22 "Prepper" as Resilient Citizen

What Preppers Can Teach Us about Surviving Disasters

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Abstract

"Prepping" is a social movement of individuals and small groups that are attempting to build resiliency at microlevels within their communities. They aim to learn how to effectively survive potential disasters and long-term change within their locale. Preppers choose to prepare for potential disaster through self-education, training, and the gathering of necessary materials to meet their own individual/familial needs. Keenly aware of community vulnerabilities, they also avidly support organizational attempts at building resilience. By building small, linked cells of microresiliency, communities are able to construct a stronger web that acts to support the larger community when disaster strikes. This allows prepared individuals to become responders instead of victims. This study introduces preppers and gives a brief history of the movement, followed by specific ethnographic examples to illustrate their efforts at resiliency construction.

INTRODUCTION

In the *World Disasters Report* by the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (2014), an emphasis is placed on the importance of local cultural understandings of disaster, risk, and resiliency in order to comprehend how populations prepare for, manage, and respond to adverse events. Similarly, this chapter is enhanced through a case study, which presents an ethnographic profile of "Zombie Squad" (ZS), a group that fits into a more general category of disaster preparation enthusiast called "preppers." While there is an ongoing discussion of the meaning of resilience and its place in preparing for disasters, the average community member around the world is more concerned with engaging in practices that will help them to survive the event.

Preppers are focused on learning and spreading such practices. This research clearly shows that they are also capable of contributing to the construction of resilient systems. The Resilience

Alliance's (2010) website defines resilience as (1) the amount of disturbance a system can absorb and still remain within the same state or domain of attraction; (2) the degree to which the system is capable of self-organization, and; (3) the degree to which the system can build and increase the capacity for learning and adaptation. As will be shown, preppers excel at increasing learning and adaptation, while self-organizing in order to support established systems in order to withstand disturbances.

Because of the particular history in which these kinds of practices have been negatively framed in the United States, it is necessary to situate the movement in its cultural context (Johnston and Noakes 2005). As discussed here, preppers are often associated with survivalists, who practice similar behaviors but have different motivations. While survivalists have been linked to criminal behavior and extremist perspectives, preppers have tried to escape that stereotype by defining a new frame that focuses on individuals enacting the same behaviors but with inclusive, community-supported goals that engage the general public. This is in direct opposition to the survivalist frame, which emphasizes that skills and resources should be focused exclusively within their specific groups. Because of such differences, understanding what preppers are and what prompts their behavior is essential to gaining insight into how they construct micro-resilient networks that support well-established systems of disaster response in their communities and why we should nurture these.

METHODS

This ongoing research was conducted primarily from 2009 from 2012 in the Midwestern United States with the original ZS chapter (001). Because ZS is a public group, entrée was through their open monthly meetings. After initial discussion with their leadership board, I started "complete participant observation" (Spradley 1980). This type of participant observation focuses on becoming a member of the group; I attended meetings, participated in charity events, and had hundreds of hours of conversations with preppers at bars, while camping, at the shooting range, at charity events, and at disaster preparation seminars. This participation-heavy method facilitates asking questions, taking observational notes, and having detailed conversations while in the field, permitting the researcher to learn the group-specific "rules" quickly (DeWalt and DeWalt 2011). Members would often seek me out to add some information to previously asked questions. They reciprocated my overtly participatory role in the group with participation in the research.

I recorded semistructured interviews with group leadership, chosen for their roles on the organization's board. Selection was based on the "snowball" method, where participants suggest the next round of people to contact (O'Reilly 2012), resulting in phone and e-mail interviews with members from other chapters around the country and in Canada. Because members are volunteers, not everyone participates at the same rate. The snowball method assisted in reaching individuals who had ties to the group but did not regularly attend all events. To widen my scope of understanding, I engaged with members on the online forum. These conversations were focused on the topic in each particular thread rather than directed questions within the research. Additionally, I conducted semistructured interviews with representatives from community organizations that had relationships with ZS.

As with any participant-based, qualitative research, reliability can be a concern. To achieve accuracy and understanding, direct experiential participation that uses mixed methods as a means to test the data is essential (DeWalt and DeWalt 2011). I have participated in and observed ZS's annual events over several calendar years, giving me a chance to test my observations and understanding of their "rules" and relationships. Supplementing my "complete participation" with semistructured interviews provides another method to test reliability.

DIFFERENTIATING PREPPERS FROM SURVIVALISTS

Unfortunately for preppers, there is a weighty discourse in American society framing some of the behaviors in which they engage as fringe activity and perspectives. This is particularly true of those

labeled as "survivalists" in the 1970–1990s. Philip Lamy (1996) has broadly defined "survivalists" as a wide spectrum of groups focusing on disaster preparedness. They range from those who are prepared for difficult times to white supremacists, antigovernment groups, and apocalyptic cults. Militias are a common addition to this list (Berlet 2004; Lamy 1992; Weeber and Rodeheaver 2003). These survivalists are often depicted as shaved-headed youths, marching about with swastikas, American flags, or signs preaching against homosexuals, abortion, or any number of ethnic groups (Lamy 1996; Mitchell 2002). They are also depicted with weapons, carrying out paramilitary training scenarios, or preaching that the "End is coming" (Lamy 1992, p. 422).

Because of these portrayals, survivalists are often equated with the "radical right" (Berry 1999; Lamy 1996; Mitchell 2002). While this is true for some, such as the Hutaree Militia (Temple-Raston 2010) or the Militia of Montana (Caron 2011), it is not true of all. It is the extreme type of survivalist groups that are used to construct frames presented by media to the public due to their actions and their perceived threat. This contributes to the construction of media-influenced memory in American culture.

These groups often follow some form of religious or secular millennial myth that helps them to interpret and explain their social experience, allowing them to contextualize that experience in any way they choose (Hill, Hickman, and McLendon 2001; Lamy 1992; Tapia 2003). Most commonly, those that claim to be survivalists focus on ideologies that lead them to prepare for adverse conditions. They focus on social/political/economic collapse or change that will bring about a dystopian situation, where they will need to defend themselves and their families or communities from those that they perceive as a threat.

The goal of prepping, alternatively, is to learn how to effectively survive disasters and adapt to long-term change within a local area. According to preppers I interviewed, the most important adverse events to anticipate were those most likely to occur—house fires, strong storms, flooding, tornados, and earthquakes. However, participants report that the preparations and skills necessary to weather these events are the same as those used to respond to large-scale events (e.g., social unrest). The need for food, water, and safety are paramount regardless.

This explanation is important because there is a common misperception of preppers by those familiar with the term. The primary sources of misconception come from television shows on the National Geographic (NatGeo) channel. *Doomsday Preppers*, the most well known, has made the public more aware of prepping. However, the show is biased toward one extreme within prepping—those that can afford the time and money to gather exorbitant amounts of material and gear and have extraordinary views on the events that would lead to using it.

The preppers participating in this research were not able to construct such arsenals. They consider the show as a bit of a spectacle, purposely showing fringe elements of the movement in order to make it NatGeo's most watched series over the past three years (North 2012). However, the show creates a lasting discourse that frames stereotypes of preppers in American society, the kinds of events that influence them, and how much time, money, and effort they are willing to expend in ways that can be problematic in the future (discussed below). The *Doomsday Preppers* website supports this notion of preppers as "Other," painting participants on the show as irrational agents, prepping for the coming apocalypse (Meet the Experts 2012). Thus, anyone claiming to be a prepper is often framed as resembling the show's participants and emulating their extreme behaviors. My contention is that there is a distinct difference between such fringe elements of the past and the average prepper of today. Furthermore, these differences are what allow for the construction of microresiliencies within communities that can bolster established systems.

Zombie Squad

Preppers are different from survivalists. To illustrate this, I will introduce one well-established prepping organization—ZS. Founded by a group of five friends in 2003, in St. Louis, Missouri, ZS has grown into a grassroots, nonprofit (501c3). It is an all-volunteer disaster preparedness and

awareness organization. Their tagline is "ZS is the nation's premier non-stationary cadaver suppression task force" (ZS 2009). This message emphasizes that, if you are prepared for a zombie apocalypse, then you are prepared for anything.

The organization has a standard corporate structure that is headed by an "international board" that oversees the ZS brand, deals with media, maintains the extensive online forum, and manages the larger charity functions. Fifty-one "chapters" in the United States and ZS's only international chapter in Southern Ontario, Canada, support the international board. Chapters, consisting of at least three active members, are required to host public, monthly meetings (often held in local bars or restaurants), as well as seminars and charity drives to bring disaster preparedness education to their communities. They often conduct these events while dressed in black tactical ("tacticool") gear and preaching against the dangers of zombies. It should be noted that members do not consider zombies or a zombie apocalypse to be a realistic threat. Rather, these are representational of emerging threats for which it is possible to prepare (Curtis 2012; McIntosh and Leverette 2008).

Because ZS is not strict on membership being a prerequisite to participating in the group, there is no accurate count of the "card-carrying" members. As of October 2015, its online forum had nearly 52,000 active participants. This suggests that the organization has wide online appeal. However, that appeal is tempered by the homogeneity of group chapters. While a detailed discussion is beyond the scope of this paper, it is important to note that preppers in this research tended to be primarily male (about 80%). Females tend to be partnered with males (15%), although about 5% are single. Participants are middle class (income over US$30,000) and almost entirely ethnically "white."

Despite this homogeneity, the organization's message is inclusive and public. While there are some latent political overtones to ZS's ideals, such as supporting the rights of gun owners (which tends toward the political right), their ideas on inclusivity and their opposition to stereotypical survivalist ideologies lean toward the political left. Political or religious talk is not allowed at meetings, gatherings, or on online boards. The organization feels these topics only lead to divisiveness. ZS is attempting to build a community of common knowledge without the ideology that is so important in survivalist circles. This was a conscious decision on the part of ZS founders. One member posted the following statement to explain why these policies are important to organizational continuation:

> ZS is where rabid republicans can sit down and talk trigger tuning jobs on AR [a type of rifle] variants with devout democrats; where successful businessmen, doctors and lawyers can sit down and talk about backpacks and hydration pouches with struggling students and minimum wagers…and it's because of the things we don't talk about when we sit down to talk that this is so. (ZS 2011)

Despite its name, the members of ZS are rational, well-informed individuals who are simply concerned with being prepared for adverse possibilities. The name "Zombie Squad" was intentional. As one founder of the group stated in an interview, "No one would show up if we called ourselves the St. Louis Tornado group. Zombies are cool and it gets people interested."

Members pay to join the organization and volunteer for activities. They report joining for the knowledge and the social aspects. They want to connect with others who are interested in learning and talking about survival strategies, gear, and end-of-the-world scenarios in a serious manner. Being a member becomes a part of their identity. They project this by wearing logoed clothes, patches, and gear. It also becomes the lens through which they view the world: they try to see how each context or item in their environment might be useful in different situations.

Embracing this identity has made ZS members a respected group in the local disaster preparedness community; it altered the local framing of preppers in the eye of the media, local citizens, and organizations. Further, ZS gives members a public outlet for their experience, knowledge, and willingness to assist the community. While members may never have to respond to a disaster situation, they still act as nodes of preparedness around the community. Thus, they function the same as any department within an organization's disaster preparedness plan.

Commonalities

Aspects of survivalism and prepping overlap where the focus is on building knowledge about how to adapt to and survive adverse events. This reflects ZS's mission and mostly consists of learning how to procure and treat water and food and how to maintain safety in any given situation. Other skills that are emphasized include first-aid, communications (especially short-wave radio), and firearms training. For ZS, these skills are often taught through the assembly of a "bug-out bag." This is a backpack or duffle with the gear that individuals need if they are forced to leave their residence. The bag is prepared for immediate need (3–5 days), with the idea that other types of assistance will be provided within a matter of days by governmental or nongovernmental agencies.

The contents of the bag depend on the individual and his/her level of skill. ZS members often noted that the more skill you have, the lighter your bag. If you know of potential clean water sources or have a way to filter it, for instance, then you don't need to constantly carry five pounds of water. Thus, survivalists and preppers share a desire for training and skill building. The key to understanding the difference between the two groups isn't the behavior; it is the impetus behind the behaviors.

Tactics and Sharing

The rationale behind learning, practicing, and disseminating skills and strategies differentiates survivalist and preppers. Also, with whom they share those skills and strategies differ vastly. ZS, at one end of the spectrum, wants every person in their communities to be prepared at a minimum bug-out bag level. The fact that ZS does this without overt calls to political, religious, or exclusionary ideologies differentiates it from survivalist groups. Survivalist groups generally want to keep these skills within their ideological communities to the exclusion of others. They may have notions of using those skills/strategies against the rest of society in order to fulfill ideas of revolution or apocalypse (Lamy 1996; Mitchell 2002). Survivalist groups often envision using the potential chaos created by an adverse event to generate a new society based on their ideologies (Berlet 2004; Hill, Hickman, and McLendon 2001). In opposition to this, preppers, like ZS, want to contribute to current forms of society, as well as recognized disaster response systems, by making it more resilient.

Why These Differences Matter

If preppers are equated with the stereotypical survivalist, then potential relationships between preppers and other individuals, organizations, and agencies within their communities may be hindered. As discussed here, ZS has been successful in showing that its members are something new in the disaster preparedness community. In so doing, ZS has been able to construct a loose web of micro-resilient areas that could act as nodes for information, resources, safety, and communications, supporting a larger effort by response organizations and agencies.

BUILDING RESILIENCY

The United States has a wide-ranging system of disaster and emergency preparedness and assistance-based agencies. The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) acts as the primary organizing agency for other federal, state, and local disaster management agencies and first responders. Additionally, international organizations, like the American Red Cross, have local chapters across the country, supplementing the government network. FEMA's Citizen Corp (2009) found that 61% of 4461 households surveyed would rely on these agencies given a local disaster. Even among those who reported they were "prepared" for local disaster, less than 30% had knowledge of their community evacuation routes and only 34% knew how to get information on local hazards (2009). The survey showed low levels of participation in preparedness activities and general knowledge on what to do, what to have available, or how to get help.

From the perspective of the prepper community, this is problematic, as the agencies (local, regional, or federal) cannot respond to disaster quickly. Thus, preppers plan for self-sufficiency until help arrives or in the case that it never does. In conversations and interviews, research participants repeatedly cited Hurricane Katrina, referring to the fact that help never arrived for some. Members of ZS have repeatedly reminded me that they fully support response agencies and recognize that these services are important. While they may have detailed, well-considered plans, they are just as vulnerable as the rest of society. Thus, they may be limited in their ability to respond. This is why members prep.

Members spoke heatedly, noting that if the rate of prepping were higher, the average person might be able to avoid some of the problems seen with Katrina. They do admit that prepping does not necessarily keep one from being vulnerable. In any disaster, you may lose your gear, food, and shelter and be unable to avoid some depravation. However, ZS argues that once you have certain skills, they are always with you. Basic survival knowledge and skill is what makes members resilient.

In this regard, prepping is a process, not an outcome. When asked if you could ever consider yourself prepared, members of ZS had strong responses.

GB: "I don't think so!...it's almost like a sport, always improving your game. But, you're never gonna say, 'done.' You continually get a little better, a little better, a little better."

BC: "Oh no, it's definitely a spectrum of preparedness…Preparedness, it's a journey not a destination. [*laughs*] Because in the end, even the really prepared guy is not necessarily prepared for everything, there's a lot of stuff he's not prepared for…there's no guarantees."

The process allows for vulnerabilities but attempts to reduce them by finding creative ways to adapt. ZS members often talk about being responsive to a changing world, especially in times of crisis, when services and resources may be unreliable or unavailable. This also means, at least on the small scale, that conceptions of resiliency encompass all services and resources needed by the individual or small group. Thus, preppers are adaptation-oriented in terms of constructing resiliency because that is what is necessary at the microlevel.

Members of ZS are not just constructing resiliency. They are influencing others to do so as well. ZS realized it could not achieve its goal of public education independently, but few organizations wanted to work with the group based on their name alone. Even fewer organizations wanted to work with, or be associated with, a group of young, tattooed, and pierced people dressed in black, military-style clothes. Still, building partnerships not only furthers ZS's goal of spreading the ideals of prepping, it also exemplifies its notion that resilient systems are redundant ones. Members have a saying to demonstrate this: "Two is one, one is none." The idea is that everything will fail, so maintaining redundancies is essential.

Members of ZS tend to think of these redundant systems in terms of gear and skills they can gain. However, as an organization, ZS has attempted to develop their adaptive capacity (Carpenter, Walker, Anderies, and Abel 2001) and adaptability (Walker, Abel, Anderies, and Ryan 2009) by building networks with other organizations in the area. ZS was able to forge relationships with three sectors within the community that have proved to be vital in gaining legitimacy for the organization: local community centers and organizations, law enforcement, and the nonprofit sector.

The first step was gaining legitimacy with the local chapter of the American Red Cross by hosting successful blood donation campaigns at local community centers and union halls. At these venues, the group was able to mix its membership with community partners not only to raise the number of blood donors but also to raise community awareness of the group. This gave ZS instant access to community organization structures to which it might not otherwise have contact. The American Red Cross publicly acknowledged the hard work and dedication ZS put into their blood drives by presenting them with official letters of thanks and coproducing fliers and banners to advertise future events.

ZS continued to plan regular charity events such as movie nights, canned food drives, and donation-based events at those same locations and local bars, leading to thousands of dollars going to local and international organizations. For example, in interviews, the international board reported that its dedicated networking allowed them to raise more than $13,000 in a matter of weeks for the Japan disaster in 2011. ZS received letters of thanks and recognition from local nonprofits and larger ones such as the American Cancer Society, Direct Relief International, and Save the Children for sponsoring fund-raising events. This legitimization helps to frame the group as a serious organization whose membership is focused on disaster preparation and helping communities affected by adverse events.

The ties to local and regional law enforcement developed in a similar way. Members of ZS, some of who are former military or have worked for or with police organizations, volunteer to act as “criminals” and “victims” for trainings. Additionally, about 48% of members of ZS who participated in this research are also members of Citizen Emergency Response Teams (CERTs). These small neighborhood teams are part of FEMA’s plan to localize emergency response (www.fema.gov 2015). Being a part of these teams also builds ties with local law enforcement and with first responders.

For example, after training with regional, interdepartmental SWAT (Special Weapons and Tactics) teams covering 11 counties in Illinois, where ZS members had played the role of “terrorists,” several officers voiced concern over the level of tactical skills and firearm knowledge held by the members. In an interview with the regional commander of the training, he related that “3 or 4” of his officers were not comfortable with the idea that ZS members were training with, and thus observing, “law enforcement strategies, armaments and training dynamics.” Yet, when questioned, the reason for this was the connection between this kind of knowledge and how it has been used in the past by antigovernment survivalists. It is this kind of framing that can destroy community relationships that ZS has worked so hard to build.

Aware of these misgivings, ZS has continued to build legitimacy and foster relationships with each of these organizations independently through its work, knowledge, and the experience of the members. While this has not resulted in any of these organizations formally including ZS in their plans, it has altered the response landscape for emergencies and disasters in the localized St. Louis metro area (which covers the city of St. Louis, Missouri, and the adjacent counties in Illinois). In fact, the relationships that the home chapter of ZS has built in this area over the past ten years directly relate to the types of volunteer services it is able to supply to the community during or after an event: search and rescue, triage, and first aid (CERT and American Red Cross), distribution of resources and services (Red Cross and local law enforcement in the St. Louis metro area), supplemental security, and communications (CERT and local law enforcement in the St. Louis metro area). This example is specific to the St. Louis chapter of ZS; however, interviews with other chapters in the United States point to much the same relationships in other chapter’s areas.

Furthermore, in interviews supplemented with conversations at charity events and trainings with representatives from the American Red Cross, local and regional law enforcement, and CERT instructors in the St. Louis metro area, there is respondent consensus that, when ZS members show up, they are there to work and are willing and interested in learning new skills. The organizations know members tend to have some knowledge and experience in training for disaster situations. They also know that ZS members often have some of their own supplies and will not be reliant on response systems in the short-term.

CONCLUSION

The concept of resiliency needs to have some metrics, such as infrastructure, economy, ecology, and community systems, in order for policy makers and organizations to determine how a community might respond to an adverse event (Cutter, Burton, and Emrich 2010). However, because they are difficult to account for within these larger scales, individuals and small groups within communities

are not likely to be counted in such metrics, even if they hold significant resources in terms of preparedness and knowledge (Cutter, Burton, and Emrich 2010). In addition, preppers and others may not hold to those same metrics when assessing their preparedness and ability to respond to events.

My observations and conversations have shown that preppers spend a great deal of time researching and contributing to the communal, organizational, and agency-based knowledge about how best to prepare, adapt, and survive various events. This communal sourcing of knowledge allows people from all over the political, social, and economic spectrums to share information with like-minded others. So, while the group may be localized, the expertise they gain and share may originate from a much wider area. Technical experts from various fields and regions contribute to that pool of knowledge. This corresponds to the definition of resiliency, presented earlier, in terms of building capacity and knowledge in order to construct resilient systems.

How these knowledge and experience are then applied to behaviors and networking will vary. Not all groups prepare in the same way, have the same resources, or are likely to be confronted by or be able to manage the same threats. Because these are individuals, small groups, or loosely organized larger groups, their adaptability is fluid. While preppers would never be able to respond to a large-scale disaster en masse, that is not their aim. Their goal is to be able to apply their knowledge and skills during an event, so that they can avoid needing assistance from large-scale organizations or be able to lend support to those in need. This type of self-organization (part 2 of the Resilience Alliance's definition of resiliency, given previously) is also important should the established plans fail due to the scale of the disaster. The hope, according to conversations with research participants, is that preppers could act as nodes of assistance, resources, and security until the response organizations could recover.

Admittedly, this is an untested web of relationships. Though ZS members have volunteered after disasters (e.g., Katrina, local tornadoes, and floods), there has yet to be a need for large-scale, prolonged response from any of the ZS chapters. As with any organization's disaster preparation, the true test occurs when the plan is implemented for the first time. You can only be so ready. But, this is where the power of ZS's goals and membership shines. ZS members continue to develop best practices, share information, and adapt, as any resilient system must. Moreover, as they build individual competency and legitimacy with multiscalar organizations, their microresilience bolsters the larger local systems, regardless of whether they are included in those systems.

The lessons learned from the example of ZS are twofold. First, communities can always be more prepared. It is possible to move communities toward preparedness by mobilizing the public to collectively plan and engage in skill building as per their resources. Plans can be created with little to no resources and still save lives. Being adaptive to emerging conditions is the key to preparedness. Second, being adaptive is more possible in a context of collaboration and consensus building. It is most beneficially adaptive when communities, government, and nongovernmental organizations work together on plans and how best to utilize resources, including each other.

This is the kind of resiliency-construction leaders and policy makers need to nurture. ZS's saying "two is one, one is none" exemplifies this idea through the creation of supportive systems. While they are not a duplicate system by any means, the unique set of skills preppers are able to provide does offer a small-scale redundant system that may help some communities withstand a disaster to which they may have otherwise succumbed.

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