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Neighbors Help in a Pandemic

NORA MILLS BOYD
Siena College

MATTHEW DAVIS
Siena College

Abstract: The degradation of non-market relationships has rendered individuals unnecessarily vulnerable in disasters, including the global pandemic. While local networks of community-based aid that emerge in response to disasters improve the efficacy of response, they tend to be short-lived. This is unfortunate, since the existence and strength of such local networks prior to the onset of disasters not only boosts the efficacy of response but also contributes to the well-being of individuals and communities in non-disaster times. Therefore, individuals ought to establish and strengthen fair-weather local networks of non-market relationships—that is, cultivate neighbor relationships.

Keywords: pandemic, social capital, mutual aid, disaster, care, local networks

JEL Classification: A13, B54, D64, H12, H84

I. INTRODUCTION

It is said that neighbors used to visit each other in the evenings to tell stories (Berry [1988] 2017, 107). That neighbors would help one another to cultivate the land, to build. Such cooperation and neighborliness now strikes many as quaint. 'Community' today has been taken to mean something placeless, something digital (Bradshaw 2008). Geographically dispersed communities certainly have benefits—they are effective at connecting individuals in minority subcultures, crowdsourcing resources at immense scales, and building international social movements. Yet, living without strong local social networks in addition to these 'post-place' communities has serious downsides, as the global Covid-19 pandemic has rendered painfully clear. With travel and economic intercourse restricted, people were thrown home. They were abruptly stuck 'in place' where local

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social bonds have atrophied under decades of neglect. They found themselves asking: *Do we even know our neighbors? Who can we rely upon? How can we help?*

This paper argues for increased emphasis on rebuilding fair-weather local networks of non-market relationships as one important pathway to improving disaster resilience. We argue that the degradation of local non-market relationships has rendered individuals unnecessarily vulnerable in disasters, including in the global Covid-19 pandemic. In 2020, needs precipitated or made salient by the pandemic spurred a heartening, if harried, attempt to improvise the required local networks (Pascoe and Stripling 2020). Volunteer brigades delivered food to isolated elders (Tiratelli and Kaye 2020). Regional people-power was rallied to construct vegetable beds in urban backyards for physical and psycho-spiritual sustenance (Soul Fire Farm 2021). Networks of mutual aid sprung up all over the world (Sitrin and Sembrar 2020). However, as we will discuss, emergent disaster communities like these are often temporary, so there is an opportunity to further increase the efficacy of disaster responses by building and strengthening fair-weather local networks of non-market relationships (see also Pitas and Ehmer 2020).

Our paper characterizes these relationships as relationships between *neighbors*. As we employ the concept here, to be someone's neighbor means to be related to that person by certain kinds of social ties characterized by care, good will, and generosity. Importantly, neighbors also share geographical proximity—they are neighbors in part because they live in the same neighborhood. Note, however, that we endorse an understanding of 'neighbor' that is not restricted to long-term residents of a neighborhood, but is rather inclusive enough to embrace new-comers and persons experiencing homelessness.

Relatively little has been written about the ethics of the neighbor relationship in this rather everyday sense. Nearby themes are addressed in the robust philosophical literatures on care ethics (for example, Noddings 1984; Held 2006) and the philosophy of friendship (for example, Badhwar 1993; Lynch 2005). The subject of neighbors *has* enjoyed extensive treatment in philosophical and theological scholarship related to the biblical injunction to love thy neighbor as thyself, as expressed in the parable of the good Samaritan. This scholarship has probed the interconnected themes of love, self, 'Other', ethics, and God (compare Kierkegaard [1847] 1962; Žižek, Santner, and Reinhard 2006). Seeking to address the question *who is my neighbor?*, philosophers have asked whether my neighbor is

my 'mirrored image', someone I could never fully and completely understand, a 'monster', and so on. Such questions need not be settled in order to motivate the kind of mundane ethics of neighborliness that we argue would improve disaster resilience. We offer the following rough-and-ready characterization:

A neighbor
1. takes respectful interest in their neighbors,
2. is generous to their neighbors without being patronizing,
3. is friendly, sociable, and considerate of their neighbors,
4. is engaged, according to interest and ability, in the ordinary physical upkeep of the neighborhood and well-being of its residents,
5. takes some opportunities to contribute to improving the neighborhood and the well-being of its residents,
6. offers extra help, according to ability, to neighbors and the neighborhood in times of extraordinary need.

The ethics of neighbor relationships can be connected to the philosophical debate about preferential moral attitudes, such as a parent's specific concern for the well-being of their child, or of the special regard that citizens of the same nation may have for one another. Philosophers have asked whether relationships of physical proximity ought to have special moral significance. Waldron, for instance, asks whether moral concern properly diminishes according to distance, and if so, whether "distance" amounts to "sheer geography" (2003, 333). Insofar as neighbor relationships involve shared geography, one might worry that our argument implies moral disregard for non-neighbors. This is not our intent. Our account is compatible with individuals having substantive moral obligations to distant agents. Rather, we aim to highlight ways that cultivating relationships between neighbors can contribute to disaster resilience. While geographical proximity is not sufficient to characterize the relationship of being neighbors in our sense, 'sheer geography' does make a difference to the opportunities for providing and receiving aid, especially in times of disaster.

In the following section, we discuss failures of disaster response and in section III we argue that local networks of non-market relationships (that is, networks of neighbors) have some advantages over market-based relationships or state-governed aid for delivering effective responses. Section IV describes the unfortunate decline of non-market relationships and section V highlights the temporary nature of emergent responses. Section

VI provides a few specific suggestions for increasing neighborliness, which we argue would improve effective responses to disasters, including pandemics.

II. FAILURES IN RESPONSES

In times of disaster—including pandemics—pre-existing social problems are exacerbated. Individuals and communities already excluded from the formal economic and power structure find themselves even more stranded (Thomas et al. 2013). In addition, new problems arise. Fundamental assumptions that underlie functioning markets and the effectiveness of centralized government response may no longer hold, resulting in problems that require rapid adaptation. In particular, as we will discuss, the efficacy of disaster response increases when there is good flow of information between those with needs and those with the capacity to meet those needs, when flexibility is possible in the nature of the response, and when the agents involved in response efforts stand in relationships of mutual care. These features of disaster response are more challenging for markets and centralized governmental responses to achieve than local social networks.

Uncertainty is a fundamental attribute of crisis. During times of extraordinary need, information about who is in need, what their needs are, who is in a position to contribute to meeting the needs of others, and so forth, is critical to mobilizing effective responses. In the disruption to daily life brought on by a pandemic or other disaster, normal communication channels and infrastructure may be disturbed, leaving centralized authorities without the necessary information. Of course, this information is accessible to those who are *themselves* experiencing need or who have aid capacities. The ability to obtain this information is weakened the farther an individual or organization is from the experience of need and aid capacities along geographical and social lines. The 1995 Chicago heat wave provides a powerful example: deaths were concentrated among elderly individuals who were socially isolated (Klinenberg 2003). Local governments and other organizations that might have helped did not know where the need was or that it even existed.

Markets also suffer from problems caused by incomplete information. Textbook models of supply and demand assume that both buyers and sellers have full information about goods and services, and have the ability to write enforceable contracts specifying every detail of the transac-

tion. While this assumption is rarely (if ever) met during 'normal' situations, disasters are particularly characterized by uncertainty. For example, a contract to deliver meals to hurricane survivors cannot account for all possible logistical difficulties. Contracts drafted in information-poor contexts ('incomplete contracts') may go unfulfilled as new difficulties come to light that make the contract unprofitable or even impossible to fulfill. After Hurricane Maria, numerous failed Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) contracts came to light, including a contract for meals that had delivered only 50,000 out of the 18.5 million meals contracted for when terminated (Mazzei and Armendariz 2018). Flexible contracts are also by nature incomplete. Incomplete contracts function only when the parties are responsive to non-contractual features like reputation and social norms, including reciprocity. The greater the missing information or necessary flexibility, the more incomplete the contract—and the more that prosocial norms and behaviors will be necessary for market exchange to function (Bowles 1998).

As disaster conditions are likely to change as the situation unfolds and more information is revealed, flexibility and speed are key aspects of effective responses. Community-organized aid can be more agile and adaptive than the lumbering and homogenous bureaucratic machinations of the state. Due to the uncertain nature of a disaster, often it will not be clear what aid is needed *when*, and how that need changes over time. Aid provided by governments or large non-profits may be limited in scope, as when one organization provides housing, another food, et cetera. Informal networks of mutual aid have an advantage in this respect. With no rigid area of focus, such networks can adapt their efforts to needs as they arise: grocery delivery, rides to medical appointments, help changing light bulbs, et cetera. When aid has to be provided via a legislative or bureaucratic process, it will often be slow and reactive. For instance, although in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, the United States Congress passed the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act expeditiously, further aid waited nine months. Hurricane Katrina is perhaps the most prominent example of a delayed government response, with various levels of government deflecting responsibility, causing a failed response that culminated in the resignation of FEMA director Michael Brown. Lack of a bureaucratic hierarchy was one of the reasons that Occupy Sandy was able to provide aid faster than government authorities following Hurricane Sandy (Feuer 2012).

Markets and governments are also significantly limited in their ability to furnish *caring* responses to disasters, including pandemics. In a pandemic, many required actions are taken not necessarily to protect oneself, but to protect others. Wearing a mask provides more protection *from* the mask wearer than *for* the mask wearer. For young, healthy individuals, the lesser risks of Covid may not justify behavioral changes purely on the basis of self-interest. Yet when the potential for infecting others (a classic economic externality) is taken into account, the behavioral choices become more clear. Caring creates benefits for society as well as individuals in the caring relationship, which means that markets will underprovide care (England, Budig, and Folbre 2002). While government programs can provide substantial material aid, they are also often motivated by paternalism and a punitive mindset, imposing constraints that may actively harm recipients (Davis 2019). The government aid relationship is one-directional; individuals cannot reciprocate or show gratitude to the direct source of aid.

III. Social Capital and Non-Market Relationships in Disaster Responses

Social scientists have long investigated the role and significance of *social capital,* and thus, much of the available evidence that is most relevant to our argument pertains to social capital. Social capital can be thought of as one product of interpersonal relationships, including non-market relationships. While market relationships are characterized by self-interest, non-market relationships cover a wide range of human activities, from raising children to communal worship. Non-market relationships have in common that they do not maximize exchange value; the agents are not necessarily acting out of raw self-interest. 'Social capital' serves as an umbrella term, encompassing several different aspects of relationships characterized by reciprocity and the propensity of people who know each other to help one another. An individual's social capital is a function of their social network (in some cases, the social capital is described as belonging to the social group itself). Individuals may have low social capital if they lack connections to others, or if their network includes others with little ability or desire to help. In both cases, the manifestation of social capital is in the actual assistance or resources given, be it help moving, access to job opportunities, or mutual aid.

Meyer (2018) provides a review of the empirical literature supporting social capital as a key factor in disaster resilience. Following Hurricane

Katrina, a number of improvised actions by local groups organized responses when local institutions were disrupted. For instance, through grassroots organizing drawing on existing groups (such as Food Not Bombs, street medics, and Indymedia), the Common Ground Collective helped mobilize essential supplies, health care, and information channels in New Orleans without the blessing or support of the state (crow 2014). After Hurricane Sandy, the Occupy movement—a preexisting movement already practicing mutual aid—provided rapid assistance where both the government and large charity groups failed. FEMA itself has recognized the unique capabilities of local communities in the implementation of the Whole Communities program. In fact, disaster experience can also create social capital as new communities unite around a social identity born of the shared experience (Ntontis et al. 2020), a point we elaborate upon below.

For those typically excluded from market and state solutions, social ties may be the main form of assistance (Braun and Aßheuer 2011). Chappell et al. (2007, 352–353) found that among Hurricane Katrina survivors in Mississippi, 32% claimed friends and relatives; 23% religious organizations; and 9% strangers, acquaintances, or "other" as their most important source of emergency aid. In contrast, federal aid was the most important source of emergency aid for 14%; military aid for 9%; and state or local government aid the most important source for 2%. When asked to report all sources of aid, more individuals reported receiving aid from strangers, acquaintances, or 'other' sources than from the federal government (40% vs. 37%).

Non-market relationships help not only in responding to crises, but in preventing them. Strong social ties increase the likelihood of mitigation efforts (see Meyer 2018, 269), as predicted by research showing that solidarity increases provision of public goods. Individuals who reported having more neighbors they exchanged greetings with and that they could rely on for help reported greater intention to wear masks, receive a vaccination, and wash hands in a hypothetical future outbreak of influenza (Chuang et al. 2015), and greater trust in others was associated with greater intent to be vaccinated in the H1N1 pandemic (Rönnerstrand 2013, 2014). Early research shows an association between higher social capital and fewer Covid-19 cases (Makridis and Wu 2021; Fraser, Aldrich, and Page-Tan 2020). Similarly, social capital has been associated with psychological resilience when disasters strike. Noel, Cork, and White (2018)

review the literature and find that higher levels of social capital are associated with better mental health outcomes, particularly lower post-traumatic stress.

We have appealed to social scientific evidence regarding social capital out of necessity. However, our emphasis will ultimately rest on the value of neighbor relationships rather than social capital per se (see section VI). The concept of social capital does not necessarily connote geographically local relationships. Social capital can also be formed from market or government interactions. In contrast, neighbors are individuals living in geographic proximity to one another who form certain kinds of non-market ties and participate in a certain kind of social relationship characterized by care, good will, and generosity. Having neighbors is therefore more specific than being rich in social capital, since social capital could come in many different forms, may not be place-specific, and could involve market relationships. This difference suggests that future social science research on disaster resilience may benefit from disaggregating the influence of neighbor networks from social capital broadly construed.

IV. NETWORKS OF NON-MARKET RELATIONSHIPS ARE ON THE DECLINE

We have argued that local networks of non-market relationships expedite effective responses to disasters. Unfortunately, as the market economy has grown, more aspects of production have entered the market sphere and weakened networks of non-market relationships (Tittenbrun 2017). As more relationships between individuals have come to be characterized by market exchange, the scope of relationships that build and sustain interpersonal trust and care has been reduced. Household 'reproductive labor', including child care and food preparation, is increasingly provided by the market instead of family. Even areas formerly handled by the state, such as the provision of public goods, have increasingly been shifted to market provision via 'public-private partnerships' (examples include privately managed toll highways and water systems). Market exchange is characterized by an impersonal nature; indeed, as markets expand and become more globalized the opportunities for repeat interaction that could cultivate a caring relationship are reduced. As a result of shifting the practice of care to the market, individuals have fewer opportunities to practice care and develop valuable social capital (Ciscel and Heath 2001). Individuals routinely caring for community members also appears to be in decline—even between 2003 and 2019, the share of individuals reporting care duties for a non-household member on a given day

dropped from 15.7% to 10.5%, and average hours per week caring for a non-household member dropped by 32% (U. S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, n. d.). The overall decline in social capital has been famously documented by Putnam (2000).

In addition to reducing the scope of non-market relationships, market expansions may incur broader effects on norms and values. The benefit of acquiring a reputation for trustworthiness or fairness declines as these traits are less used (Bowles 1998). Market expansions and the shift away from local businesses to national or multinational firms accelerates the decline in social capital (Heying 1997; Clark and Record 2017; Goetz and Rupasingha 2006). Indeed, the process of market expansion includes finding replacements for the very social capital it weakens, which can result in apparent GDP growth alongside decreases in social capital (Bartolini and Bonatti 2008). Tsakalotos notes that market expansion "makes alternative conceptions much more difficult to conceptualize, let alone carry out" (2004, 29). Once the market and state are the dominant 'solutions' in a society, they will more and more appear the *only* solutions. The existence of non-hierarchical, non-market mutual aid between neighbors in the face of these countervailing forces is a testament to just how beneficial such relationships are.

V. EMERGENT RESPONSES

'Emergent social capital' has been described as a temporary phenomenon arising during disasters. Solnit (2010) poignantly describes the temporary solidarity often found in disaster situations. This phenomenon has been called "catastrophe compassion" (Zaki 2020, 588).

In direct response to a disaster, emergent local aid groups can form, such as those that rescued survivors and fought fires after the 1995 Kobe Earthquake (Aldrich 2011). Over the medium-term, while it may be true that funding and certain kinds of information can be readily shared across great distances insofar as the will exists to do so, there are physical aspects of disaster response that, by their very nature, must be accomplished by people on site. Child care, nursing the ill, fetching food and medicine, and the irreplaceable value of in-person presence and social interactions, are just a few examples. Especially in circumstances where travel is restricted—as is often the case following natural disasters, and has been enforced as a matter of policy in the Covid-19 pandemic—local people will be the ones who will ultimately perform this work. If they do

it voluntarily and bypass the market and state by organizing themselves, they can often do it particularly effectively.

However, even when non-market relationships are built or strengthened in direct response to disaster conditions, experience has shown that as the acute conditions ebb, these spontaneous relationships of mutual aid will be overpowered by impersonal and voracious market forces (Ntontis et al. 2019, 2020). Fledgling mutual aid initiatives are unlikely to survive the full-scale return of market-based interactions precisely because those initiatives were reactionary. When the next disaster arrives, individuals can hope for another temporary resurgence in mutual aid. But without concerted effort to entrench and normalize local networks of non-market relationships, mutual aid will remain fringe and occasional. This is to our detriment, since emergent mutual aid initiatives are better equipped to succeed in their aims if they can draw on extant networks of trust and reservoirs of information gathered by established social infrastructure (Jun and Lance 2020).

VI. CULTIVATING NEIGHBOR RELATIONSHIPS

Taken together, our arguments thus far show that individuals are unnecessarily vulnerable to disasters, including disease outbreaks such as the catastrophic global Covid-19 pandemic. Although there is evidence that local networks of non-market relationships aid in effective disaster response, the stability and strength of such networks has generally been declining. When mutual aid networks emerge in response to disasters, they are effective, but unfortunately short-lived. In contrast, in circumstances where networks were already in place before the onset of the disaster, those contributing to disaster response could draw on resources, familiarity, trust, and pre-existing infrastructure. As we have seen, the benefits that local networks of non-market relationships have in disaster response hinge at least in part on their access to the right sort of information about needs and capacities, flexibility unhindered by rigid bureaucracy or large-scale coordination, and the sort of care that accompanies social interactions. This suggests a path forward: building and strengthening fair-weather local networks of non-market relationships; that is, cultivating neighbor relationships.

Individuals can endeavor to cultivate neighbor relationships by introducing themselves to others in their neighborhoods, inviting them to social events, and organizing block parties or community dinners, to mention just a few examples. As Helm (2008) has argued, participating in a

shared activity intentionally directed at an aim that the agents involved care about is closely related to mutual affection. Thus, cultivating social relationships among neighbors could also involve working together on projects of mutual interest, such as tending a community garden, neighborhood repair and beautification projects, and grassroots activism to address issues of mutual concern. It could also involve doing one another favors (minding children), extending friendly gestures (offering help with projects), and giving gifts. Obviously, these activities are more easily and safely accomplished in fair-weather/non-pandemic times, which speaks to the importance of proactively cultivating neighbor relationships.

While cultivating neighborliness in these sorts of ways may seem commonsensical, building social relationships among neighbors during 'normal' times may require intentional action. Pew Research has found that across community types, a greater percentage of older adults than younger ones reported feeling supported in their communities, and older adults are more likely than younger ones to know their neighbors (Parker et al. 2018, 65, 77). Younger adults may eventually build support among their neighbors as they age themselves. However, prudence cautions against taking this possibility for granted. For some communities, aversion to bringing issues perceived as "political" into the local social dynamics may be an obstacle to building effective and lasting networks of mutual care (Grayson 2020, 28). While non-market relationships need not constitute overtly anti-market activism in order to improve disaster resilience, building mundane trust among neighbors may lay groundwork for further political reflection and action, which may in turn break down obstacles to neighbor relationships. Similarly, now-entrenched social norms characterizing neighbors as "eyes on the street" rather than, say, folks who organize together, may have to shift first via intentional steps, like creating conditions conducive to chance encounters in the neighborhood (Halegoua and Johnson, forthcoming, 13).

We have argued that building networks of neighbor relationships will bolster the capacities that neighborhoods have to respond to disasters effectively. Disposing oneself to one's neighbors and neighborhood in the ways articulated above would likely be associated with increased access to information of particular relevance to disaster response and with mutual care among neighbors. In virtue of the informal nature of the social networks thereby established, neighbors would retain the capacity to respond nimbly. Finally, we want to stress that cultivating neighbor relationships is valuable for its own sake. Being in relationship with one's

neighbors (much like belonging to friendships) is enriching, regardless of the occurrence of disasters. Although cultivating such relationships may have become unfamiliar, we believe it would be well worth it—and, as Berry reminds us, there are evening stories waiting to be told.

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Nora Mills Boyd is an Assistant Professor of Philosophy at Siena College. She holds a PhD in History and Philosophy of Science from the University of Pittsburgh.
Contact e-mail: <nboyd@siena.edu>

Matthew Davis is an Assistant Professor of Economics at Siena College. He received his PhD in Economics from American University.
Contact e-mail: <medavis@siena.edu>