

# **Narrating the Storm: Storytelling as a Methodological Approach to Understanding Hurricane Katrina**

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*There is significant debate over how and why Hurricane Katrina impacted the lives of so many people in the South. In this article, we present the human side of this debate. Beyond the political and economic effects of Hurricane Katrina, those who intimately experienced these events struggle to cope with both the daily trials and the ongoing physical and emotional displacement of their lives. This article is based on a larger project that utilizes storytelling to address the sociological impact of Hurricane Katrina (Hidalgo and Barber forthcoming). Using storytelling sociology (Berger and Quinney 2005) as a method, we integrate first-person narratives of experiences with Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath. These narratives explicitly connect to or use a sociological*

*concept, theme, theory, or perspective to shed light on ways Hurricane Katrina impacted people's lives. We begin with stories of evacuation and exile then transition into the processes of coming home. We end with narrative reflections on the "new normal," the continuing process of living in and through a period of rebuilding homes and lives either throughout the Gulf Coast or in new and unlikely places.*

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"Tell them a story, the children cry. If we tell them, they will listen."

(Berger and Quinney 2005)

Through telling stories of one's life and adventures, others learn something about the world around them. In *Storytelling Sociology: Narrative as Social Inquiry* (2005), Ronald J. Berger and Richard Quinney discuss the narrative turn in sociology, traditionally a very quantitative field. They describe the crafts of writing and "telling" as a sociological *process* that allows not only for the social to emerge from personal narrative pieces, but also for a space to be created for both "healing" and for "wounds and pain that cannot be cured, but only endured" (Frank 1995; Zeitlan 1997). (Berger and Quinney 2005, 4). As Berger and Quinney (2005) remind us, "the personal is political" (6). Their treatment of narrative and storytelling rest on the "idea that lived experience is constructed, at least in part, by the stories people tell about it" (Berger and Quinney 2005, viii). Drawing from this perspective, we present varied sociological stories of our experiences during and since Hurricane Katrina to highlight the following: personal issues, trials, and tribulations as they directly and indirectly relate to issues of bureaucratic processes, social-psychological responses to disaster, and the masculinization of space, just to name a few. Building upon the work of Berger and Quinney (2005), we offer

a sociology that is self-reflective and willing to engage the personal, a sociology that refuses to segregate our professional insights from our lives...[and a sociology where] [w]e have discovered that we [can] find meaning and solace in writing and reading well-told sociological stories (viii).

While there is significant political and academic debate over how and why Hurricane Katrina impacted the lives of so many people in the South, we present the human side of these debates by integrating thick, descriptive and reflexive first-person narratives of our own experiences during and after Hurricane Katrina. As members of a survival community, we experienced these events intimately and, in this article, we reflect on both our day-to-day trials during evacuation and exile, and on the ongoing physical and emotional displacement in our lives. Further, as sociologists, we address the sociological implications of our stories, thus contributing a new method to disaster literature: narrative accounts of disaster-related experiences where *our* experiences serve as the central data.

Given this approach, we do not attempt to make generalizable claims about our data. Much like a single case illuminates a particular social dynamic, such as race or class inequality, our narratives or cases illustrate how so-called micro interactions were imbued

with and shaped by larger social systems and structures. Therefore, this article offers a new methodological approach to disaster research as well as rich and important data about this historic event. Notably, our narrative approach *gives life to* and clarifies issues of inequality, privilege, and disaster.

## **Literature Review**

### *The Social Construction of Disaster*

Sociological research on disaster has emerged primarily over the last 50 years as scholars have moved away from defining disaster as a physical event and have adopted a social constructionist perspective instead (Kreps 1984; Marshall, Picou, and Gill 2003; Picou, Marshall, and Gill 2004). The social constructionist perspective allows for disasters to be defined by their common effects more than by their specific causes, broadening our conception of disasters to include natural, technological, and terrorist events (Quarantelli and Dynes 1977; Erikson 1994; Quarantelli 1998; Marshall, Picou, and Gill 2003; Picou, Marshall, and Gill 2004). While some scholars argue that type and intensity affect outcomes differentially (e.g., Kroll-Smith and Couch 1990; Couch 1996), the social constructionist perspective's most important contribution is that it allows for the *meaning* of disaster to be integrated into research agendas and analyses. In *A New Species of Trouble* (1994), Kai Erikson illustrates how seemingly unrelated tragedies—a flood, a nuclear accident, larceny, toxic poisoning, and other events—share common outcomes, responses, and meanings among individuals and within respective communities. Erikson (1994) focuses first on the common response of trauma, arguing that “it is the damage done that defines and gives shape to the initial events and the damage done that gives it its name” (229). Second, he suggests that “trauma has to be understood as resulting from a constellation of life experiences as well as from a discrete happening, from a persisting condition as well as from an acute event” (Erikson 1994, 229). For those who experienced Hurricane Katrina, the periods of preparation and evacuation, displacement and response, and reconstruction and recovery were, and still are, extended experiences, the duration of which intensify the trauma of the event.

### *Preparation and Evacuation*

Unique to Katrina was an evacuation period that was longer than what is typically offered to those who experience tornadoes, fires, or earthquakes, but much shorter than for those who experienced previous hurricanes. New Orleans was on the edge of the storm's strike path late on a Friday night; therefore, Katrina did not appear to pose a significant risk until the following Saturday morning, when the city was suddenly in the center of the strike zone. The result: an entire metropolitan area enacted a 72-hour evacuation plan in just over 48 hours. This compressed timetable made coordination efforts among individuals, families, and institutions more challenging than normal. For households, evacuation is often both a risk-benefit assessment choice between leaving or staying, and a collective structural decision to evacuate jointly, in separately, or not at all (Ziegler, Brunn, and Johnson 1981; Mawson 2005). In Gladwin and Peacock's (1997) research on Hurricane Andrew, 54% of all households located in an evacuation zone evacuated entirely, while in the highest-risk zones along the coast this percentage increased to 71%, which the authors have suggested is a low-rate of compliance. During

Hurricane Katrina, an estimated 1.2 million people left the Gulf Coast region prior to the storm, while an estimated 100,000-120,000 New Orleans residents remained (Nigg, Barnshaw, and Torres 2006, 113).

Variables such as community size, age, composition, family structure, race, gender, and social class shape evacuation patterns. For example, Elliott and Pais (2006) found that African Americans, both in New Orleans and the surrounding area, generally waited longer to evacuate from Hurricane Katrina, and were less likely to evacuate at all. Additionally, Mawson (2005) found that family structure mattered since families tended to evacuate in groups, and only once the entire group had been assembled. This occurs because the threat of separation is often far more stressful than the disaster itself. Likewise, Haney, Elliot, and Fussell (2007) found that wealthier Gulf Coast residents were more likely to evacuate from Hurricane Katrina with an intact family than were families with fewer financial resources.

Haney, Elliot, and Fussell (2007) also found that gender was a significant predictor of evacuation behavior during Hurricane Katrina as men were more likely to remain behind while female household members evacuated. Enarson and Scanlon (1999) found similar gender effects in their case study of flooding in Canada's Red River Valley. Even though women were active information seekers, proactive about household preparedness, and more engaged in flood preparation work, they disproportionately bore the brunt of the aftereffects: women were much more likely to lose a job because of the flood and found themselves shouldering a much larger household work burden than men.

### *Displacement and Response*

Echoing Erikson's (1976) observations in Buffalo Creek after that West Virginia community's flooding catastrophe in the early 1970's, residents of New Orleans found that much of the psychological trauma associated with Hurricane Katrina involved the loss of communality. To quote a Buffalo Creek survivor whose account resonates with the stories of those who were displaced by Hurricane Katrina, "We think about our neighbors and friends we lost. Our neighborhood was completely destroyed, a disaster area. There's just an open field there now and grass planted where there were many homes and many people lived" (Erikson 1976, 196). Words such as "adrift," "displaced," and "lost" were used by disaster survivors in an attempt to capture the collective feeling that they "do not seem to belong to anything and that there are no longer any familiar social landmarks to help them fix their position in time and space" (Erikson 1976, 204). For those who attempted to pick up the pieces of their scattered lives, these feelings of loss, of missing commonality, translated into depression and anger.

Smith and Belgrave's (1995) work on the aftermath of Hurricane Andrew suggests that similar responses emerged as Andrew's victims often felt their space and privacy "invaded" by curious individuals driving through their destroyed neighborhoods to observe damage. Research such as this suggests that both the government's and the community's failure to respond quickly and adequately with assistance compounds the severity of a disaster. Consequently, the social environment becomes a corrosive community, exacerbating the strain caused by disaster and preventing recovery (Freudenberg 1993; Marshall, Picou, and Gill 2003). As Picou, Marshall, and Gill (2004) explain, three factors predict the emergence of corrosive communities: 1) the mental and physical health of victims; 2) perceptions of governmental failure; and 3) litigation.

Together, these factors inhibit and break trust between the community and the organizations that are supposed to assist its recovery. This break in trust makes it difficult for the community to truly ever return to “normal.”

*Reconstruction and Recovery: The “New Normal”*

Immediately following Hurricane Katrina, the media inundated the public with images of the National Guard failing to bring supplies such as food and water, and police failing to control looting and lawlessness. The media contorted public understandings of the disaster, magnifying the limited forms of disorganization into a framework of “civil unrest” (Tierney, Bevc, and Kuligowski 2006). The media also splashed across the screen images of miles upon miles of flooded houses, providing a point of entrée for the public to understand the enormity of the damage. Kates et al. (2006) estimate that New Orleans, when compared to historical recovery timeframes, will require 11 months for restoration, and 8 to 11 years for reconstruction. The massive physical destruction, combined with a projected long-term reconstruction period, has resulted in a permanent sense of change in the city. We refer to this changed environment as the “new normal.”<sup>1</sup>

While disaster survivors are forced to come to terms with this new normality, coping strategies are considerably varied. Among Hurricane Andrew victims, Smith and Belgrave (1995) found that the experiences of surviving and of trying to cope with the rules and realities of the new normal present emotional and psychological challenges that compound the loss of life, property, and community. Many of these challenges originate from the disruption of daily rituals and routines to which we are so accustomed. These disruptions can include the absence of taken-for-granted resources, long waits in line, food and supply shortages, and blocked channels of communication. Amid these challenges, traditional forms of stratification prevail. For example, after Hurricane Andrew, the private invitation-only group, We Will Rebuild, restricted the inclusion of women and minorities (Enarson and Morrow 1998). As a result, resources were funneled into business and long-term economic recovery instead of meeting residents’ needs. In response, a separate organization, Women Will Rebuild, was formed to ensure women and their families received sufficient resources to meet their crisis needs.

When those who are most affected by disaster operate in a world where they are subsumed by the experience, a rift can develop between their world and the world of those less affected. For Katrina survivors, like those of Hurricane Andrew, the *process* of moving between the orderly world of work and the chaotic world of home and neighborhood became psychologically demanding (Smith and Belgrave 1995). The resulting stress compounded an already-taxing and traumatic situation. In the following narratives, we show how these traumatic situations were inextricably linked to sociological issues.

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<sup>1</sup> “New normal” is a term adopted from April Brayfield’s (2006) presentation at the Southern Sociological Society Annual Meeting. She used this term to describe her ongoing shifting and changing life in San Diego, to which she evacuated, and her life in post-Hurricane Katrina New Orleans.

## Methods

Storytelling sociology is the method of telling a narrative that remains particularly sensitive to the sociological processes of the story *and* the implications of its telling. The narratives presented in this article<sup>2</sup> use storytelling sociology to illuminate the trials and tribulations of individuals whom Hurricanes Katrina and Rita have affected. As Berger and Quinney (2005) have argued, “a compelling story connects personal experience to public narratives, allowing society to ‘speak itself’ through each individual” (10). Our narratives provide a window through which to address sociological issues and possibly anticipate issues future disaster survivors and evacuees may face. We begin with both evacuation and exile stories then transition into the processes of coming home. We end with narrative reflections on the “new normal,” which is the continuing process of living in and through a period of rebuilding homes and lives both throughout the Gulf Coast and in new and unlikely places. This project offers a sociological interpretation of the evacuee experience and is represented in our personal stories. Taken aggregately, the narratives presented in this article extend and support empirical literature that suggests individuals in affected regions experience disaster in diverse ways.

We, the coauthors of this article, sociologists who were affected by, and continue to deal with, the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, tell these first-person narratives. However, in order to contextualize our situations, we describe and reflect on our stories by using the third person. This strategy allows us to offer both an intimate account of our experiences and alert the reader to the sociological implications of our separate stories. All of the authors experienced the four processes discussed in this article: evacuation, exile, coming home, and the “new normal.” However, each author chose to highlight the experiences he or she felt were most salient for him or her; some had more or less to say about each process.

The concept for this project first emerged during the post-hurricane spring of 2006 as Danielle Hidalgo organized the local arrangements for the Southern Sociological Society’s Annual Conference, which was held in New Orleans. She organized a panel session entitled, “After Hurricane Katrina: Storytelling Sociology,” and asked participants to use storytelling sociology to present their experiences with the hurricane. The overwhelming response to the panel inspired both this article<sup>3</sup> and the forthcoming larger book project (Hidalgo and Barber forthcoming). Five of this article’s authors, and sociological storytellers, are graduate students who, at the time of the storm and its immediate aftermath, were completing their studies at Tulane University in New Orleans. Stan Weeber, the fourth author, is a full professor at McNeese State University. After the storm, some of us returned to Tulane University before transitioning to other graduate programs, while others remained in Louisiana or transitioned to other jobs and institutions within the South.

As trained sociologists, we are able to offer sociological insight that interviews may not be able to provide. For example, while we could use interview data and frame it

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<sup>2</sup> Portions of the data and analyses in this article are excerpts from lengthier sociological stories that were presented at SSS, 2006 and that will appear in *Narrating the Storm: Sociological Stories of Hurricane Katrina* (Hidalgo and Barber forthcoming).

<sup>3</sup> The authors of this article include all of the panelists with the exception of both April Brayfield and Andrea Wilbon.

sociologically, this methodological and theoretical process would not result in the same *type* of data. Sociological storytelling (Berger and Quinney 2005) allows writers, particularly sociologists, to reflexively tell their rich, detailed stories while *at the same time* illustrate how and why their stories are sociologically compelling. Sociologists too often forget that their own subjective experiences both matter and may be looked at as data. Therefore, the goal of this article, and the larger book project, is to reflect on and tell our own stories *at the same time* that we, as sociologists, step back from that telling to frame our narratives in sociologically significant ways.

It is *not* our aim to make a general statement about the experiences of hurricane evacuees and survivors. Although we address various emerging themes, we do not claim to speak from the perspectives of all hurricane-affected residents; no work can do this. Instead, our descriptions of the events that each and every one of us experienced are intertwined with sociological concepts, and allow others to better understand how social inequalities and material consequences of the storm impacted and continue to impact our lives.

## **Findings**

### *Evacuation*

People who have lived along the Gulf Coast have encountered and survived numerous hurricane scares previous to Hurricane Katrina. Many had packed and evacuated for countless uneventful hurricanes and finally reached a state of complacency, not believing that anything devastating would happen because storms had always “blown over” before. The nation witnessed the effects of this when historic and horrific images were splashed across the news before and after Hurricane Katrina: unimaginable traffic clogged the freeways out of New Orleans hours before Katrina’s predicted landfall; scribbled signs on particle board claimed that vigilantes “Will Shoot Looters”; and, perhaps most devastating, photographs depicted those who did not “choose” to stay and had to scramble to the Superdome with their children and belongings in tow.

A smaller, but still devastating hurricane, Hurricane Rita, came on the heels of Katrina, but despite the catastrophe it too caused in New Orleans, people continued to be complacent about their own crises. In Lake Charles, Louisiana, Stan Weeber watched Rita with concern for others, but also relief as the news reported his area was not in harm’s way. Stan’s reflections demonstrate how years of past hurricanes shaped his perception of and attitude toward evacuation. Although Stan had recently dealt with students who had just evacuated from New Orleans, he notes that he continued to feel safe and complacent as Rita approached:

I felt fairly secure living in southwest Louisiana, and those students previously displaced by Hurricane Katrina who knew of the hurricane history of the area were similarly secure. Audrey was a devastating storm, but it had occurred long ago, in 1957. In 2002 there was a near miss with Lily. It made landfall near New Iberia, and the bad weather that spun off of it reached within 10 miles of Lake Charles, but left us virtually untouched. In between those

hurricanes there had not been much major storm activity along the coast directly to our south.

As Tropical Storm Rita became the 17<sup>th</sup> named storm of the 2005 season, the news produced no particular angst in southwest Louisiana. Early models had it delivering a glancing blow to the Florida Keys and then after that, a westward plunge into the Gulf of Mexico. In a record year for hurricane production, it became just one more storm to watch.

Katrina reminded many of us how uncontrollable and unpredictable the weather can be. Soon, Rita turned and started heading directly for southwest Louisiana. Stan notes Rita's approach and his decision to evacuate, which came only when he had no other option:

After hours of rumors, the official word finally reached me at 1:30 p.m. that school was cancelled for Thursday and Friday. Wednesday's night classes would go on as scheduled. As of that afternoon, Lake Charles was on the edge of the "cone of uncertainty," represented by several computerized hurricane-tracking models. This meant that we were not anticipating a direct hit, but would experience significant wind and rain from a landfall somewhere on the upper Texas Gulf Coast.

By 8 a.m., I learned just how quickly things can change with a hurricane approaching. The mandatory evacuation came down for everyone in the parish south of Interstate 10. We were only about two miles south of the Interstate, and my initial reaction was to stay put. However, we got a full dose of peer pressure to pack up and go. All of our neighbors were packing up; then, our landlord came to announce that we must leave as he and his entire family were leaving. That made it official; we were going to leave under the mandatory evacuation order, whether I liked it or not.

Despite the recent catastrophe in New Orleans, partially due to Hurricane Katrina, though mostly a result of poor levee construction along the Mississippi River, Stan expressed feelings of not wanting to evacuate for Hurricane Rita. Rather, he displayed an attachment to place, to home, that many along the Gulf Coast exhibited and is difficult for those outside of the affected areas to understand. It was this attachment to place, combined with the complacency that came from experiences with multiple uneventful hurricanes, which hindered Stan from mustering up the desire and motivation to flee. His experience, surely not a unique one, demonstrates the shove many people need in order to decide to evacuate in the shadow of very real danger and destruction. News reports did not appear to have a significant influence on much of the potentially affected population. Stan evacuated because he could no longer stay at his home. Despite

the mandatory evacuation, which is often called too late, it was the absence of his landlord that forced Stan and his family to evacuate to Farmerville, Louisiana.

Although many people's complacency and disbelief that anything devastating would really materialize kept them from evacuating, Jessica Pardee experienced quite the opposite effect. Jessica found that engaging Simmel's (1997) blasé attitude—the ability to choose reactions in an “assumed” rational manner—helped ease her evacuation process. Originally an adaptation to chaotic urban life during industrialization, the blasé attitude develops in reaction to the “*intensification of nervous stimulation* which results from the swift and uninterrupted change of outer and inner stimuli” (Simmel 1997[1903], 175: italics in original). By all means, Hurricane Katrina created intense, swift, and continuously changing stimuli for Jessica:

My experience with Hurricane Katrina was fairly straightforward. Saturday morning, I woke up and learned Katrina, a category 4 hurricane, was headed directly here. I called friends and made arrangements—these plans would change with each new forecast or phone call. I packed up lawn furniture and potted plants, and borrowed a copy of Harry Potter to use as a distraction. I made lists of things to do, to take, and kept to them. As best I could, I removed all thought and emotion from the process. I chose my reaction and rationalized the storm as a problem; the solution was a series of troubleshooting activities. In this manner I engaged the blasé attitude as a mechanism of survival, preventing a deep panic. I was so blasé, I even packed my books to finalize my syllabus for the coming Wednesday.

My departure from the city was fairly smooth. As I drove to Houston, I took a back route and avoided the cumbersome traffic. This plan was successful until I approached Beaumont, Texas. At that point the traffic was so dense that the last hour of driving took five hours. I arrived at 6am on Sunday, resting well into the evening. On Monday, news coverage presented a wind and rainstorm, but no flooding—Much ado about nothing, I figured. However, on Tuesday, I turned on the TV and saw water streaming into my city. In this moment, the blasé washed away. All rationality was replaced with inexplicable pain. In that moment, only a frantic uncertainty remained.

The blasé attitude can have both negative and positive effects for people experiencing disaster. It may create dismissiveness toward the threat of disaster, as Stan demonstrates; or it may help rationalize and organize the process of evacuation, as Jessica's narrative shows us.

### *Exile*

During and immediately following Hurricane Katrina, others living along the coast as well as those in unaffected areas who found themselves face-to-face with displaced evacuees also adopted the blasé attitude. As Jessica found, the blasé attitude of

others worked against her best interest. For example, in South Carolina, Jessica struggled with the complacency and indifference of healthcare workers on whom she was dependent for the refill of her prescription medication:

I waited for four hours to receive a simple prescription refill; it was pre-measured and only needed the mandatory name label. At first, I was told it would be free because of my status as a hurricane victim. But after waiting for hours, I was asked to pay. I felt so strained by this imposition that I began sobbing, wailing really, in the clinic waiting room. Didn't these people understand that I didn't even know if I had anything left? Did we not just spend forty-five minutes talking about the damage and how horrible everything was? All the while, the workers continued to tell me they understood, and then proceeded to ignore me as if I was just another patient waiting for a prescription. This is the negative side of rationality: the ability people have to shut out things that overwhelm them, like homelessness after a disaster, or homelessness in general. In the end, the damage, disruption, and flooding in New Orleans was simply too far away for people to really comprehend the disaster, or truly relate to me; they were blasé.

Arguably, this negativity and indifference reflects both the geographical and emotional distance between outsiders and the disaster event. Yet, these attitudes can directly impact the lives and well-being of all hurricane and disaster victims. As Jessica's narrative continues, it suggests that those who share similar disaster experiences in their past tend to possess the empathy necessary to offer support for the emotional and psychological management of such trauma:

In Florida, I found a temporary home in the University of Central Florida's Sociology Department. In talking about Katrina as an interruption in my life and professional work, there was no indifference to my concerns. Instead, people knew. Charlie, Ivan, and other hurricanes had dissolved the rational frigidity I had faced in South Carolina. Florida people *knew* the life of hurricane threats: life without electricity, staying with family, even the uncertainty and stress of being at nature's indiscriminant hand. Compassion and shared empathy was important in helping me manage my own trauma and disorganization.

The experiences of "host" communities, and, consequently, their ability or inability to relate, affected many of our personal experiences following Hurricane Katrina. With little access to media coverage of "what was actually happening" in New Orleans and the surrounding areas, and without the ability to return home for months, many of us remained in a state of limbo, maneuvering through our everyday lives in a fog. Kristen Barber experienced this liminal state during her transition into a temporary

life in her Michigan hometown. Unable to return to New Orleans, she completed a semester of graduate work at the University of Michigan while also working in her mother's store. In addition to the role conflict she experienced as an academic who felt she had to police her emotions, she often felt alienated from others who failed to understand her feelings of uncertainty and process of mourning:

I was devastated and confused. Unfortunately, there was no time for me to mourn, no time to digest what was happening to my life, to the city I now called home, and to those friends and colleagues whom I did not know were alive or dead. The horror and helplessness I felt had to be managed (Hochschild 1985) because although my world had stopped, everyone else's around me had not. After all, I still had a paper deadline to meet for an anthology chapter. The deadline was just two days after the levee break. As a result, I experienced a sort of role conflict (Goffman 1971). My rational, unemotional academic self was in conflict with my highly emotional hurricane victim self. I could not simultaneously occupy both roles. I had to distance myself from the role of hurricane victim in order to continue doing sociology and perform [as a] graduate student. I was forced to separate myself from my recent identity as a New Orleans evacuee, and instead evoke and make salient my role as a "masculine" academic.

During her temporary time away from New Orleans, Kristen negotiated her position as an outsider; although she was a Michigan native, she was also a New Orleanian, and often these identities and experiences came into conflict:

I learned that being an evacuee meant becoming Simmel's *stranger* (1999 [1908]). As I assume was the case with many Gulf Coast evacuees (whether evacuating to either a familiar or an unfamiliar place), I became the stranger at home. In conversations with others, my position or role within the community and within interactions shifted from insider to outsider; I was now essentially known as the local "New Orleans evacuee."

Simmel noted that the stranger comes into a community to which she has never belonged and has an affect on the relationship between those who were already there, creating solidarity among the group by representing the "other." The stranger's "position within it [the group or community] is fundamentally affected by the fact that he *does not belong in it initially* and that he brings qualities into it that are not, and cannot be, indigenous to it" (Simmel 1999 [1908], 185; emphasis added). However, using my experience, I expand on Simmel's original concept of the stranger to include someone who once belonged to the group and now returns. With this return, the stranger brings new "qualities" to the

community or group she has accumulated from life experience gained while absent from the group, qualities that are not “indigenous to it.” These qualities reinforce the difference between the group and the stranger, making salient the commonality among the group and the fact that the stranger does not really belong.

I had a reservoir of experience and knowledge that those in the community drew from in order to round-out their understanding of what had happened and what was continuing to happen in the Gulf Coast area, particularly in New Orleans. People asked me questions about the state of my life: “Did you loose anything?” How did I know, I hadn’t even tracked down all the *people* I knew to make sure they made it out of New Orleans alive. They also asked me political questions: “Do you think it’s the local or the federal government’s responsibility?” Both. Sometimes, it even seemed as if they wanted to start a fight: “Everyone should stop pointing fingers and blaming George Bush and FEMA for the poor response after the hurricane.” Or “Well, what do people living below sea-level expect, really?” Grrr!

Paralleling many of our narratives, Kristen’s captures the processes of mourning and adjusting that have been a constant in our lives during the immediate aftermath of Hurricane Katrina and as we move into a period of new normality. That is, things have indeed changed at “home,” whether home is another geographical location, New Orleans, or the wider Gulf Coast.

### *Coming Home*

Some of us came home to New Orleans immediately following the storm; waves of various residents were allowed to return to different city zones, while others remained in distant places, often unsure about the current state of our employment, neighborhoods, friends, and family. Besides the emotional milieu of the environment in which we were all embedded, the bureaucratic state of government agencies implemented to provide monetary aid to those in need greatly impacted the experiences of many survivors. Tim Haney evacuated to the small bayou town of Boutte, Louisiana. There he and his spouse heard of work colleagues who attained aid in the form of food stamps. They decided to apply since, regardless of financial situation or physical ability, everyone in the affected area was supposed to qualify for disaster assistance. The Department of Agriculture had implemented a policy which stated that there were to be no financial tests in determining eligibility for aid in the face of the disaster. “Rather, the only requirements for the food stamp program involved residency in a declared area and date of application (prior to October 31, 2005 for Hurricane Katrina-affected areas)” (Haney, forthcoming). However, as his narrative demonstrates, bureaucratic agencies, here the Department of Family Services, were not prepared and did not have the protocol for dealing with such a situation:

I walked to the St. Charles Parish Department of Family Services (DFS) in Boutte, where I encountered a crowd of between 1,000 and 3,000 people waiting under the blazing sun. By 8:00 a.m., the crowd had thickened and the wait was on. The mercury quickly rose to above 100 degrees and shade became a scarce commodity. Many people showed visible signs of heat exhaustion. But, instead of liberally handing out food stamp assistance in order to thin the agitated crowd, the Department of Family Services utilized a lengthy screening process for each candidate.

After spending nearly 10 hours waiting outside in stifling temperatures with no water readily available, I was called inside via police megaphone where I encountered a second waiting area. After another considerable wait, I met with a caseworker who hurriedly reviewed my application, noting that my spouse and I had liquid assets in our bank account, and that she was still gainfully employed. I did not initially consider that this might be an impediment to receiving assistance, as many of her coworkers had also received such assistance, some who have considerable financial resources. The caseworker performed a number of whirlwind calculations and proclaimed that we did not qualify for the disaster food stamp program: “NEXT!”

Whether related to applying for food stamps, paying bills, or sending mail, ineffectual bureaucratic systems in the wake of Hurricane Katrina impacted not only Tim, but also those most disaster-affected and most in need. Agencies that exist to aid people through difficult times may become ineffective due to a lack of policy preparedness and personal training. Weber (1946) has noted that bureaucracy dehumanizes business dealings and seeks to eliminate love, hatred, “and all purely personal, irrational, and emotional elements which escape calculation” (216). Included in this is the emotion of compassion. In the name of calculability and a defined set of bureaucratic rules, DFS employees refused to bend prescribed protocol in order to distribute assistance more expediently, even as a group of hungry, emotionally-drained, and, in some cases, homeless, disaster victims roasted in the blistering sun. Ritzer (2004) notes that this is one of the irrational consequences of “rational” bureaucracy: humans become numbers. Those who provide services never come to know patients or clients as individuals, and, as a result, are unable to utilize the compassion necessary in such a traumatic situation.

For those of us who returned to New Orleans early, relations of inequality emerged as we reentered this new and often hostile space. For some of us, hostility arose from how our gender was read on the street and in public spaces. A dramatic shift occurred post-Katrina that affected the gendered and embodied experiences of several of us who are women. Immediately following Katrina, male military police and construction workers were brought in by the truckloads to help New Orleans’ recovery, dramatically skewing the ratio of men to women. The masculinization of New Orleans directly affected how we moved about in this new world and how we felt readjusting to life in our city:

Walking down Decatur St. in New Orleans' French Quarter, a fellow colleague and I experienced a blatant display of sexual street harassment. While crossing the busy street, two men approached in their automobile. The passenger in the truck rolled down his window while stopped at a streetlight and yelled, "Hey! I want to lick your ass."

Jennifer Day also describes another incident to demonstrate the recurrent pattern of her experiences as an assumed (hetero)sexual woman in this new "home" space:

In early January, three young women and I met at a bar to celebrate the re-opening of Tulane University. This particular bar, is a local's hangout located on the less touristy, easternmost edge of New Orleans' French Quarter. We were gathered at the end of the bar and I was near the edge of the group, sitting on a stool. I noticed an older white man in his mid- 40's staring as he leaned up against the wall next to me. At one point he leaned in and informed me, "You know, you have a great ass." I puckered my face and scoffed, speechless at his totally inappropriate comment. At this point another young woman came to my rescue, telling him that his comment was rude. We turned back to our conversation and tried to ignore him. About an hour later I rose from the stool to prepare to leave. As I stood up, the same man stepped forward, grabbed my buttocks and commented, "It looks even better when you stand up."

Incidents such as this represent patterns of behavior and spatial dynamics that Jennifer noted in her journal entries time and time again after her early return home. Often, she reflected on how different it felt in post-Hurricane Katrina New Orleans, how frustrated she frequently felt in this new space, and how uncertain she was about her comfort level as others read her as a vulnerable and an exposed female body. Jennifer's personal journal entries exemplify how the military presence especially contributed to the masculinization of the city:

Journal Entry: November 17, 2005

Just cooking dinner and happened to look out my window to see a hummer full of military police patrolling my neighborhood. Now, I was going to say that's not something you see everyday...but that's not quite true; I do see it everyday: huge helicopters buzz my neighborhood and MPs walk down Magazine Street with automatic weapons. It makes me feel as though the city is a war zone and I need protection. From what? I don't exactly know.

Journal Entry: November 15, 2005

Many people told me it was too early to go back. Now I think maybe they were a little right. But, I NEED to be here. This is my

home. I won't be a prisoner in my own home, in my city. But I will watch my ass.

As a result of these gendered and sexualized experiences, Jennifer felt fear and paranoia, and altered her routines; for example, she would not go outside at night. Her embodied and spatial relations to the city of New Orleans drastically shifted as she experienced recurring violations of her space and her body. These early experiences, either away from New Orleans and the Gulf Coast or in the middle of a "war zone," intersected with conflicting feelings of frustration, relief, anger, hope, sorrow, and new beginnings. We describe this shift into new and unlikely places in our hearts and lives as the "new normal."

### *The "New Normal"*

The new normal is normality with a twist: the mail system is working, but it takes three weeks to a month to receive a birthday card or a letter from a worried friend; most of the universities are up and running, but students are taking classes in the downtown hotel rather than at their home campus; restaurants are open in the French Quarter, but they close early every night. And the list goes on.

This new normal seemed fairly manageable until many of us were faced with reflecting on *how* we were currently managing our lives. Kristen highlights this process of reflection in her description of our 2006 Southern Sociological Society panel, where she notes that many of our "personal stories were laced with deep, complex, and often conflicting emotions that came through as a few of us began to cry during our presentations; making it obvious that the emotional and psychological pain caused by our experiences related to Katrina continued long after the winds had passed" (Barber, forthcoming). She further observes that

as panelists, we were expected to simultaneously perform victim and academic, one role which is rooted in deep emotional and psychological trauma, the other which requires the disassociation with the emotional and necessitates the performance of ideal masculine worker, an "objective" observer.

An example of this emerged as I was telling my story in front of a crowd of approximately sixty students and scholars. I stopped many times in various sections of my presentation because I was so overwhelmed with emotion I knew I could not say one more word without breaking into tears. I gave myself a moment each time this happened to collect myself, as I did not want to embarrass myself by crying in front of colleagues, something not recommended in academia as it is not...appropriate conduct [for]... "masculine" work.

However, in the middle of my presentation, I let out a sob. I immediately apologized, something women often do. It is important to note that not only did crying violate the "masculine"

code of the workforce, here specifically the academic workforce, but my response was also a “violation” because of its feminine and, thus, marginal meaning. During the question and answer session of the presentation, one sociology professor politely told me that I need not apologize because crying is part of the disaster experience and part of the storytelling process. In listening to the panel, she apparently was able to separate us, the panelists, out as hurricane survivors who were sharing an experience of trauma. On the other hand, perhaps she, as a woman academic, also had an appreciation for the feminine and was responding to my socialized response to my sob. Whatever the case, I was not able to do the same.

Role conflict, alienation, and frustration continue to occupy our post-Katrina experiences. For example, Danielle Hidalgo negotiated, and continues to negotiate, her role as a post-Katrina graduate student. During the spring of 2006, she, like many other graduate students at Tulane University, felt the pressure to find a new department in which to complete her studies. During her final semester at Tulane, everyday presented a new “rumor” and conflicting information about whether or not she could complete her Ph.D. at the university. Given this confusion and uncertainty, she felt pressured to look for a new home, a new place in which she could complete her work. Nonetheless, she was often confronted with a deep sense of loss that was exacerbated by her interactions with those who “simply did not understand”:

During a visit to Santa Barbara, which would become my new “home,” I discussed my post-Katrina living situation with a local Californian who reacted by abrasively stating, “Oh, well, I don’t even know why they’re rebuilding New Orleans. Honestly, I don’t see the point.” This failure to “see the point” rested on the assumption that since New Orleans is below sea-level, it is destined to experience another hurricane-related tragedy. What this person failed to note was that this “disposable” place had, in fact, been my *home* for the last 3 years, was the home of my current partner, Teresa, and, of course, was home to thousands of people who were still unable to return. Teresa and I, like many other New Orleanians, were experiencing the total displacement of our lives. We were trying to figure out how to manage our loss one day at a time.

Anger seethed beneath the calm performance of my academic self. Nonetheless, I was so shocked and dismayed by this remark that I found myself speechless. Underlying my shock and anger, I also felt a deep sense of guilt. I hated these remarks for everything they meant for the city of New Orleans and for those people who were able or who longed to return to the city. Yet, I also experienced a deep conflict between the goals that I had for my work as a

sociologist and the impossibility of attaining those goals if I did, in fact, remain in New Orleans.

Danielle continues to feel a deep sense of longing for her bygone life in New Orleans and for the loss of community she had while she lived there. She constantly negotiates these feelings in everyday interactions in her new “home” and at the University of California at Santa Barbara where she is currently completing her studies. Like Kristen, Danielle’s post-Katrina self constantly conflicts with her stoic and professional academic self; she continually negotiates how to resist the misdirected assumptions that are made about New Orleans. Comments such as “What’s the point?” of rebuilding New Orleans fail to capture the rich and complicated social, economic, and political dynamics and history of the city; and it fails to address the sociological implications of a “forgotten” city. If a city is left behind and not rebuilt, what will happen to the culture, the people, and the life of that city? While Danielle cringes at such remarks, she is also conflicted when she reflects on her own decision to leave New Orleans and move on.

Tim’s negotiation of “where to go from here” resulted in an opportunity to complete his graduate studies at the University of Oregon. This decision did not come without conflict and frustration. However, as he and Danielle discussed the other options that had recently come their way, they experienced deep conflict over leaving their home institution and the loyalty they had to their mentors, uncertainty and anger at how Tulane dealt with the situation of graduate students, and frustration over the ongoing problems they dealt with “outside” of school in their everyday lives with spouses, friends, and in their respective neighborhoods. Tim recalls an incident where his new normality wholly conflicted with his attempt to build a new life in Oregon:

The spring following the storm, I received a phone call that an apartment had become available in our desired apartment community in Eugene; I eagerly seized the opportunity. I informed the apartment complex staff member that I would mail out the deposit check immediately in order to reserve the apartment. She cheerfully informed me that the apartment would be held for 4 business days while my check was in the mail. My jubilation quickly morphed into restrained fury. I politely informed her that although our mail situation in the New Orleans area had improved markedly since the fall, I could not guarantee that my check would arrive in four days. Naturally, I assumed that they would waive this rule for us. I was flatly informed that the waiting list was a mile long; either I find a way to get the check to Oregon in four days or the apartment goes to the next person on the list.

In this particular situation, the woman with whom I spoke on the phone possessed a *habitus* (Bourdieu 1977) that had been shaped in accordance with one set of images and experiences. Having long forgotten Hurricane Katrina, her readily available images and experiences did not include the everyday struggles of living in

post-Katrina New Orleans; my habitus, on the other hand, was shaped by quite an opposite set of experiences.

Our new normality as reflected in these narratives is constantly peppered with coping mechanisms and periods of reflection where we attempt to make sense of the sociological and psychological implications of this disaster for our lives; we attempt to make sense out of the chaos and often resign ourselves to simply accept the chaos and move on. In the remaining section, we briefly summarize the key themes that emerged from our narratives. The narratives illuminate not only larger implications of disasters, but also the smaller, yet no less significant, everyday experiences of those who were faced with and continue to face the effects of disasters in their personal lives.

### **Conclusion**

Woven throughout all of the narratives in this article are four transitional themes: evacuation, exile, coming home, and negotiating the new normal. Following these processes of transition, many of us dealt with spatio-temporal role conflicts and feelings of alienation in New Orleans, the wider Gulf Coast, and many other locations. We also dealt with, and continue to deal with, negotiating new ways to interact with those “who just don’t understand.”

The goal of this article is to alert people to the everyday trials and tribulations of several Hurricane Katrina (in Stan’s case, Hurricane Rita) evacuees, and how such trials were wrapped up with and were shaped by already existing social phenomena. We use storytelling sociology to achieve this goal. Our narratives represent the socially constructed experiences of sociologists who became hurricane evacuees, were “exiled,” and returned home to a new normal. This is not a positivist project, but a qualitative one that empowers the voices of the evacuees as displaced “others.” We believe that our experiences can point to the “smaller” picture that many individuals face as they transition into post-disaster life. Such an analysis of evacuee voices is traditionally lost in quantitative models of evacuee behavior that stress how jurisdictions can more efficiently manage their resources to improve evacuation experiences. As Erikson (1976) remarked in making sense of his qualitative study of the Buffalo Creek flood, “... the traditional methods of sociology do not really equip one to study discrete moments in the flow of human experience” (12).

Six central themes that demonstrate how social meanings and institutions shaped our experiences of the 2005 hurricanes and their after-effects up to mid-2007 emerged from our storytelling. First, Stan Weeber demonstrated how difficult it was to navigate issues of attachment to place before being forced to evacuate his home in Lake Charles, Louisiana. Given the unique history and cultural traditions of the city, New Orleanians likely faced a deeper than average connection to place along with a blasé attitude toward evacuation that contributed to a culture of complacency around the oncoming storm. This second theme, the blasé attitude, helped Jessica Pardee to remain calm during the evacuation and to conceptualize the storm as a problem that needed to be solved. Third, while hardly unique to the post-Katrina setting (Bates 1963), Tim Haney’s narrative of his struggle with the Department of Family Services demonstrates how difficult it was immediately following the storm to acquire aid through bureaucratic processes set up to provide basic support to those affected by the disaster. The fourth theme, the masculine

ideal worker, shows how gender also came into play as Kristen Barber revealed how such a work model emerged as an emotional hindrance, creating role conflict and alienation. The fifth theme, closely aligned to the fourth, relates to the gendered spatial dynamics of disaster zones, which Jennifer Day experienced upon her arrival home soon after the storm had passed. This theme is important as it speaks to gender and sexual rights issues of women who live through disaster. The sixth and final theme that emerged from this article is the ongoing struggle, or the new normal, that people experienced with each of the preceding themes. The physical and emotional exhaustion of dealing with the above issues do not end because the new normal is a constant reminder of what happened to each of us, and how much further our lives have to progress before they resemble how things used to be.

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**Danielle Antoinette Hidalgo** received her Masters degree in Sociology from the London School of Economics and Political Science. Before joining the Sociology program at the University of California, Santa Barbara, she completed three years of graduate study at Tulane University. While working for the Southern Sociological Society's Annual Conference in New Orleans, she co-organized a Silent Auction for the SSS Katrina Fund, Gulf Coast Historically Black Colleges and Universities, and the ASA Minority Scholarship Fund. Additionally, she organized a panel session that directly led her forthcoming book (co-edited with Kristen Barber), *Narrating the Storm: Sociological Stories of Hurricane Katrina*. She is currently a doctoral student in Sociology, and is completing dissertation research on spatio-temporal relations of gender and sexuality in the context of Bangkok, Thailand. Her areas of interest include gender, sexuality, the sociology of the body, immigration, Asian and Asian American studies, the sociology of development, and Southeast Asia with a particular emphasis in Thailand. She is co-editor, with Carl L. Bankston III, of *Immigration in U.S. History: An Encyclopedia survey of U.S. Immigration* (Salem Press 2006) and has authored or co-authored numerous journal articles and book chapters.

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transformation either published or under review.

**Stan C. Weeber** is an associate professor of Sociology and Criminal Justice at McNeese State University. His interests in sociology include applied sociology, the sociology of sociology, social theory, political sociology, collective behavior and social movements, and crime/deviance. His work has appeared in *The American Sociologist*, *The Sociological Quarterly*, *International Review of Modern Sociology*, and other journals.

**Jessica Pardee** is a doctoral candidate at Tulane University. Displaced by Hurricane Katrina, she is currently a visiting instructor at the University of Central Florida, in Cocoa, FL. Her current research examines the evacuation, displacement, and recovery experiences of low-income, minority women from New Orleans following Hurricane Katrina. She also conducts research on public housing reform and urban revitalization and displacement.

**Jennifer Day** holds a Master's degree in Sociology from Tulane University. In addition to her own original work studying gender and disaster, she has actively contributed researched to multiple Katrina related projects such as the "Neighborhood Change Study" funded by the National Health Institute and the Neighborhood Capacity Collaborative. In the spring of 2006 Jennifer decided to put her graduate studies on hold and earned a position as a New Orleans Mayoral Fellow. Working in the Department of Arts and Entertainment she was involved with various projects to stabilize and develop New Orleans' cultural economy, including researching infrastructure financing incentives for a performing arts district as well as acting as the Interim Director for the Office of Film and Video. Jennifer has accepted permanent employment with the City of New Orleans as the Director of the Office of Film and Video where she continues to fight for the city she loves.

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