

Voices of Katrina

Guest Editors

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For several decades, qualitative social science research that employs sound, appropriate methodologies and theoretical frameworks to guide interpretation of findings has proven to be effective in efforts to inform decision-makers. Although policymakers tend to rely heavily on quantitative data, the value of qualitative research in planning and policymaking is well established in public management research. This is especially the case with respect to issues typically affecting underrepresented and at-risk populations. The work of qualitative researchers to identify and clarify social problems provides critical perspectives that might otherwise go unnoticed and unaddressed. Recognizing that there is no “correct” recounting of any given event or situation, qualitative researchers offer interpretations that, as Denzin and Lincoln (2000) suggest, may be likened to light striking a crystal, reflecting different perspectives.

The complexities of long-studied issues such as education, crime, poverty, disease, mental health, and others demand the attention of multiple disciplines, perspectives, and methodological approaches. The social impacts of natural and human-caused/technological disasters also demand better understanding informed by a variety of perspectives. As a subfield, disaster sociology has a rich and established tradition of qualitative research dating back to Prince’s (1920) research on the 1917 Halifax explosion. It is imperative that we build on these qualitative approaches to improve our understanding and public policy approaches to disasters.

For better and for worse, disasters tend to highlight and exacerbate extant social conditions. This is particularly evident in New Orleans, which experienced a natural disaster caused by a meteorological event, as well as a technological disaster when levees were breached—flooding the city. The resulting hybrid disaster exposed social vulnerabilities and the consequences of decades of neglect by policymakers. Events accompanying Katrina provide a context to advance our understanding of the social

impacts of disasters, as well as illuminate societal ills that existed long before August 2005.

The purpose of this special issue is to give a voice to some of those most dramatically affected by this ongoing disaster. Notably, all of the articles in this special issue focus on New Orleans. No manuscript focusing on anything other than the situation in New Orleans was received during the submission process. The added complexities of the Katrina disaster in New Orleans have created uncertainty and presented a challenge to researchers, policymakers, and citizens to make individual and collective sense of the unfolding situation. As previously noted, qualitative research is particularly adept at providing useful insights. We must also keep in mind that voices all along the Mississippi and Louisiana Gulf Coast—well beyond New Orleans—though perhaps less compelling, are equally important, and there is much that we can learn from them.

The research presented herein follows in the tradition of seminal qualitative social science studies of disasters that have influenced how we conceptualize, understand, and inform various audiences about the social impacts of such events (e.g., Edelstein [1988] 2004; Erikson 1976, 1994; Kroll-Smith and Couch 1990). Denzin and Lincoln (2000) refer to the qualitative researcher as a “bricoleur”—defined by Lévi-Strauss as a “Jack of all trades or a kind of professional do-it-yourself person” (1966, 17). As bricoleurs, qualitative researchers create a “bricolage” by piecing together distinct and often very different representations of complex social situations using various approaches, methods, tools, and analytic techniques.

The first article in this issue, by Kroll-Smith, Jenkins, and Baxter, considers first-responders to the post-Katrina flooding of New Orleans as bricoleurs. In doing so, the authors explore what we can learn from these individuals, seeing their behaviors as a window onto a self stripped of convention and the mundane protocols of proper conduct, rather than simply cataloguing, analyzing, and evaluating their actions. Examining the decisions, behaviors, thoughts, and feelings of first-responders as they navigate the material world of a disaster landscape, the authors contend the first-responder resembles the bricoleur in action as well as character.

New Orleans residents that could not or did not evacuate the city struggled to survive amid the floodwaters and breakdown of social order. Within this chaotic milieu, rumors of rape and other violent crimes were perpetuated by the media and then recanted, leaving uncertainty among the public as to what actually happened. Thornton and Voigt examine the volatile topic of rape and sexual assaults in the aftermath of the Katrina disaster by presenting official reports and narratives of first-responders and victim advocates. These voices provide poignant illustrations of the chaos that reigned in the immediate aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.

The Katrina disaster closed colleges and universities in New Orleans, displacing almost 50,000 college students and forcing many of them to relocate to other educational institutions across the U.S. Ladd, Gill, and Marszalek provide insights into how this disaster affected these students as they faced a range of uncertainties about their lives, education, and return to New Orleans. These student voices give accounts of evacuation experiences, personal and financial losses, feelings of recreancy, psychological stress, educational impacts, and concerns about returning to the city to complete their academic year.

After Katrina, the mass media was a primary source of information used by survivors to construct narratives that expressed their experiences and struggles to reclaim their lives. For many New Orleans residents, *The Times Picayune* newspaper provided important information and compelling disaster narratives about the Katrina disaster. Miller examines newspaper articles with an eye toward the roles they played in constructing risk narratives about the disaster. Specifically, he identifies moral, social, legal, environmental, and institutional uncertainties within these narratives that framed risk and influenced decisions to return to New Orleans or move on. The risk saga that emerged from these narratives had important influences on public policy decisions as officials faced the task of re-opening the city and repairing the physical and social infrastructure.

Barber, Hidalgo, Haney, Weeber, Pardee, and Day lend their own voices by providing first-person narrative accounts of their experiences with Hurricane Katrina. All of these authors resided in the Louisiana Gulf Coast area and they use “storytelling sociology” as a method to link their individual narratives to sociological concepts and theories. Specifically, they provide narratives about evacuation, exile, coming home, and creating a “new normal.” Their stories convey a sense of the struggles of ordinary people to deal with day-to-day challenges after this disaster.

Given the understandably charged social and political atmosphere that continues to pervade events associated with Hurricane Katrina, media attention has been primarily focused on the sensational—voices of the best and worst cases of the situation. We believe that the sampling of voices of Katrina in this special issue offers a balanced presentation of social science insights grounded in theory as well as application. It is our hope that these insights will lend themselves to informed decisions and policies with the potential not only to enhance timely recovery for survivors of Hurricane Katrina, but also contribute to preparedness and resilience for future victims of disasters.

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