by a social deviant (i.e., a mentally ill individual).
2. This act could not have been foreseen or reasonably prevented.
3. We (the surviving members of the university community) were therefore not responsible for this event.
4. This was an attack not just on the victims, but also on our whole community.
5. Thus, we were all victims.
6. As victims, the effects on us would undoubtedly be devastating and long lasting.
7. This was more than just about us, the whole country—and indeed the whole world—was watching and supporting us in our grief.

Competing frames that included all of these components quickly emerged, but they attempted to weaken the notion that the act was not preventable by imputing some blame either to ineffective gun laws, university officials and police mishandling the situation, mental health professionals failing to treat the perpetrator successfully, or some combination of these issues. Some of these frames clearly relate to the dimensions available in pre-April 16 framing; however, at the time of this writing, such frames do not appear to have the power of the initial frame. This is particularly true inside the institution, where a few faculty members, staff, and students have attempted to invoke competing frames without much success, at least so far.

Thus, our reading of what "strong character" meant for a community member in this context was accepting and enacting the frame of "member of a moral community that was traumatically victimized." Enacting this frame required showing the right combination of grief and self-control. Although there certainly were variations in commitment to this frame, expectations, and its enactment, to cleanly step outside of it at this time would have been obviously deviant.[3]

What We Did in Our Roles: Putting the Frame to Work

In our role as sociology professors, "strong character" meant the added expectations of carrying on with our professional duties and adding an appropriate sociological dimension to the frame. We assume that similar added expectations were imperative for those with other status (e.g., staff, professors in other disciplines, physical plant workers, administrators). However, for faculty and students, the ability to carry out "normal duties" was short-circuited by an administrative order developed in the wake of April 16. By administrative policy, faculty were ordered to offer students numerous grade options that in effect allowed them to stop attending classes and receive a grade weighted in their favor. The intent was to relieve students of academic stress and accommodate the possibility that their academic performance would suffer as a result of the shootings and their aftermath. Attendance at the first classes after the week of April 16 was very good. For example, in one of the author's undergraduate class, 58 of 61 enrolled students attended the first class after the tragedy. Two of the three students let the author know they would miss class because they were attending funerals. The other absent student was rarely in class prior to April 16. The other author experienced similar levels of attendance. By the second week after April 16, however, classes were largely empty, and many students had left campus. Rumors held that attendance was, on average, approximately 10% of normal.[4]

Although at this time our evidence is anecdotal, we believe that the removal of normal expectations led to considerable ambiguity in how students and faculty were expected to show "strong character." Faculty experienced a loss of power over grading and class attendance at the point in the semester when such issues normally are most salient. At the same time, the administration asked faculty to meet with their classes and invite students to discuss the tragic events. Some faculty felt ill equipped to do so and expressed their hesitancy publicly. However, in general, the demonstration of character seemed to involve holding classes once the university reopened and, in the first meeting, to use perspectives from one's academic discipline to place some context on the events.[5] At the same time, faculty members clearly were expected to expand their context-giving role beyond the classroom. Thus, many faculty members increased their contact with students both formally and informally. For example, one author, in the role of graduate director, met with graduate students to hold a "debriefing" session, where students were simply encouraged to talk (either about the event or about any other topic of their choice). In

addition, in the role of "community member," one of the authors hosted a well-attended gathering where graduate students, faculty members, and departmental staff came to "just hang out." Yet the "proper" role for faculty members was never defined clearly or officially. Still, the frame we developed provided guidance for what we "should do."

The administration's adopted grading and attendance policy apparently created a similar sort of ambiguity for students, which is evidenced by the fact that some did not follow what would seem to have been rational self-interest and instead continued to attend class despite already having a high grade. Some of these students made a point of telling their instructors that they were doing this to show that they would not be intimidated by violence. Of those who were no longer attending classes, some explained their decision in terms of logistical problems (e.g., I've flown home to California and it will be too expensive to fly back). At the same time, many others who stopped coming to class felt compelled to apologize to the instructor for their decision and attempted to assure the instructor that they indeed "loved the class." Our interpretation of these events is that there was considerable anxiety about self-presentation manifested in a fear of appearing weak or disloyal in their absence from the classroom.

An article by Tamara Jones (2007) in the *Washington Post* supports this interpretation. In this article, the reporter describes how, in the immediate aftermath of April 16, she spent three days interviewing and following the activities of three Tech students, none of whom were closely connected to the victims. The three students were able to articulate with conviction and subtlety the confusion they were experiencing about how to comport themselves and how to feel. Jones relates her conversation with one of the students this way:

> "How do you balance this?" he wonders. If there's no name for this space between sorrow and survival, is there some measure of its distance? "How sad am I supposed to be on a scale of 1 to 10?" He wishes he knew.

The students describe how they continued to go to class, "because it seems important to finish," even though their grades are secure and the exercise is otherwise meaningless. They also describe their sense of responsibility for connecting, and attempts to connect, with the collective and its sense of tragedy. Jones quotes one student asking the question, "Where do you place yourself?"

Thus, at the individual level, the frame that was quickly developed and widely adopted helped people cope with the tragic events, but this frame was far from seamless and left considerable room for ambiguity. Still, it appeared that most people defined themselves as not responsible for the heinous act, part of an attacked collective and therefore victims deserving of sympathy, and yet, moral individuals of "strong character" who would overcome the tragedy and return to normal as soon as possible. This frame helped guide our personal actions. Based on anecdotal evidence and nonsystematic observations, it appears this frame guided many other individuals' actions as well. What we are arguing and attempting to show is the profoundly social aspects of April 16. Perceptions of the community and one's place in it were critical concerns to those involved. As a result, the frame forged at the individual level was writ large in the community.

From Individual to the Community: Extending the Frame

What often occurs when a mass tragedy strikes is the frame that is created to process the events at the individual level becomes social. Collins (2004), writing about the surge in social solidarity after the 9-11 attacks, explains how the individual-level sentiments become part of the collective. Collins (2004, p. 55) states that

> what creates the solidarity is the sharp rise in ritual intensity of social interaction, as very large numbers of persons focus their attention on the same event, are reminded constantly that other people are focusing their attention by the symbolic signals they give out, and hence are swept up into a collective mood.

Thus, a mutually reinforcing process emerges between the individual's frame and that of the collective. That is, individuals independently begin to create frames as the events unfold (e.g., this is really bad. I'm glad my love ones and I are OK). Then, through their interactions, these individuals begin to solidify a common frame (e.g., we have been wronged, but we are strong). The frame begins to be widely held and becomes social; it becomes the collective's frame. Then, the collective frame becomes manifest in numerous displays of social solidarity, and, by participating in social rituals that symbolically celebrate the collective's frame, the individuals' frame is reinforced.

Indeed, numerous displays of solidarity occurred following 4-16. Over 10,000 people attended the

convocation held to honor the victims. The event ended with the audience spontaneously standing and shouting the ritualistic "Let's Go Hokies"[6] chant typically heard at sporting events. Thousands of people also attended the candlelight vigil held the day after the shootings. On the Saturday following the tragedy, thousands of students and Blacksburg residents attended a picnic hosted by a community group on the University's Drill Field. Additional mass displays of solidarity occurred throughout the week and have continued. These displays of solidarity even extended beyond the Virginia Tech community. Rival universities held vigils in honor of the victims of 4-16 and sent letters of support and condolence. Literally tens of thousands of letters of support from individuals across the country and globe flooded the university. The media frequently showed signs from various locations across the globe that read, "Today, we are all Hokies!"

Such displays of solidarity are common after disasters and tragedies (Carroll et al., 2006; Collins, 2004; Durkheim, [1915] 1966; Erikson, 1976; Turkel, 2002). These displays reinforce the sentiment that the group is special and will overcome the collective loss they feel. They help create and maintain the frame that we are a good community who suffered a tragedy that was not of our own doing and that we did not deserve. The frame was expressed almost immediately during the university-sponsored convocation of 4-17 when renowned poet Nikki Giovanni read her poem to close the ceremony. As the frame would suggest, Dr. Giovanni said, "We are Virginia Tech; we will prevail." Thus, the collective response was framed in a manner similar to that we experienced at the individual level. Namely, we, the Virginia Tech community, are a moral community and we will conquer the challenges that lay ahead.

The collective sentiments generated by mass displays of solidarity are a key factor in a community's recovery and the re-establishment of normalcy (Turkel, 2002). Not only do they provide the emotional support survivors need, they reaffirm that the group, although damaged, remains. Moreover, these sentiments provide a stimulus for collective action (Chavis & Wandersman, 1990; Hawdon, Ryan, & Mobley, 2000; Sampson, Raudenbush, & Earls, 1997), which the community may need to deal with the crisis cooperatively and restore a sense of normalcy. The collective action fostered by the surge in community solidarity creates new social networks and reaffirms those that existed. And we know that strong social networks are important for a community's overall health and its recovery from tragic events. For example, in Erikson's (1976) classic study, he found the severing of community ties to be most detrimental to the everyday lives of the victims. Re-establishing ties was important for survivors to regain a sense of normalcy. Similarly, Barnshaw (2006) noted the importance of social networks in the wake of hurricane Katrina. Consequently, tragedies not only damage communities, they can also strengthen them and allow them to recover by stimulating group cohesion.

The insight that tragedies often enhance the collective sense of pride, resolve, and togetherness associated with community is hardly new. Tragedies often act as a source of cohesion or solidarity for a community (Carroll et al., 2006; Collins, 2004; Drabek, 1986; Durkheim, [1915] 1966; Erikson, 1976; Pijawka, Cuthbertson, & Olson 1987; Quarantelli & Dyanes, 1976; Sweet, 1998; Turkel, 2002). As Durkheim wrote nearly a century ago, when a tragedy hits a community, "everybody is attacked; consequently, everybody opposes the attack." However, not all tragedies produce solidarity. In fact, some disasters produce conflict at the community level (Carroll, 2006; Quarantelli & Dynes, 1976). Moreover, many tragic events happen each day that produce varying levels of empathy; however, few produce strong feelings of solidarity with the victims' community. For example, reports of "routine tragedies," such as a murder, can create fear and actually fracture a community (Skogan, 1990). An airplane crash that kills hundreds certainly evokes empathy for the victims and their families; however, we rarely witness—and would likely not expect to witness—mass gatherings expressing solidarity with the air-traveling community. On the Saturday before April 16, 45 Iraqis were killed in Baghdad and another car bomb in Karbala killed 42 people and wounded 224 more. The next day, a double car bomb killed at least 18 more people, including children, in a suburban shopping district of Baghdad (Sieff, 2007). Yet few public displays of solidarity resulted in this country from these deaths. It is obvious, then, that it is not simply the number of victims that shocks our collective conscious. What tragedies are likely to produce the collective sentiments that reinforce individual frames and help individuals and communities recover from the events?

What We Have Learned: The Conditions of the Tragedy–Solidarity Relationship

We can identify four factors that appear necessary for a tragedy to produce frames that eventually lead to collective solidarity. Although we do not claim these are the only factors involved, we argue these factors were present at Virginia Tech and, at the very least, facilitated the collective solidarity we witnessed. We hypothesize that these factors, if present after a tragedy or disaster, will likely result in solidarity. The four factors are (a) the tragedy is defined by members as affecting the collective, (b) the tragedy is a "fateful event" that disrupts the routine of everyday life, (c) the collective is seen as an unwilling participant in the tragedy, and (d) the collective is seen as a "moral collective." We argue that if these conditions are met, individuals are likely to adopt a frame that defines the situation in a manner that resonates with the collective. Then, the collective will likely reflect that frame and reinforce it for the individuals involved. Let us consider each of these factors in turn.

First, it is likely that a collective must define the tragedy as affecting the collective for the tragedy to be a source of solidarity. As argued above, solidarity emerges when individuals' frames are attached to a collective and the collective's frames in turn reinforce those of the individuals. Thus, a collective must exist in the public's mind before the tragedy if social solidarity is to result from the tragedy. Tragedies that individuals or small groups suffer are likely to produce empathy, not community solidarity. When individuals are murdered or killed in a car crash or suffer some other traumatic event, friends, relatives, and even some strangers offer condolences and support. However, there is rarely a mass ritualistic display where we proclaim to "all" be part of the group. Although funerals are undoubtedly rituals offered to support the survivors of "tragedies," the group that is celebrated—the deceased's network of friends and family—is not usually a widely recognized collective that "outsiders" can readily join or claim allegiance. When Henry Smith dies, we do not proclaim that, "Today, we are all Smiths." We recognize that some tragedies involving relatively small numbers of people who are not members of a well-defined collective can produce solidarity; however, the solidarity these cases produce is likely to be of a more limited duration. For example, although a car crash that kills many members of a family can lead to an outpouring of community-level grief, there are typically few displays of solidarity beyond a vigil and the funeral. Rarely do such tragic events produce the prolonged expressions of solidarity witnessed when a tragedy affects a larger collective (Collins, 2004).

In addition, it helps if the collective identity is regularly reinforced through ritual celebrations. Thus, we would predict that a tragedy occurring at a university such as Virginia Tech would produce more solidarity than an equally tragic event occurring in a less-established collective. The fact that Virginia Tech is ritualistically celebrated at every sporting event, symbolically represented with tokens and emblems on everything from bumper stickers to flags and buildings, and has a clearly established, legally defined membership makes it an entity that already exists in the public mind. It has a life of its own, and 4-16 dealt a blow to that life. It is telling that after 9-11 we were all "New Yorkers." Arguably, however, "New York" was not attacked. Two buildings in New York were attacked. When the people and material buildings most directly affected are viewed as a percentage of the population or real estate, the perpetrators of 9-11, as tragic as their acts turned out to be, did not attack "New York." However, the Twin Towers were not a recognized collective identity; New York, of course, is, and it is celebrated in sports, song, and story on a near daily basis. Earlier we argued that plane crashes do not routinely produce solidarity. Of course, an exception to this "rule" also demonstrates our point. The crash of Flight 93 on 9-11 did stimulate collective solidarity. Memorials were held in honor of the victims in the Pennsylvania field where the tragedy occurred. This case, however, was not a "normal" plane crash. In this case, a collective, the United States, had been attacked. An "individual plane" did not experience a tragedy; instead, it was an attack on a social entity.

Second, and related to the first, it is likely that the tragic event must be, in Goffmanian terms, a "fateful event" that disrupts the routine of everyday life. This disruption is most likely to occur on a widespread basis if the tragedy is defined as affecting the collective. Again, the effect is amplified when the collective is formally institutionalized. The events of 4-16 literally shut down the institution of Virginia Tech. The approximately 46 murders that occur each day in the United States (FBI, 2007) disrupt families and friendship networks, not institutions. When the routines of hundreds or thousands of people are disrupted, the likelihood of individual frames being collectivized increases dramatically.

We emphasize here that being a "fateful event" is not merely a matter of the extent of the tragedy or

the number of victims. Plane crashes often result in more victims than 4-16 did; yet plane crashes rarely stimulate community solidarity. Conversely, the Amish school shooting of 2006 in Lancaster, Pennsylvania resulted in "only" five victims; however, there was a tremendous outpouring of sympathy toward and expressions of solidarity with the Amish community after the tragedy. For example, about 3,000 bikers from Pennsylvania, Maryland, New Jersey and Delaware participated in a ride "Because We Care," that helped raise $34,000 for the families of the victims of the shooting (AP, 2006; for other examples of expressions of solidarity with the Amish community, see the Web site *Amish Country News* at www.amishnews.com/publishersmessages/schholshooting.htm, where e-mails expressing support and solidarity are selected from "hundreds received"). Even a tragedy that does not result in many victims can be a fateful event and disrupt the routines of a community. The Sago Mine disaster of 2006, where 12 miners died, is another example of a "fateful event" that resulted in relatively few victims but produced the powerful social forces of community solidarity.[7]

Third, for a tragedy to produce solidarity, it is likely that the victimized collective must not be seen as a willing participant to the tragedy. To be deserving of sympathy, one must be a victim. If your willful actions result in injury to others, you are a "criminal," not a victim. Even if your willful inaction permits the tragedy to occur, you are not a "deserving victim." In the case of 4-16, we could honestly believe that "we had nothing to do with this . . . it was not our fault." The same is true for the Amish schoolchildren, Columbine schoolchildren, Sago miners, and 9-11 victims. Conversely, the victims of the ongoing violence in Iraq are not always seen as "deserving victims." Although many feel empathy for Iraqi victims, we would predict that more expressions of solidarity would occur if the commonly held image of Iraqis was that they wanted to succeed in achieving the vision America holds for them and they were working hard to bring that vision to fruition. Instead, the commonly held image is that the sectarian violence that creates tragedy on a near daily basis is, at least in part, their fault. Decrees that the government "must step up and take responsibility" and that Iraqis perpetuate the violence against Iraqis deflates the frame that leads to solidarity. They are not like "us"; they invite the tragedy they suffer.

Fourth, for a tragedy to stimulate solidarity, it is likely that the victimized collective must be defined as a "moral collective." As discussed earlier, the individual frame that emerged around the events of 4-16 involved demonstrating "strong character." The frame that we saw emerge was that we were members of a moral community that was traumatically victimized. Related to the previous point, a necessary condition for being "moral" is that the community cannot be the cause of the tragedy or a willing participant in the tragedy. But by being a "moral community," we mean more than this. A moral community handles the tragedy with class, dignity, honor, and bravery. Regardless of one's opinions on what Virginia Tech did or should have done prior to the tragedy of 4-16, it is hard to argue that the community handled the immediate aftermath of the tragedy with anything other than class, dignity, honor, and bravery. The official university spokespeople, the law enforcement officers, and the frequently interviewed students were well composed and articulate during obviously trying times. The students and residents repeatedly expressed their love of and loyalty to the town and university. Similarly, the Amish community acted with class, dignity, honor, and bravery after the 2006 tragedy. The community prayed for forgiveness for the assailant. As one anonymous Amish woman said, "We have to forgive. We have to forgive him in order for God to forgive us" (CBS News, 2006). It is easy to feel pride and a desire to be part of the community when the community is a "moral community."

In contrast, the devastation of Hurricanes Rita and Katrina evoked a lot of empathy for the victims. To some extent, although we would argue to a lesser extent than witnessed after 4-16 at Virginia Tech, the tragedies produced a sense of solidarity with New Orleans and the Gulf Coast. However, the initial surge in solidarity was not, in our opinion, as dramatic as that witnessed after 9-11, 4-16, Columbine, or the Amish school shooting because the community was not seen as a "moral community." The stories of mass looting, of victims firing shots at rescue helicopters, and of violence at the Super Dome all damaged the image of the New Orleans community. Moreover, the institutions involved in dealing with the tragedy did not act in a manner that promoted a sense of class, dignity, honor, and bravery. Complaints of the Bush administration mishandling the crisis, New Orleans police abandoning their posts, and horror stories of FEMA mishaps emerged almost immediately. These frames overshadowed, at least to some extent, the frames of bravery, camaraderie, and

heroism that undoubtedly occurred. Yet the dominant frame—one that was very confused and included bits of positive and bits of negative views—did not make it easy to be proud of the group or easy to proclaim allegiance to it.

Conclusion

We have tried to express our personal experiences of April 16, 2007. We have tried to show that although the experience was profoundly personal, tragedy is a social event. That is, our experiences were personal and idiosyncratic because of our biographical histories and our physical and social locations. At the same time, social ties made our personal experiences social constructions. The events and our attempts to comport ourselves adequately were filtered through individual frames that became tied to macro frames offered and legitimated primarily by the media, but also by governmental and institutional spokespersons. For those who were not the physical victims or their loved ones, existing and emergent definitions of community provided a way in to the experience (or, for others, a way of distancing from the experience). For people like us, the not directly affected, empathy became grief through this process of identification.

Unfortunately, other tragedies will likely happen. When they do, those directly or indirectly involved, those who are merely bystanders, and those who observe from a safe distance will all develop an understanding of the events. As Goffman would say, they will frame it. A number of frames will be available, as they are for any given situation. These frames can range from "blaming the victims" to apathy to empathy to solidarity. Since Durkheim ([1915] 1966), we have understood how tragedy can bring a group closer and promote social solidarity. However, not all tragedies do this. We have argued that solidarity is most likely to emerge when individuals frame the event in a way that allows them to show "strong character" and when this individual-level frame is transferred to the collective. We argue that four conditions increase the likelihood of this transference occurring. The four conditions are (a) the tragedy is defined by members as affecting the collective, (b) the tragedy is a "fateful event" that disrupts the routine of everyday life, (c) the collective is seen as an unwilling participant in the tragedy, and (d) the collective is seen as a "moral collective."

Unfortunately, Virginia Tech suffered a horrible tragedy on April 16, 2007. Although it provides little solace, at least the tragedy met the conditions that facilitate the emergence of solidarity following tragedies. The events of that day could have torn the community apart; they did not. The community could have hidden in shame or blamed itself; it did not. The community could have responded with unthinking outbursts of anger and sought revenge on perceived allies of the gunman; it did nothing of the sort. The community, instead, responded with a tremendous sense of pride, with an outpouring of support, and with dramatic displays of solidarity. The community's response, at least to date, has shown that Nikki Giovanni correctly assessed our collective strength when she said, "We are Virginia Tech; we will prevail."

Notes

1. For example, in the absence of any authoritative account, theories circulated of a terrorist attack—a frame waiting to be employed since 9-11.

2. Indeed, in the days and weeks following the shootings, the media carried comments from various commentators and letters to the editor critical of the victims' responses during the attack, as well as stories lauding acts of heroism.

3. We have already noted one alternative frame, but others were available. For example, within a week of the event, one of the authors received letters from noncommunity members in which conspiracy theories were developed. One theory alleged that the university knew the attack was coming, and another alleged that the KKK was behind the attack.

4. This figure is purely based on rumor. The authors' attendance in their undergraduate classes remained well over 30%. Nevertheless, the campus had the feel of summer school instead of the end of a regular semester.

5. This latter expectation may have been strongest in the social and behavioral sciences, but we cannot be sure.

6. Virginia Tech's sports teams are called "Hokies."

7. The Sago mine was in rural West Virginia.

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