We are in a Social Emergency. Now What?

By Kenneth Bailey and Lori Lobenstine

We learned this week that when it comes to social justice in the USA we are in a social emergency. The grand jury's refusal to indict Darren Wilson for the shooting death of Michael Brown is just another devastating example of the current state of affairs. Now what do we do? Let's not give in to confusion and impotence. Let's act. There's much work that needs to be done.

Learning how to respond to social emergencies

Just as fire drills train us for how to act and what to do in case of a physical emergency, we need drills and steps for how to act when there's a social emergency. (And in case you were wondering, this IS a social emergency.) We need steps that we are forced to practice, so we have some social version of "stop, drop and roll" ready to go when there's a social fire. Without these, we tend to go awkwardly about our day-to-day life, and so do most of the people we'd expect to be acting boldly on behalf of civil society. This is a problem. We think clear social emergency procedures could help.

What could social emergency procedures help accomplish?

Indicate urgency and what can be done. The people most affected by the verdict are closer to the situation and are most inclined to step out of disbelief into action. But what about those least affected, at least directly? Feelings of awkwardness, confusion, and impotence set in so quickly, creating even more social distance, disappointment and sadness between us. Clearly assigned emergency responses could help move people out of the frozen trauma of disbelief or horror and into action. Social emergency procedures could function as both a reminder of the urgency of the situation and a guide post for how to act in such emergencies. (Think of the work done to make us all aware of how critical it is to respond quickly to the signs of someone having a stroke.)

Coordinate a collective understanding of the emergency. Akin to how we have a shared understanding of what to do for fires or plane problems, developing and learning social procedures can supply the basic steps needed to coordinate collective understanding of a social

emergency. It is clear that these steps need to include moves that expand collective social truth. The intense fragmentation of today's social experiences, entertainment and media make it hard to get the kinds of agreement needed to share a social problem across lines from those most affected by a problem to those needed to address it. Procedures could at least create the coordinating system for different people to make their cases and build solidarity. Which is much more useful than the social distance currently created when one expects a kind of solidarity and is met with confusion and awkwardness. Imagine if someone choking on food was met by awkward blank stares and looking away by other restaurant patrons? We don't see that because people have a collective understanding of the problem and how to address it.

Clarify what responses are most effective. There are many ways to respond to emergencies that are not very effective, and some of them make situations worse. People's natural inclinations about how to address ebola have combined with multi-layered systems flaws to spread the disease and its trauma faster than necessary. Having effective social procedures in place can help us avoid the common pitfalls of shame/rage loops, white guilt, victim blaming, and all sorts of other typical human responses to social emergencies.

Towards a practical set of social procedures

In order to develop social emergency procedures, we have to put some prototype of them out to start with, test and refine. Here's a very rough set, with the aim of getting something out quickly that folks can start to test and give us feedback on.

1) Stop
Some of us are less plugged into our everyday lives than others, or maybe we just have a sixth sense about crises. If you are not one of these people, start by identifying someone you trust to tap you on the shoulder and say "Come out of normality." It's easy to feel overwhelmed and to just go on with your day to day. Don't do that. Stop long enough to come to terms with the fact that we are in a social emergency and to become aware of your emotions around the emergency. Always respond to their tap by going to step 2.

2) Look Around
It's easy to dismiss the ways in which a social emergency takes on an affective life and enters into our relationships, both close ones and peripheral ones. How will this particular social emergency shape your interactions on the street, at work, at home, at school or in other terrains of your life? Will it be spoken about? How? Will you bring it up? Face what it's doing at the social scale and pay attention to who is being affected by it the most.

3) Gather Your People
Meet with your close social networks. Look at each other. Address the situation by looking at it. It's easy to stay in isolation or reach out to certain individuals who you believe will want your support. Collect the people you typically eat dinner with or congregate with. And look at the social emergency together, even if you don't have a habit of talking about such things.

4) Keep the Big Picture
Make shared sense problem formation - it's easy to act as if the situation is within the scale that gets presented by mainstream media and general public discourse. In this case our conversation could easily focus on a particular verdict when we know the problem is much larger than this. We have to keep our social justice heads about us and come to terms with the fact that this is another devastating episode of a larger civil society problem.

5) Find Yourself in the Big Picture
It's easy to keep the problem close to the bodies most affected by it. Therefore we tend to want to support but don't know how or where to hook in. Find enough of the problem to be implicated in it. If the mainstream formation of the problem says it's a "black problem", it is not. If it says it's a cop problem, it is not. It is much bigger. It is a civil society problem. Find your own connection to it. We are all a part of creating, ignoring, underfunding, enjoying, voting, working and more in this so-called democracy. Make sure you frame the problem large enough to include you. In this case, is your safety something that police departments hide behind?

6) Act
This can take many forms, here are a few ideas:
- Reach out—Connect with others who are acting—what are they trying? How is it working? Offer to join, be "coordinatable" for folks coordinating responses to the social emergency.
- Sacrifice—If you are not directly affected by the problem, find ways to make actual sacrifices to your schedules, your resources and your lives to help address the social crisis. Those most affected rarely have a choice in the matter, so it is significant if we all respond with the commensurate urgency.
- Enact social space--Show some kind of actual force in the public arena outside of protest. This might look like wearing an object that says "black lives matter". There's room for creativity here. Things can be figured out in partnership.
- Enact political space--If politicians aren't playing the roles needed call them out, and if they are encourage them. If you vote and engage in civic discourse in general you must step up and demand that politicians respond with vision and urgency.
- Try something new—You might have a bold idea about how to respond to a social emergency. You won't know if it will work unless you talk about it with other folks responding to the emergency and even test it out. Be bold but be ready for feedback as well.

7) Keep the Big Picture Up
Oftentimes these social emergencies are so traumatizing that as soon as we recover from one, we put it under the bed or in the closet. We need to keep each one visible, at least to the point where we can reflect on it, learn from our responses to it and begin to create political and social preventions, such that we are not always responding to new versions of the same social emergency. It is also important that we continue to invest in on-going solutions and those people and organizations who are taking on these problems all the time. If we only send resources in an emergency, we will always have more emergencies. Creating resources that

prevent such emergencies (or keep them from spreading) is similar to the heavy on-going investment people make in fire escapes and extinguishers (something put in place by public policy, by the way.)

These are just some ideas. They need work. They need testing. They are ready to be tried, added to, re-worked. We are more wed to the idea of having social emergency procedures than the ones we've mentioned above.

The Bigger Picture

We believe that social emergency procedures fit into a larger framework of civic and policy responses to social emergencies, just as knowledge about how to respond to fire fits into a larger system of fire departments, fire prevention policies, emergency housing, etc. Off the top of our heads and in talking with friends, we see room for system-scale procedures such as:

- The opening of churches, libraries and schools for community gatherings, grieving, organizing, etc.
- A framework for local officials and governors to apply for emergency civic discourse funds
- A National Guard equivalent for getting additional folks on the ground in the most affected communities to help people attend to how they are affected and are affecting each other during a social emergency
- An assumption that important national figures like the US Poet Laureate will be flown to the scene of the emergency
- Guidelines for declaring a policy emergency and negotiating the challenges that come when multiple social emergencies are occurring at the same time

Conclusion

Right now, we are in a social emergency, but we are far from the ubiquitous fire escape signs or flight attendant announcements about oxygen masks. We are on our own, and as such, we can hardly be surprised that we don't have a common understanding of a social emergency, let alone how to respond if we recognize we are in one. Indeed, we humans tend to care most about things we are most affected by and overlook things we don't immediately experience. We are easily paralyzed by impotence during times of social crisis, or by rage as our political leadership frames emergency social situations like minor inconveniences. We believe that social emergency procedures could help people respond in ways that are commensurate to the urgency at hand, whether it's this week's verdict in Ferguson or the next…

If you'd like to give us more ideas or feedback on these, you can reach us on twitter (@ds4si) or facebook (facebook.com/ds4si).