

FRAMING PERCEIVED EFFECTS OF DISASTER: GIVING NAMES TO A LOT OF STUFF

CRAIG J. FORSYTH*

ABSTRACT: *This research focused on the perceived effects of disaster. The data for this research were from individuals who experienced the effects of Hurricane Katrina in the New Orleans area. Data were from unstructured interviews/conversations with 71 individuals. In addition, data were gleaned from 30 case studies in news articles which appeared in the print and electronic media. The locus of this paper is the development of thematic frames, affecting decisions to return to the area, which in turn impact community resiliency and restoration. Six themes emerged from the data: Wounded; Embedded; Wiped Out; Mobile; Inconvenienced; and Optimistic.*

Introduction

This research focused on perceived effects of, influencing reactions to, a natural disaster. The data for this research were from individuals who experienced the effects of Hurricane Katrina in the New Orleans area. Data were from unstructured interviews/conversations and case studies which appeared in the print and electronic media. The results are dynamic thematic frames that represent the data at hand. As such, it is intended to be a heuristic point for other researchers examining similar phenomena.

Disaster Effects

The upheaval produced by disasters expands far beyond the destruction of the physical environment. The human suffering caused by disrupted lives and relationships is always far-reaching. Erickson (1976:154) used the term "collective trauma" to describe the damages done by disaster to bonds that attach individuals to community. Family and friendship networks are the foundations of communities and serve as social resources to individuals, especially in times of crises. The severing of familial bonds and friendship networks by geographical separation, due to disaster, negatively impacts community resiliency through the diminishing of social capital among individuals. This loss of social capital and the trauma that results is eloquently described as follows:

The collective trauma works its way slowly and even insidiously into the awareness of those who suffer from it, so it does not have the quality of suddenness normally associated with trauma. But it is a form of shock all the same, a gradual realization that the community no longer exists as an effective source of support and that an

* Department of Criminal Justice, University of Louisiana at Lafayette, Lafayette, LA-70504-1652, E-mail: cjf5714@louisiana.edu

important part of the self has disappeared. As people begin to emerge hesitantly from the protective shells into which they have withdrawn, they learn that they are isolated and alone, wholly dependent upon their own individual resources. "I" continue to exist, though damaged, and maybe even permanently changed. "You" continue to exist, though distant and hard to relate to. But "we" no longer exist as a connected pair or as linked cells in a larger communal body (Erickson, 1976:154).

This is the context in which the current study operates and it is my contention that the extent to which such collective forms of trauma exist within individuals is largely determined by their prior locus of economic and social capital as well as the impact of the disaster on such capital. Furthermore, these same factors combine to influence, if not determine, individual decision making regarding continued residency and investment in the affected area, following disasters. Thus, it is crucial that we understand not only the broad or psychological impacts of disasters but also other micro factors that influence individual decisions, which in turn impact resiliency of communities. Much prior research has focused exclusively on either psychological or community impacts of disasters with little combined effort to fully understand how the impact on individuals combine with micro level factors, such as individual social and economic capital, to influence decision making, which in turn impacts resiliency of devastated communities.

Factors Mitigating Disaster Recovery

Disaster studies reveal three principal modes of recovery: personal resources, kinship/friendship support, and institutional support. While victims may make use of all three, the difficulty of recovery increases as one goes from personal, to kinship, to government assistance (Bates, Folgeman, Parenton, Pittman, and Tracy, 1963; Dyes, 1974; Morrow, 2000; Rapheal, 1986).

The economic and personal resources of a family, including its relative position within the community power structure, will determine the extent to which it can autonomously facilitate its own recovery (Morrow, 2000: 143).

Research shows that relationships, especially family and kinship networks, facilitated the processes of recovery. These primary group structures are critical in recovery (Barton, 1962; Bates, Folgeman, Parenton, Pittman, and Tracy, 1963; Bolin and Trainer, 1978; Cunningham, Bankston, and Jenkins, 1980; Fogleman and Parenton, 1959; Gillin, 1962; Hill and Hansen, 1962; Moore, Bates, Layman, and Parenton, 1963; Prince, 1920).

Higher income increases the odds of ease of recovery because money increases access to resources. Disasters agencies are set up to handle what personal resources and kinship/friendship networks cannot. Those who recover best and quickest are those who rely less on the aide of agencies (Bolin, 1982; Morrow, 2000). Some researchers content that, in terms of family relationships or kinships ties, the effects of natural disasters can be positive such that familial bonds or relationships are strengthened (Bates, Folgeman, Parenton, Pittman, and Tracy, 1963).

Methods

Framing Perceptions

Framing represents the individual's social construction of reality. Framing refers to the tendency of persons to construct accounts/stories of reality on the basis of their place within a socially organized situation or locality (Goffman, 1974; Krogman, 1996). Frame analysis recognizes that individuals may differ on the nature and consequences of an issue. The ensuing view may represent values or linguistic means to achieve a particular definition of the situation (Thomas 1928: 572). This basic principle is apparent in the way that each individual frames a disaster. Individuals interpreting events tend to assemble selective realities that diminish, construct, and/or augment what is important to them, or is happening in specific situations (Forsyth, Luthra, and Bankston, 2007; Krogman, 1996).

Data Collection

The data gathered for this research were gleaned from individuals who experienced the effects of Hurricane Katrina in the New Orleans area. Data collection began in September 2005 and concluded at the end of 2005. Data were collected from two sources: (1) unstructured interviews/conversations with an available sample of 71 individuals/families which took place in a number of settings and (2) 30 media case studies which were published in the newspapers of Baton Rouge and Lafayette (both hard and electronic versions), which contained first-hand descriptions and accounts of experiences with this disaster. Baton Rouge and Lafayette are approximately 65 and 130 miles west of New Orleans, respectively.

Interviews began at an evacuation center. Interviews were also done at the homes of individuals who were housing individuals from the New Orleans area. The last source of interviews were with students, displaced from New Orleans' universities, who had enrolled at the University of Louisiana, Lafayette.

Data were procured through the use of thick descriptions (Geertz, 1973), letting the respondents speak for themselves, and summarizing their perceptions through frame analysis. In the interviews, the respondents shared their own and their families/friends¹ experiences regarding this disaster and recovery. The purpose was to discover what they experienced, factors that mitigated the decision making process, future plans, and what can affect/change these plans. These conversations lasted an average of 1 hour, and ranged from 30 minutes to 4 1/2 hours.

Snowball sampling was utilized, which allowed the researcher to develop an ever increasing set of sampled observations beginning with the use of key informants (Babbie, 2001).² A form of analytic induction was used to develop the thematic frames. Should a case (either interview or media account) be inconsistent with any of the frames, it would mean revising the frames in a manner consistent with that case and all other cases previously examined so that the final frames represented all cases (saturation) (Bankston, Floyd, and Forsyth, 1981; Cressey, 1953; Ragin, 1987). These thematic frames

are not discrete categories, but are rather best fit models with which to present the diversity of these data (Forsyth, Luthra, and Bankston, 2007; Forsyth and Marckese, 1993). These themes are the collection of cases into conceptual differences. The author used the obvious details/differences contained in the quotes, but, in addition, cases were differentiated on a continuum of six factors: (Social capital tied to area; Probability of return/remaining in area; Level of economic resources; Physical damage to residence; Effect on employment; Level of social capital). All themes were present in all sources of data.

FINDINGS

The themes shown in Table 1 represent the variety of perceived effects which were identified from both interview and media data. Each interview and case study from the media were examined for and assigned a thematic content. Identifying themes focused on isolating in the subjects' narratives their ideas and understandings of the effects of the disaster on them, their families, friends, and communities (cf. Stone, 1989). Quotes from the respondents were selected for inclusion which best reflect their perspectives. These quotes are varied, some are better fits than others, and some quotes contain overlap between categories. This process produced six themes: *Wearied*; *Embedded*; *Wiped Out*; *Mobile*; *Inconvenienced*; and *Optimistic*.

Table 1
Themes

1. <i>Wearied</i> . (N = 20)	Could have come back to New Orleans, but choose not to. Little damage to property. Social capital not tied to area. They wanted to move from the area before the storm.
2. <i>Embedded</i> . (N = 14)	Social capital tied to the area. Must come back. Small business owners or involved in skilled trades.
3. <i>Wiped Out</i> (N = 29)	Had low level of social capital, but what they had has been destroyed. Heavy damage to property. They want to come back but cannot. Employment and sense of community have been lost.
4. <i>Mobile</i> . (N = 17)	Relative ease of transition. Social capital and economic resources are high. Not sure will return. College or post graduate education. Have a second home, work may have furnished residence in other city, income made move to another city easy, and/or had relatives with high social capital in nearby area. Low effect on employment. Lifestyle has low tolerance for any damage to property; consequently their assessment of "destroyed" may not have appeared that extreme to others.
5. <i>Inconvenienced</i> (N = 14)	Can or will return. Social capital is tied to the area, but not as extreme as # 2. High social capital and economic resources. Had heavy damage, but received help quickly.
6. <i>Optimistic</i> (N = 7)	See the impact of the storm as emotionally positive. Low social capital and economic resources. High effect on employment.

1. *Wearied*: Individuals in this category could have come back to New Orleans, but did not. Their homes received little damage. Most evacuated late and endured long

lines of traffic trying to get out of the city. They typically have evacuated for storms in the past. These individuals were among the lowest in social capital tied to area; probability of return/remaining in area; and physical damage to residence. The Wearied were in the mid-range on level of economic resources; effect on employment and level of social capital.³

One family of six and their pets, evacuated from New Orleans and drove to Dallas the day before the storm hit. The normal 8 hour trip took over 16 hours. They moved in with relatives there. The respondent continually commented "I cannot not take this anymore." As he watched the scenes from the city as depicted on television his traumatic feelings heighten. As the pictures of human suffering and looting of landmarks they knew well were exposed to the world, they wept. The family received word that their home was okay. The power was out, but there was little damage to their house. Indeed, the section of the city where they lived had no flooding, little damage to property, and utilities were in place relatively quick. The father went back to work in New Orleans to help get the oil refinery he worked at up and running and in off time he checked on his home. He slept in his office at the plant until power was restored to his home. His family stayed in Dallas, the children enrolled in schools, and the wife found employment in a school system. They sold their home in New Orleans and the husband/respondent has asked to be transferred.

I have had enough...my wife and 4 kids are in Dallas...I am back at work...came back 3 days after it hit...we had to get the plant running...I was working 24 hours a day... calling in my crews...they slept in tents, I slept in my office. We...got some trailers so we could accommodate their families...got a caterer to come and cook...my wife is not coming back...our house had little damage...I will asked the company for a transfer to... They have a plant there. It may take a year but there are no hurricanes in...Demand for real estate is high...in this area because there was so little damage and the schools in this area opened first. I already got a sale for my house...will rent an apartment until I get transferred.

Another married male, who works as a welder, was also relocating.

Did you see those...animals at the Super Dome and looting stores? A great city (sic)...Man I got my insurance money...sold my house, as is...made a killing and I am never going back. The...can have it.

It was apparent in the interviews that several extra-Katrina factors determined their negative attitudes toward the New Orleans area. All the families in this category were middle class. The hurricane, for these emotionally frazzled individuals, was merely the tipping point toward relocation.

2. *Embedded*: These individuals had to return because their social capital was tied to the area. Most have businesses that were tied to a specific area/customer base. Each was culturally embedded and had extensive kinship ties to the area. They were among the highest in social capital tied to area and in the mid-range on probability of return/remaining in area; level of economic resources; physical damage to residence; effect on employment and level of social capital.

A single unmarried woman, who runs a family owned locksmith business, felt she had no choice but to return.

I had to go back...do not know what I would do if I couldn't...we have a family locksmith business for over 40 years that I am running...my family has always lived there...I had to go back...should have a good business with the construction that should take place.

A male, married with 4 children, who works for an investment firm, plans to return to New Orleans.

We came to Lafayette two days before the storm hit the city...put my kids in school quickly...got the insurance money...went back working on my house on weekends and finding my clients...contacts and clients are there...we will stay the school year in Lafayette and go back to New Orleans for August 2006...I assume we can put the kids in school there...the house is in good shape...little stuff I will work on when I can...already made some clients in Lafayette so I will come back often...my family is comfortable in New Orleans...both my wife's and my family are there...hard to give up that support...The bottom line is my life is in New Orleans...we can't stay away.

3. *Wiped Out*: These individuals feel they had nothing to come back to. They were socially embedded in the area. Kin and friends have been displaced. Homes were heavily damaged. They wanted to come back but no one in their network was coming back. These individuals had few resources before the storm and their social capital was tied to the area. They were among the highest in social capital tied to area; physical damage to residence and effect on employment. They were among the lowest on all other factors: probability of return/remaining in area; level of economic resources; and level of social capital.

In one conversation, a 10 year old boy said, "I use to be from New Orleans but now I am from no where." For this 10 year old, the effect of the disaster was traumatic. He had been separated from his family when the levees broke, evacuated first to the Super Dome then several days later to Lafayette's Cajun Dome, where he would stay for a month with the parents of the friend he was with at the time of the flood. He would enroll in the local school system, wear donated uniforms, sleep in a cot in the middle of a basketball arena full of strangers, stand in line to eat, and use bath and toilet facilities with several thousand strangers. He would be reunited with his parents in Houston, Texas five weeks after evacuation, in the Astro Dome, where he would also learn his grandmother had died in the storm and his home and possessions were gone. He was *Wiped Out*. Indeed, many people felt the same way.

A 14 year old girl had come alone. She was from New Orleans and had been shopping when the flooding started and had gotten into a truck with a family she had never seen before but who knew her mother. She had no idea of where her family was.

I need to get into school...I am going to stay here [Cajun Dome] with Miss...until I find my family.

A single woman, who worked for a travel agency, could not return.

My house was destroyed...there was several feet of water in it...I will stay with family and friends in Lafayette for 4 months...rotate between them so as not to wear out my welcome...I have a cat...I know other people's pets work on people's nerves...work for a travel agency...will work on the computer and keep my salary for 4 months here and then my company will transfer me to Corpus Christi in January. I really miss New Orleans, my home and friends...I have nothing or nobody there now.

A single mother was trying to move near relatives in another city.

I was renting...lost everything...we are living in a trailer park...but I am trying to move near my sister in Atlanta...She said she had a job for me...the guy who owns the place where I worked is not reopening...most of my friends are in Houston and have found work and got their kids in school...they ain't coming back.

Another single mother was trying to relocate anywhere she could find work and affordable housing.

I have moved several times...Lafayette...Houston...Lafayette again...my goal was to get back to New Orleans...that has changed...I don't know where we are going after this...If I can find a good job where housing is not too expensive...I don't know what I am going to do. No sense going back to New Orleans because the neighborhood is gone.

Several generations of a long-time New Orleans area family had decided to permanently leave.

My family has always lived in St. Bernard Parish...every one lost everything...the area was flooded then the oil tanks over flowed...my grandmother moved to Shreveport my mother moved to Houston...I transferred to ULL (University of Louisiana, Lafayette) from...College...I should graduate this year...my boyfriend is in Lafayette now. We will move to Houston, close to my mother, after I graduate. I still can't believe my life has been erased so quickly...you think about the past and then...that place no longer exists.

4. *Mobile*: The main characteristic of these individuals was the relative ease of transition.⁴ Their social capital could be extracted. Some had a second home which they relocated to before or after the storm. These individuals were not sure if they would come back. They will either repair their home over time or merely switched primary residence. Their children switched schools easily or were in college out of state. There was minimum effect on employment. They evacuated quickly to an area nearby. They still have economic ties to the disaster area, but these can be maintained from a distance. The Mobile were among the highest on level of economic resources and level of social capital. They were among the lowest on social capital tied to area; physical damage to residence and effect on employment. They were in the mid-range on probability of return/remaining in area.

The following upper middle class individual expressed her family's ease of consequence.

We left 2 days before the storm hit...so we were not in all the evacuation traffic...we first went to my aunt's home in Lafayette; they have 2 extra bedrooms...after the storm hit we realized our house was destroyed...I transferred from Tulane to SMU in Dallas...my mother stayed with her sister and started teaching in the local school system...my father's law firm transferred him to Houston...the firm has 2 apartments there...my father will stay there until he takes care of the house insurance and all that...his firm will keep the office in New Orleans...my father may or may not go back there to work...my mother is still teaching for the present in Lafayette...she goes to Houston on the weekends.

Another individual's family had a second home which they evacuated to.

We moved into our vacation home...both children are in college, one in Centenary College and the other at UL-Lafayette...we stayed with my daughter in Lafayette...then moved into the vacation home in Galveston...Our home had lots of damage...we do not want to rebuild...probably will buy wherever my husband ends up...Houston, Lafayette, or Dallas...chance he could go back to New Orleans...in that case we may repair our home but it will not be our primary residence...The company my husband works for put him in the Houston office...he commutes from Galveston.

Two single woman, partners, both who are in the medical profession quickly made a decision to relocate.

Our house was a mess...we came to Lafayette...stayed with friends...quickly went to work at a local hospital here...we bought a home in Lafayette within 2 weeks after moving here...we could see that the real estate market in this area was booming...we love New Orleans...will slowly fix our home in New Orleans and use it as a weekend and holiday place...we have permanently relocated to Lafayette.

In some cases parents found that their children were a form of social capital which eased recovery. A father from New Orleans came into the evacuation center with his two sons, both of whom were outstanding athletics. He had been contacted by a coach from a Lafayette area private school. The father was in the evacuation center waiting for the meeting between the coach from the school and these exceptional athletes. The sons could be seen as social capital which facilitated the recovery of the family. The coach showed up with several parents and students to ease the recovery of this family. The two brothers played for the private school. The family never returned to New Orleans. This was not a unique case, as several parents with children, who were superior athletes from the New Orleans area, asked about coaches they were scheduled to meet. Coaches from schools in north Louisiana were also there. Indeed, the 4A 2005 state football champs, Bastrop, had to forfeit their title because of offering too much assistance to athletes and their families evacuating towns in lower Plaquemines Parish, Louisiana.

A 73 year old widower drove to Lafayette from his home in St. Bernard. His necessities were in the back of his truck which was covered by a camper top. He used the facilities at the evacuation center for several days. He would calmly sit in a lawn chair in the shade or read inside the facility.

I evacuate for every storm. I usually wait for the storm to pass at a shelter and return home, then call the insurance man if needed...I have flood insurance and everything else...so I know I am covered. I will call my younger sister in Bossier Parish if the damage is too bad and move in with her for a while...She gave me an open invitation, but I still like to call.

In this case, he learned that his home was destroyed. He called his sister in north Louisiana, to say he was coming for an extended stay. He was very calm during the entire ordeal. His demeanor was of an individual who had prepared for this and done this before. The internationally famous singer and musician, Aaron Neville, whose family in many ways epitomizes the Crescent City said he was not returning to New Orleans. "It is a fond memory and I would like to keep it as such." Neville, bought a house in Nashville-where he continues his recording career. He can wait for the insurance company to settle for his flooded home in the Gentilly section of eastern New Orleans. Aaron Neville was very *Mobile*.

5. Inconvenienced: All of those in this category can and will return to New Orleans. All were economically tied to the area. They were among the highest on level of economic resources; physical damage to residence and level of social capital. The Inconvenienced were among the lowest on effect on employment. They were in the mid-range on the two other factors: social capital tied to area and probability of return/remaining in area.

A 71 year old artist was planning to return.

I moved in with my daughter...she came and got me...my apartment house is okay...the gallery where I sell my work is okay and has reopened...I brought some paintings there last week...some of my patrons have called to see how I was...I will go back when my daughter feels comfortable with me leaving...I am waiting for my friends to move back into the apartment house or at least call and tell me they are.

Another couple, who own a combination art gallery/antique store and live on the 2nd floor above their business had already permanently returned to New Orleans.

We had no damage to our apartment [upstairs], but the store was wrecked...we stayed with friends in Lafayette ...and developed some outlets for my art while there...we will have a show in Lafayette...created a whole new market...because we had several individuals from Lafayette who bought our art in New Orleans we felt very comfortable there, but we must stay in New Orleans because my art has a New Orleans flavor to it. I just hope the tourists and residents come back.

6. Optimistic: There were some who saw the impact of the storm as positive. Typically these individuals viewed the reuniting of family and friends

as muting the negative impacts of the storm. They were among the highest on probability of return/remaining in area and effect on employment. The Optimistic were among the lowest on level of economic resources and level of social capital. They were in the mid-range of social capital tied to area and physical damage to residence.

Katrina wrecked the city but it reunited our family...It is amazing how my sisters and brothers became friends again...we do things together...spend time together...our kids know each other now...in many ways the storm was a blessing...if Katrina would not have hit we would have continued to drift apart...two days before the storm both my brothers and my sister called me...we had not spoken in years...I cry when I think about it...not about the storm's destruction but about how happy we are now to be a family again.

Discussion

Perceived effects of disaster informs the researcher to the extreme diversity, transient nature, and ambiguity of social life. The perceived effects are molded by the individual's definition of the situation, resources to weather the storm, pre-existing patterns of stratification and inequality, and the mobility of their social capital. The importance of social status as a mitigating factor cannot be overstated.

Although there are many different types of disasters, trauma from disasters are similar; implying that research on any specific event has implications for all (Erickson (1994: 226).

The scenes described...are different in many ways, but the reactions of the people who live in them to the troubles they experienced are so alike that one can speak of a syndrome-a group of symptoms...that together are characteristic of a specific condition. That was the resemblance the chief of the Grassy Narrows Ojibwa caught when he likened his people to the survivors of Buffalo Creek, and it was the resemblance the trooper from South Florida caught when the Haitian farm workers of Immokalee reminded him of his fellow combat veterans in Vietnam. Over the past decade or so, moreover, a number of reports describing the travails of other afflicted communities have entered the literature, and the portraits they draw are largely the same.

These findings clearly indicate the need for research that is sensitive to the diversity of possible effects and that is not bound to inherent assumptions of any previous models. Auspiciously, the ideas and findings generated by this research should encourage further inquiries, and will propagate new models and paradigms, with which to investigate the effects of disaster. The thematic frames allow researchers to comprehend the micro level factors that influence the decisions of individuals, which ultimately impact communities. Generally, framing offers a view of the diversity that exists within a general class of phenomena (Ragin, 1987). But fundamentally thematic frames consist of giving names to a lot of stuff (Becker, 1998). In this case the stuff of separation from a cultural berth.

Notes

1. Although individuals were interviewed they were regarded as representing households, indeed, all spoke in terms of being members of a family. Studies of disaster recovery often use households as the unit of analysis. Individuals typically experience, react to, and cope with crisis events as members of households. A disaster is in many ways a familial crisis in which the unit's resources, networks, and bonds are critical for recovery (Morrow, 2000).
2. Each respondent selected for the study was asked to identify other persons as potential subjects, and each of the subsequently interviewed participants was asked for further recommendations, and so on. The non-probability design of this study dictates that caution should be exercised in praising its findings relative to studies that employed random sampling design rather than snowballing; collect data at one point in time rather than over a 4 month period; and/or from multiple data sources and locations. Additionally, in interpreting what factors might influence the variation in perceptions, the author acknowledges the possible influence of the amount of time which passed between the interview and the event.
3. The concepts human, cultural, economic and social capital inform this research (Lin, 2001; Portes, 1998; Putnam, 2000). Though these concepts have somewhat diverse meaning in social science they generally refer to social phenomena which are closely tied to the lives of human subjects. Human capital refers to the traits individuals hold in themselves that facilitate production, e.g. education or job skills. Cultural capital is symbolic resources, e.g. language and values that promote the development of human potential to be productive. Social capital is the form of valuable links to social groups, kinship, voluntary associations, neighborhood, communal and familial networks, community context etc. Resources are considered economic capital. It consists of wealth, generally and access to savings and private insurance. Social and economic capital/resources are generally highly correlated. Since the meanings of these terms are rather plastic (every author seems to have a different definition) only two terms were used: 1) economic resources and 2) social capital (as inclusive of all of the above, except economic resources).
4. The individuals and families in this study have suffered a form of trauma. The use of the term ease of response is not meant to imply that relocated is easy for anyone-it was not intended to erase the difficulty experience by so many people who survived this disaster. It is a relative concept.

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