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Introduction

In the opening piece in this special section, Kai Erikson argues that Katrina is likely to long remain the most *telling* disaster event in modern history because of all that it revealed about our society. Erikson, as well as Steve Kroll-Smith and Rachel Madsen (whose article follows this one), articulate a special kind of urgency in our need to understand the consequences of this catastrophe in the daily lives of those who were most affected by Katrina's devastating winds and deadly floodwaters.

This article describes an effort to document the experiences of people displaced by Katrina. The hurricane and the flooding that followed ultimately forced the evacuation of about 1.5 million people from across the Gulf Coast. And although the exact numbers will never be known, most researchers and practitioners working in this field now agree that the disaster led to the permanent dislocation of tens of thousands of people. A disproportionate number of those who were displaced over the long term were racial minorities, including over 119,000 African American residents who had not returned to New Orleans as of the 2010 Census count.

Here, we describe the efforts of our group, the *Research Network on Persons Displaced by Hurricane Katrina*. Our goals as a network were to (1) learn what we could about the experiences of displaced Katrina survivors, and (2) consider the ways that the places where people landed—sometimes by choice, other times by force of circumstance—shaped various outcomes for displaced children and adults. Like the other contributions in this special section of *Sociological Inquiry*, we focus less on our specific findings and more on how we actually went about completing our research studies. Our hope is that by sharing some thoughts about our own process—and by describing how our projects fit under the larger umbrella of the Katrina Task Force—that readers might consider how this type of collaborative social science work could enhance their own scholarly practice.

Forming and Solidifying the Network

When Katrina happened in August 2005, we were not an established working group. Some of us who came to be a part of the network, however, did know, or at least know of, one another. In spring and summer 2006, Jacquelyn Litt, who wanted to find other researchers who were focusing on gender issues and social inequality in Katrina, joined with Kai Erikson, chair of the Task Force, to form the network. Litt and Erikson drew upon their own networks and used an open call for researchers to identify a group of scholars already studying or planning to study the effects of the massive post-Katrina population displacement. Once a list was generated, a number of individuals were invited to a meeting in mid-August 2006, set to coincide with the annual meetings of the American Sociological Association (ASA).

After that initial meeting, where various researchers shared about their projects and also expressed a commitment to exploring the possibility of working together as a collaborative, we decided to assemble again in October 2006 in New Orleans. In retrospect, that was a critically important moment in establishing and solidifying our network. It was the first time that we were all together in the city that was still reeling from the disaster that had struck more than a year before. The members of our network who were residents of New Orleans at the time of the storm took us on a driving tour of the various neighborhoods that were so badly damaged in Katrina; they also shared their own experiences of loss and their struggles to rebuild. A few days later, the group drove together along the Mississippi Gulf Coast and viewed the seemingly endless destruction caused by the winds and water. For many of us not from the region, this was our first direct exposure to the landscape of loss caused by Katrina. The special emotional weight associated with seeing the destruction, firsthand, added a sense of gravity and purpose to all that we would do in the years that followed.

The October 2006 gathering also represented the first time that we were able to meet with other members of the larger Katrina Task Force and with the scholars who agreed to assist with our specific project on displacement. The inclusion of members of the Task Force—including Kai Erikson, Steve Kroll-Smith, and Shirley Laska—helped our network to better understand how our specific focus on displaced persons fit within the much larger program of research that others who were part of the Task Force were actively gearing up to complete. Advisers at that meeting included Heidi Hartmann, Rubén Rumbaut, and Bonnie Thornton Dill; they were later joined by Nancy Foner. The participation of the project advisers helped to ground our Katrina-focused work in broader disciplinary dialogues. Our network also invited local, community-based experts on housing, poverty, community organizing, and social

programs to meet with us so that our group could be informed on local recovery needs and efforts, further embedding our research in the lived experiences of the disaster survivors.

Litt and Erikson served as the co-chairs of our Research Network. Other core members included Alice Fothergill, Elizabeth Fussell, Cynthia Garza, Pamela Jenkins, Laura Lein, Rachel Luft, Beverly Mason, Lee Miller, Jessica Pardee, Lori Peek, and Lynn Weber. Although the group was composed mostly of sociologists, it also included an anthropologist and a Latin American Studies scholar. When we first began in 2006, our collective was made up of academics from public and private universities, ranging from full professors to graduate students. A few of us had engaged in disaster research before Katrina, but for the most part the members of our group were new to the study of extreme events. Of the group, six of us lived in New Orleans at the time of Katrina, while the others were geographically dispersed. Network members resided in both urban and more rural communities and worked in different types of academic settings located in the Northeast, South, Midwest, Southwest, and West. (For more on the composition of the network, see Weber 2012).

Where we lived at the time of Katrina shaped, at least in part, who we studied and where we carried out that work. As evacuees landed in our home communities and surrounding areas, several of us quickly moved into action to begin documenting their experiences of resettlement. Others focused on recovery processes in New Orleans and along the Mississippi Gulf Coast. In the end, the researchers involved in our network conducted studies on displacement in thirteen different communities in seven states across the nation. Taken together, the researchers in our collective conducted 767 in-depth interviews—562 with displaced persons; 104 with first responders, service providers, and community organizers; and 101 with other residents in the receiving communities. For the most part our work was qualitative in nature, although many of us also used close-ended surveys, secondary data, and other approaches to more fully understand the experiences of the people who landed far away from home in the aftermath of the storm (see Weber and Peek 2012b).

Lessons Learned

As we conducted our research and worked together as a network in the years following Katrina, we learned a number of lessons. First, it was critically important that our network formed in response to a common topic: the impacts of displacement in the aftermath of Katrina. While the studies that we ultimately completed ranged in focus, scope, longevity, sample size, sample composition, and methodological approach, we were all bound by our common concern with the need to document and understand the experiences of those who were displaced after the storm. This focus was driven as much

by scholarly interest as it was by a deep personal sense of obligation and urgency.

Second, the importance of regular contact and communication was integral to keeping our group intact in the post-Katrina period. Over about 2 years, from 2006 to 2008, we had access to just over \$30,000 in funding to support network meetings. This funding was provided by the ASA, the MacArthur Foundation, and the Rockefeller Foundation, and was administered by the Social Science Research Council. We managed those funds carefully to support five gatherings of the collective. After those monies ran out, we became highly strategic about scheduling network meetings to coincide with professional conferences that many of us would be attending. That way, we could use whatever departmental or other professional development funds we had available to cover travel expenses for the conference as well as a one- to two-day add-on meeting of our network. An e-mail listserv and monthly or bi-monthly conference calls allowed us to remain in touch between meetings, to share insights from the field, and to pass along articles, interview guides, and other important documents that were informing our research.

Third, after our first few meetings as a network, we realized how important it was that we establish a shared theoretical framework and begin working toward a common vision and goal. We were each committed to completing our own projects on Katrina, but we wanted to do something more. In response, we held an in-person meeting dedicated to establishing a shared theoretical framework for our studies. In advance of the meeting, we read articles on intersectionality. We then worked collectively to identify intersectional themes and patterns in each of our projects. We also began a series of discussions about what we wanted to create together—a Web site, a series of briefing articles, a special issue of a journal? We finally decided that we would collect our research projects into one edited volume. We thought a book would be the best outlet to share some of the independent findings from our research, as well as to elaborate on the common threads across our studies. In the end, we produced *Displaced: Life in the Katrina Diaspora*, which was published as the inaugural volume of the Katrina Bookshelf by the University of Texas Press (Weber and Peek 2012a).

Fourth, in completing the edited volume, we dedicated a great deal of attention to the following questions: What is each of us doing and finding that is unique? And, conversely, what commonalities are we seeing across the diverse population groups and field settings? By regularly pushing ourselves to ask these questions, we were able to distinguish the distinct contributions to knowledge of each group member, while also identifying the commonalities across our studies (For more on what we actually found, see Weber and Peek 2012b).

Fifth, our diversity of perspective was one of our greatest strengths. Each person in our network brought a different scholarly interest and methodological and theoretical focus to our initial work; a diversity which would fuel intense, often highly charged, but always respectful, debates. Discussions over issues such as how Katrina ought to be conceptualized, how our “insider” or “outsider” statuses affected our research protocols and data collection efforts, and the implications of what individuals and population groups we were studying and why drove multiday working meetings and, eventually, the conceptual framework of our edited volume.

Sixth, our group was essentially rankless and leaderless. We tried to make every critical decision as a group. Although we sometimes disagreed on things, we were committed to working together to find a solution that was acceptable to all members—a challenging, rewarding feat given the diversity of our group. We attempted to make sure that every one of us received equal time to present and to discuss during our meetings, encouraging an equal valuation of one another’s scholarship. We also read one another’s work, on a rotating basis, on multiple occasions. At the same time that we tried to share in every responsibility, the demands of our personal and professional lives, as well as the realities of academic publishing, often led us to ask for volunteers or to “appoint” particular members of the group to step up to take on particular tasks. For many, this form of highly cooperative scholarly collaboration was a first.

In the End

Our group remained an active network from 2006 through 2012, which was the year *Displaced* was published. In anticipation of the release of the edited volume, our group decided that we would organize a book launch and hold one last formal, two-day meeting of our Research Network. We gathered together in New Orleans in October 2012, just over 6 years after our first meeting as a collective.

During that final meeting, we spent a day together at the University of New Orleans. Much of our time was dedicated to catching up with one another on our Katrina-related and associated research projects. We also discussed strategies for sharing and disseminating our research. At the close of the day, we traveled together to the Royal Castle Child Development Center in the heart of New Orleans. Previously, our network had voted to contribute the royalties from our book to this particular childcare center. Its building was badly damaged in Katrina, but Royal Castle was rebuilt after the storm and it soon resumed providing high quality care for children from diverse socioeconomic and racial backgrounds.

The next day, our group rented a van and traveled to the various neighborhoods that we had been watching change and recover (at vastly different rates

and in dramatically different ways) in the years after Katrina. That evening, our group hosted a book launch at the Ashé Cultural Center in New Orleans. This was an especially important “closing ritual” for our group, as the event was attended by many of our friends, family members, colleagues, and other researchers who were studying Katrina’s ongoing effects. There were also many persons in the audience who had been displaced by Katrina for months or even years. As with many of our post-Katrina experiences, it was a night filled with laughter and some tears, with a sense of simultaneous joy and sorrow.

After the October 2012 meeting, our network ceased to be in regular contact, in part, because the book and book launch were now finished and also because most of the members had begun to move on to other projects and commitments. Like Litt’s (2012) kin network that she studied after Katrina, our group was “fading away.” Yet, the bond we formed was strong, and many of the network members continue to work together in other collaborative ways on writing and research.

During our final meeting, the members of our Research Network reflected on our 6-year journey. One thing that we all agreed on was that the work that we completed together had deepened our own knowledge as social scientists, had challenged some of our theoretical, methodological, and personal assumptions, and had greatly energized and enhanced our own work. More than that, though, working together helped us to generate something much stronger, more insightful, and more interesting than what any of us could have ever produced on our own. That, indeed, was the ultimate power of the network.

ENDNOTE

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