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The collective method: collaborative social science research and scholarly accountability

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Abstract

This article conceptualizes the *collective method* to describe how 12 scholars worked collaboratively to study the effects of displacement following Hurricane Katrina. The collective method is defined as an integrated, reflexive process of research design and implementation in which a diverse group of scholars studying a common phenomenon-yet working on independent projects-engage in repeated theoretical and methodological discussions to improve (1) research transparency and accountability and (2) the rigor and efficacy of each member's unique project. This process generates critical discussions over researchers' and respondents' positionality, the framework of intersectionality, and applied ethics. Informed by feminist theoretical and methodological considerations of reflexivity, insider-outsider positionality, power relations, and social justice, the collective method can enhance scholars' standpoints regarding philosophical, ethical, and strategic issues that emerge in the research process.

Keywords

collaboration, collective method, disaster, epistemology, feminist research, Gulf Coast, Hurricane Katrina, intersectionality, positionality, reflexivity, research ethics, research methods, working group

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Hurricane Katrina made landfall along the US Gulf Coast on August 29th, 2005, displacing over 1.2 million persons and prompting countless researchers to study the storm's process and impacts. These researchers gathered data to document and understand the myriad consequences of this monumental event. Some traveled to the US Gulf Coast; others began projects in cities that hosted those displaced by the storm and subsequent flooding. And amidst serious disruptions to their lives-the loss of their homes and belongings or displacement elsewhere-scholar survivors (Pardee, 2015) also began new projects.

Since Katrina's landfall, numerous publications about the disaster emerged (see Erikson and Peek, 2013). Yet because of the nature of academic publishing, where scholars often sanitize or omit stories from the field and where journals limit the length of articles, much of the discussion of the *nature* of conducting post-Katrina work was left unexamined (exceptions include Barber and Haney, 2016; Bevc, 2010; Browne and Peek, 2014; Fothergill and Peek, 2015; Haney and Barber, 2013; Pardee, 2014, 2015). Consequently, *how* researchers navigated the data collection, analysis, and writing process is limited. Similarly, few works explain how the researchers processed their actions and decisions in the context of catastrophe.

In response, this article describes the collective method and details how we conceptualized and applied this approach to the research and dissemination process of 12 related, yet distinct studies. We define the *collective method* as *an integrated, reflexive process of research design and implementation in which a diverse group of scholars studying a common phenomenon yet working on independent projects engage in repeated theoretical and methodological discussions to improve (1) transparency and accountability in the research and (2) the rigor and efficacy of each member's unique project*. More than a traditional working group, our collective informed individual decision-making and analysis through in-depth discussions over issues of our own, and our participants', positionality, intersectionality, and the applied ethics of post-disaster field research to produce collaborative, reflexive, feminist research studying the effects of displacement on Hurricane Katrina survivors across 13 US cities in seven states.

Our approach is a potential model for future scholarly investigation, both within and outside of the field of disaster research. Founded in scholarly critical engagement, the collective method is transferable to other complex research areas, including but not limited to: stigmatized or marginalized groups, survivors of crime or war, and traumatized or vulnerable populations. Because researchers who study and work with such groups often face an array of complex methodological challenges and thorny ethical issues, the need for more adaptive, inclusive, and collaborative approaches is urgent (Aldridge, 2014; Browne and Peek, 2014). In response, the collective method offers one option to effectively address difficult issues as they arise in intricate post-disaster and sociocultural contexts. This method can also enhance research on topics where understanding historical, geographic, or social contexts is desirable or necessary. It can also foster mentorship of, and research capacity building among, early and mid-career scholars.

Studying disaster

To explore, describe, and explain social processes both during and following extreme events, researchers have used a range of methodological approaches (Drabek, 2002;

Michaels, 2003). Reviewing the research methods used in sociological disaster studies, Mileti concluded that 'disaster research is hardly distinguishable from the general sociological enterprise' (1987: 69). Indeed, data collection techniques used in social science disaster research - survey questionnaires, participant observation, in-depth interviews, focus groups - are not unique. Yet, Stallings (2002: 21) argues what distinguishes disaster research are the *circumstances* in which otherwise conventional methods are employed. It is the *context*, not the methods, that makes disaster research distinct and often especially challenging.

Certainly, designing and conducting studies in disaster-struck communities presents researchers with particular logistical challenges (Drabek, 1970). Since most disasters are unpredictable, one cannot plan where or when the next event will occur or what research questions will emerge. Researchers must respond quickly, entering the field with haste and flexibility in terms of the methods they use and the questions they pursue (Phillips, 2014). Moreover, the emotional and ethical dilemmas faced by researchers who study highly vulnerable populations (Browne and Peek, 2014) present challenges for the researchers themselves (Bevc, 2010), especially scholar-survivors who are insiders (Barber and Haney, 2016; Haney and Barber, 2013; Pardee, 2015). How do scholars balance their emotional reactions to deep loss while performing the professional actions of a researcher? How does a disaster-affected researcher create the space for critical reflection to achieve insights beyond the limits of one's own personal experience? In addition, when geographic outsiders study the event, how are conflicting perceptions across projects reconciled to create a rich, authentic, and accurate understanding of diverse social realities? The collective method, in our experience, offered an opportunity to grapple with, and even to resolve, these complex dilemmas.

From working group to collaborative research network

During Katrina's landfall, six of the twelve of us within our research network were living in New Orleans. As scholar-survivors (Pardee, 2015), we felt we must become intellectually and emotionally involved in post-Katrina research. And as Katrina's evacuees arrived in communities across the United States, our team members in Colorado, Missouri, South Carolina, Texas, and Vermont became involved as researchers and, in some cases, volunteers.

Before Katrina, we were not a working group. Each scholar began working quickly and independently following the disaster, yet all the projects focused on the Katrina diaspora. Predominantly qualitative, these studies included interviews, focus groups, observations, and some survey work with displaced survivors. A few studies included first responders, service providers, and residents in the receiving communities where persons were displaced. In 2006, Jacquelyn Litt, who was interested in communicating with other researchers focusing on women in the disaster, joined with Kai Erikson, Chair of the Social Science Research Council Task Force on Hurricane Katrina and Rebuilding the Gulf Coast, to invite scholars to the network to foster communication as each studied the Katrina diaspora in their communities, for more information, see Peek, Fothergill, Pardee, and Weber (2014) and Weber (2012).

All 12 core members were women; ten white, one African American, and one Latina. Initially, the collective included two graduate students, five untenured assistant professors, two associate professors, and three full professors. We held different theoretical perspectives, with varied areas of expertise including urban sociology, social movements, immigration, feminist theory, intersectionality, poverty, and disaster research.

The concept of the working group is popular, and social science scholars frequently collaborate to produce a single piece of work covering their shared interests in greater detail and specificity. However, our working group transitioned into a fully integrated research collective as we met and engaged in an iterative process that informed our individual studies from the early stages of data collection to the ultimate dissemination of an edited volume (see Weber and Peek, 2012). We agree with Mayhew et al. (2012) who contend that effective collaboration requires working together toward a set of common goals; in fact, over time we came to view our group as something more systematic - as a new, *collective* method where the research of individuals was shaped by both the process we engaged and the diversity of the scholars within the group. The collective method shares several characteristics with established feminist methodologies: collaboration, inclusiveness, an explicit critique of power relationships, an engagement of reflexivity, and a social justice and change emphasis (Hesse-Biber, 2012; Lane, Taber, and Woloshyn, 2012). Our collective borrowed from, and expanded upon, these important foundations.

Our collective method process was iterative: the group encouraged in-depth analysis and critical reflection as each member's scholarship was regularly and continuously reviewed by a dozen colleagues. This discourse was democratic, cooperative, and respectful; members critiqued, questioned, and challenged each other's positions and perspectives. We often agreed, and disagreed, openly. For instance, one researcher described her work as 'speaking for those with no voice or power' while another researcher bristled at this description, finding that stance misguided at best and demeaning and demoralizing at worst. This space for opposition did not happen naturally. Instead, the group actively established these normative behaviors through conversations and collective accountability. We acknowledged conflicts would occur, and tried to establish a safe space so that junior scholars were comfortable critiquing the work of senior scholars. The result was an atmosphere where collective members asked questions of others and themselves without reproach.

Establishing such openness was not easy; we worked past points of contention systematically to address difficult issues. This meant we engaged in lengthy discussions, and sometimes, when consensus was not reached, called for a group vote. Our democratic show-of-hands voting process indicated preferences on everything from the next meeting agenda or location, to selecting editors for the volume we produced. Sometimes we made lists of the positives and negatives of various perspectives, which facilitated clear and careful consideration of the topic at hand. This collaborative reflection on intricate issues was an asset of the collective method - one that encouraged greater in-depth individual engagement with claims and analysis than occurred working independently.

The collective method: Process

Our collaboration style developed gradually, as we spent our first meetings describing our independent work. Each researcher explained her methodological approach, participant

demographics, and ethical challenges. Quickly, linkages between projects emerged, and detailed discussions of issues including our own and our participants' positionality, methodological transparency, intersectionality, and the ethics of disaster research ensued.

For six years, our collective met once to twice annually, with interactions becoming more personalized as we gradually acknowledged our own and our participants' positionality (see also Barber and Haney, 2016; Lane et al., 2012; Pardee, 2015). We interrogated how our race, class, gender, and religious orientations impacted our research perspectives and data collection capabilities. We varied in relation to structurally-based power dynamics, too; some scholars were quite senior and well established in their respective fields; others were just embarking on their first research studies. Some projects were grant funded; some were not. Two members had studied disasters previously; the remainder had not. Half of us were from the Gulf Coast; half of us were much less familiar with the regional and cultural context. There were full professors in the group who held much sociological knowledge, but who were not affected by the storm; and then there were graduate students who were deeply affected and were able to share their insider knowledge. These dynamics around experience and knowledge further upended the hierarchies that often mark such group interactions. Like Cole (2008), we sought to achieve collaborative intersectional practice by exploring our differences while seeking common ground for collective work.

The importance of shared characteristics and experiences

While a diverse group, we shared numerous characteristics that facilitated communication and group cohesion. We all studied Katrina's displacement consequences, which was the most important basis for group membership. With ten sociologists, an anthropologist, and a Latin American Studies scholar, our training and social science language was similar. And importantly, we all desired to convert our data and information about Katrina survivors' experiences into actionable policy and practice recommendations.

These scholarly goals, ideologies, and identities were most meaningful in the working group's initial formation. Over time, though, our interpersonal dynamics and group activities provided much needed support, establishing a foundation of trust which allowed us to safely critique and challenge one another and ultimately develop the collective method. This trust-building work began swiftly. During a 2006 New Orleans trip, we toured the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) trailer park where one of our members lived. Her home destroyed, we viewed the small trailer where she then resided, an eye-opening and heart-wrenching moment that moved us beyond our academic roles into meaningful, emotionally-invested interpersonal relationships.

Driving together through the city, we saw the destruction in flooded neighborhoods where the levees broke. [1] During subsequent meetings, we monitored how the city's rebuilding had, and had not, progressed. Lee Miller, a collective member from Texas, described her reactions to these group tours:

> More than the information we shared or the discussions we had, although those were crucial, I think the shared experiences were key to the project. I remember vividly the feeling of numbness, a sort of profound disorientation, that I felt after one of the early tours we took,

> which was guided by New Orleans residents in the group. The devastation was so widespread and so complete. There was nowhere to turn that was unharmed, no place that was whole. The feeling remained with me even after the tour and I took it home with me. (I can conjure the image in my mind, even as I write this reflection.) It so affected me that my father commented that I 'seemed different after that trip.' 'Traumatized' was the word he used. Sharing those intense experiences with group members created strong bonds, ones I suspect will remain forever.

Through these experiences, whether seeing the devastation firsthand, witnessing survivor-scholars' pain as they described deep, searing losses or by sharing meals after long meeting days, the collective method created something greater than scholarly collaboration. This consciousness-raising transformed our working group into a collective community committed to critical, reflexive scholarship framed by a feminist ethic of care (Lane et al., 2012).

Maintaining the collective and establishing goals

As our group kept meeting in the years after Katrina, we continued our ritual of opening each meeting with a status report from each researcher. As our own studies progressed, we distributed interview guides and survey instruments, discussing various analytic strategies. Each discussion triggered new and revised research questions, interview probes, and ideas for follow-up data collection. For example, a summary of Fothergill and Peek's work (2015) with displaced children raised particular questions about child-care centers, city parks, and charter schools from group members who returned to live in New Orleans. Their insights and experiences led Fothergill and Peek to ask their study participants about these issues and how they affected children's health and well-being. Thus, the collective method informed the research questions we asked, the data being collected, the analytic strategies, and in some cases, the overall direction of the projects themselves.

Beyond technical discussions of our research approaches, our repeated conversations delved deeply into the 'ethical landmines' (see Browne and Peek, 2014: 89) we faced, including our own emotional challenges. We provided support through regular email communications and conference calls which were scheduled to fall between in-person meetings (Table 1). Additionally, some members pushed our collective to identify a common theoretical thread to systematically frame and connect our individual works.

Two and a half years after Katrina, our group decided to produce an edited volume. While the opportunity for collaborative support and mutual learning was improving our work, we recognized that our efforts would be more powerful if we were to work toward a common goal. In the end, we decided to bring our 12 unique studies of Katrina's displacement together in an edited volume (see Weber and Peek, 2012). With over 500 in-depth interviews, our collective gathered what we believe to be the largest sample of narratives from people displaced by the storm. To share that information, in one edited publication, would create a deeper, richer understanding of the storm's lasting effects. By establishing that end goal, it also helped formalize and solidify the work of our collective.

Table 1. The collective method.

Publication process	
Consultation for data collection	• Early meetings discussed the research direction, designing interview questions, selecting sampling frames, finding respondents, offering compensation, etc. • Consultation began during data collection, when incorporating new angles of inquiry remained available.
General reviews	• All 12 members reviewed paper outlines. • All reviewed initial drafts. • Drafts were grouped by dominant themes.
Thematic reviews	• Theme group authors reviewed the group's papers in extensive detail. • A second draft of thematic group papers was reviewed.
Editorial reviews	• Revised manuscripts from the thematic review stage went to book editors, external reviewers, and the series editor. • External editors, book editors, and the series editor provided revisions. • Authors returned final drafts.
Collaborative process	
Collaborative meetings (in-person)	• ASA meeting, August 2006, Montreal • SSRC Working group meeting, October 2006, New Orleans • SWS meeting, February 2007, New Orleans • ASA meeting, August 2007, New York • SSRC Research Network meeting, February 2008, New Orleans • ASA meeting, August 2008, Boston • ASA meeting, August 2009, San Francisco • NWSA meeting, November 2011, Atlanta
Teleconferences	• Held approximately twice per year, maintained group contact between face-to-face meetings. • Used most during the process end stages, often preceded upcoming deadlines.

Note: ASA = American Sociological Association; SWS = Sociologists for Women in Society; NWSA = National Women's Studies Association.

Completing the edited volume

In outlining the volume, we recognized it was important to identify distinctive contributions for each author. Each author began by writing a chapter abstract, which was discussed by the group. After the chapter was drafted, we worked as a collective to identify cross-cutting themes and common findings. Every member provided constructive feedback on each chapter at this stage, resulting in peer-reviews from 12 perspectives. Next, we engaged an iterative review process to discuss inconsistencies across chapters, such as discerning why a conclusion from one study did not correspond to findings in another study or location. The most intense phase was the general review process (Table 1), which occurred in early face-to-face sessions when individual contributions were

presented and discussed. During reviews, we shared questions and concerns to help all the authors to refine their analyses and writing.

This process revealed two common themes across all studies: the context of reception and the role of social networks in post-disaster recovery. For the next wave of review, we organized groups of papers around these themes, and negotiated chapter content to reduce overlap and repetition. We asked: 'What am I missing?' and 'Why does this matter?' We continued to provide detailed feedback both verbally during in-person and telephone meetings, and in writing. While receiving real-time group critique was difficult at times, converging comments highlighted the strengths and weaknesses - with concepts, theories, writing style, examples, or treatment of ethical issues - that required elaboration or complete revision.

Following the thematic reviews, Weber and Peek, the collective-selected volume editors, reviewed every chapter. These reviews were conceptual and comprehensive, refining the writing to a near final form. We then submitted the manuscript to the publisher of the volume. At that time, the book was reviewed externally and by the series editor. Thus, each author received multiple reviews from multiple sources. Each author revised her chapter again, with the editors reviewing the final manuscript before submission to the publisher for copyediting.

Active scholarly engagement

The collective method employs critical reflexivity by blending scholarly mentorship with critique. Scholars were accountable for decisions, biases, and assumptions within their work, including how one's personal social location influenced the ultimate research product (Clarke, 2012; Lather, 2007).

Researcher positionality

A central focus in feminist research and theory, researcher positionality within power relations associated with gender, social class, race, and other social categories shape what we know and how knowledge is produced (Harding, 2008; Henwood, 2008; Weber, 2010). In our network, we regularly examined how our positionality influenced the nature and quality of the data we collected. As women of varying statuses, perspectives, and personal histories, our own assessments of self in the research process varied greatly.

One positionality concern we explicitly discussed was how the power and privilege of our social locations affected our research. Most group members were white with formal education, while many study participants were Black women with limited formal education. [2,3] How did this status differential alter our interactions and relationships with the people in our studies? What role did it play in our observations, data collected, and knowledge gained?[4] Examining these issues was of immense value, even though we reached no simple conclusions. For example, even basic terminology was debated - were our study participants: subjects, participants, women who shared their experiences, evacuees, disaster victims, survivors, or residents? That variety, which transitioned over time, reflected how our debates affected our analytic perspectives, yet did not dictate them.

These positionality discussions acknowledged the hierarchical power relations between us as researchers and the participants we researched, a dynamic in which researchers have, or can easily gain, information about subordinates' lives while the reverse is rarely true (Weber, 2010). Through discussion, we critiqued the role that specific social locations might have on information access. Some group members were not from positions of power in terms of social class background, religion, family structure, sexual orientation, and age. How might a working class background reduce power disparities in an interview, or how might educational disparities reinforce them? In what ways did interviewing across racial lines matter? How did New Orleans resident insider status shape the researcher-researched relationship differently from outsiders living and working beyond the Gulf Coast region? Hours were devoted to discussing these matters. While clear resolutions were simply unavailable, our collective awareness and sensitivity to how positionality *could* influence our research was critical for increasing ethical and analytic accountability.

Insider-outsider dynamics among the collective

Feminist and social justice oriented critical scholars working from a grounded theory perspective have long argued insider-outsider positionality shapes what is and can be known, identifying advantages and disadvantages of each position (Collins, 1986; Charmaz, 2011; Clarke, 2012; Naples, 1998; Sprague, 2005). In our earliest work sessions, the New Orleans scholars (geographic and disaster insiders) were invaluable contributors, providing a lens into the city's distinct culture, socio-demographic characteristics, and its pre- and post-Katrina dynamics. During our face-to-face meetings, scholars outside the disaster zone would draw on insider knowledge, asking the question: 'Can you help me to understand this? You were there'. For instance, the official reports on the demolition of low-income housing projects in New Orleans differed from on-the-ground information, and the insiders would contextualize the political and social dynamics in a more nuanced and culturally specific way than the mediated versions.

The New Orleans members also invited community speakers to our working sessions. One meeting, for example, connected the group with representatives from local organizations that presented up-to-date information on social movement organizing and the recovery status of various New Orleans institutions. As permanent residents, the New Orleans scholars demanded constant recognition of the underlying need for post-Katrina social justice, reminding the group of the deep loss felt by local community members. Further, their personal experiences humanized accounts from interviewees in our separate studies, requiring us to deliberate over our analytic approaches to data collected.

Although academic interests and social justice goals brought outside scholars to New Orleans, they had not lost their homes or community; nor were they dealing with the difficult insider research dilemmas of studying friends and neighbors (see also Naples, 1998; Taylor, 2011; Pardee, 2015). Still, the outsiders contributed valuable insights based on their own perspectives and prior ethnographic research, including in other disaster-affected areas as well as their present work in Katrina receiving communities. For example, they shared how their home states' media represented the displacement, and they

characterized the bureaucratic, technical, and emotive responses of receiving communities toward an influx of evacuees.

Our collective defined insider and outsider groups in ways that were disaster-specific and in relation to our positions as researchers (see Barber and Haney, 2016). We learned from each other, using our differing standpoints to mutual and collective advantage. Simultaneously, tensions arose over the meaning of expert. Did living through Katrina immediately make one an expert? Would an outsider researcher understand and conceptualize Katrina similarly to an insider? Like many discussions, we came to no absolute resolution, but the process of raising such questions regarding status and knowledge elevated scholarly accountability for all members of the collective.

Intersectionality

Some of our first discussions among the collective focused on how multiple dimensions of social inequality were playing out in the lives of the displaced persons we were studying, in the receiving communities where we lived, in our relationships with our respondents, and within our collective. While we were all well-versed in the study of social inequality, some members advocated using an intersectional framework to guide our work on the edited volume (Dill and Zambrana, 2009; Weber, 2010). Although scholars with research already framed in other theoretical and methodological traditions were understandably reticent to change their approaches, we came to recognize the utility of an intersectional paradigm and decided together to employ it in our work. We began by devoting one half-day session to the basic tenets of intersectionality and how it could be applied in our research projects. In one exercise, we employed an intersectional framework to analyze a lengthy case study of the experiences of one African American woman who was displaced to Columbia, Missouri. Ultimately, the group integrated intersectionality theory into every chapter of the edited volume by reading new literature and revising existing writing.

While adopting an intersectional framework was reasonably straightforward, the lack of a specific methodology for doing intersectional research posed a challenge for some collective members. As recent scholarship shows, intersectionality as a research paradigm is still in formation (Bowleg, 2012; Cole, 2008; Hancock, 2007; Hankivsky, 2012; Luft and Ward, 2009; McCall, 2005). We each, to a greater or lesser extent, had to address those uncertainties as our own research unfolded. But, the thematic principles of intersectionality - that inequalities are socially constructed power relations, co-constituted at the macro-level of social institutions and the micro-level of individual lives - guided us to a more complex and, ideally, more meaningful analysis in the service of social justice.

One operationalization of our intersectional approach was to discuss repeatedly various dimensions of inequality in an ongoing reflexive praxis. These considerations proved to be another advantage of our collaborative method. Since we each worked in different social contexts and had multiple data sources and personal and professional contacts, this ongoing focus on the diversity of our perspectives made us watchful for interpretive bias both within our individual studies and our edited volume (Clarke, 2012).

Applied ethics and methodological decision-making

The collective method provided a unique opportunity to discuss the ethical and intellectual implications of *how* collaborative members conducted research in a way that is often invisible or under-specified in most studies. For Edwards and Mauthner (2012), ethics in social research refers to the moral deliberation, choice and accountability on the part of researchers throughout the research process,' where most researchers considering ethics in research are 'often left in isolation to ponder and plot' those decisions (pp. 14-15). Our recognition that ethical decisions are made throughout the research process and not just when gaining initial human subjects approval (Browne and Peek, 2014; Edwards and Mauthner, 2012) prompted critical conversations at every stage for each project.

Through the collective, we were attentive to the terrain and politics of New Orleans and the losses associated with Hurricane Katrina, rejecting the cross-sectional, 'research gold rush' approach for which some social science disaster research has, as of late, been sharply criticized (Gaillard and Gomez, 2015:1). Indeed, some disaster researchers have been accused of gathering data quickly after an event to their own gain, while offering limited consideration for the survivors or the local scholarly community who assisted with data gathering logistics. Bearing that in mind, we encouraged one another to engage in longitudinal disaster research (for a discussion of the need for longer-term studies of disaster, see Browne, 2015; Fothergill and Peek, 2015), and recognized the assistance of local scholars.

Next, the collective examined the issue of responsibility to research participants. Ethics scholars debate whether ethical decisions in research should be based on outcomes, justice, or rights, or from a feminist ethics perspective of care and responsibility (Edwards and Mauthner, 2012). Denzin (1997) argues that emotionality should be privileged in ethical decision-making and that researchers should build connected, empowering relationships with participants. Others assert, however, that this is not feasible, nor necessarily desirable. We pondered these questions, and used them to help us solve specific dilemmas. For example, similar to researchers who study extremely vulnerable populations (the homeless, mentally ill, survivors of violence) we found ourselves studying people with a 'crisis of basic needs' (see Luft, 2012: 251). Collectively, we asked: What should we do for survivors who gave us their time and energy in the disaster's aftermath? Should we assist individuals directly, or make our contributions to the larger community? Should we pay our participants in cash, gift cards, or through some other form that was most needed by the individual or family in question? By using their experiences in our work, we hoped to ameliorate future suffering, but what should be done immediately for those sharing their suffering with us? For example, the group debated whether monetary compensation was appropriate or exploitive in a disaster aftermath. In part in response to our debates about participant compensation, we elected to donate the edited volume's royalties to a childcare center in New Orleans that was devastated by the storm. This small redistribution of income from us to this center was one way we reinvested in the communities which drove the research studies from which we professionally, and personally, benefitted.

We also examined issues of the confidentiality and privacy of study participants through the collective method. Confidentiality is seen as ethically necessary, and some

argue that it actually improves qualitative research (Vainio, 2013). Others argue that confidentiality in qualitative research should be rethought, especially at the point of dissemination (Tilley and Woodthorpe, 2011). Toward the project's end, we disagreed about whether to invite our respondents to the book launch and community conversation we held in New Orleans. For some collaborative members, this violated promises of confidentiality. For others, it was empowered inclusion, defining participants as human beings who privileged us with their experiences, not the anonymous subjects of research. Ultimately, we remained divided, challenging each other to consider our active responsibility to our participants.

How does one remain accountable within the published text? For example, how does one justify decisions in the field which are made in haste, or even with great forethought, yet which prove questionable when under the scrutiny of one's peers? For audio-recorded interviews - how do you edit the transcripts? Is changing language for clarity and readability a form of silencing? If you edit, how extensively? To edit out 'um' or 'ma'am', noun-verb disagreements, or misspoken words obscures the educational status, nervousness, regional and linguistic variability, and power hierarchies embedded within many of our interview interactions. Yet, it also makes for a more readable transcript and quotation for publication, where readability increases dissemination to a larger audience. And, it can reflect a sense of researcher entitlement, whereby we obligate a participant to speak our language by editing their words for them; much in the same way we expect they will answer each of our questions honestly and with full and complete details. Yet, do we actually wield a right to such information? Must someone share their unedited life experiences with us? While we do not provide answers here, the collective became a location to discuss the implications of these too-often taken-for-granted actions.

It is precisely these types of questions that we discussed collectively, issues that may be often avoided due to their conflictual nature or overlooked in the name of research productivity, which are imperative for a deeper understanding of the researcher's epistemological stance. As considerations of ethics in research are 'rooted in a genuine and legitimate concern with issues of power' (Edwards and Mauthner, 2012: 17), we unpacked as many of these questions as possible. And while the final decision for such issues ultimately rested with each individual researcher and was certainly not mandated by the collective, the ongoing conversation alerted us to the significance of these ethical dynamics.

Emotional support

Studying New Orleans and the Gulf Coast area displacement exposed us to reports of excessive trauma for months and years on end (see Pardee, 2014, 2015). Through the collective method, our group interactions helped us manage the stress and sadness we encountered and felt. For example, respondents shared stories of rape, homicide, infanticide, sexual violence, exposure to corpses, and repeated threats of gun violence. Team members also witnessed the harsh daily living conditions during displacement, including poverty, fear, despair, hunger, and illness.

Grateful for the trust of participants who shared their experiences, we often felt emotionally exhausted, deeply saddened, and frustrated by our inability to help. As Carroll

(2013) notes, the emotional selves of researchers can come to the foreground while doing the emotional labor of this type of research. For New Orleans residents in our collective, this was particularly challenging as they were immersed daily in the devastation and sadness in their own homes, schools, places of work, and neighborhoods. Meanwhile, out-of-state collective members struggled with feeling powerless when they returned from Louisiana, faced with neighbors and colleagues who did not understand the scope of the devastation, believing Katrina was 'over', and that New Orleans was 'recovered'. Over time, three collective members were permanently displaced, facing unique stressors somewhat akin to the experiences of 'outsiders within' (Collins, 1986). Sharing our emotional and psychological reactions with other collective members offered unexpected forms of invaluable support.

Limitations and challenges

As with any approach, there are certain limitations to the collective method. First, as we sought common ground on conceptual, theoretical, and/or methodological issues, we had to resist pressures to find consensus when recognizing our differences was critical to an authentic representation of our individual projects, data, and stances to them. Our group long contended with this issue of how to bring coherence to the work of the broader collective without imposing arbitrary agreement where the evidence for it was lacking. In the end, there was no perfect solution to this particular challenge. We were cognizant, however, that we could work together with a common goal and framework, while still retaining the distinct foci for each of our projects.

A second and perhaps more significant limitation was the time required to engage in reflexive, longitudinal, group-oriented scholarship. The process of researching, analyzing, writing, reviewing, and editing the book lasted over half a decade due to data collection with peer consultations, a multitude of peer reviews, and the regular timetable of the publishing process. While participation in the collaborative offered invaluable leadership and mentoring opportunities, for junior scholars, the collective method's emphasis upon process and quality over productivity could be seen as a liability for tenure. With book chapters possibly credited as less meritorious than peer-reviewed journal articles in tenure considerations, the collective method did not always accommodate demands for expediency and quantity, although it promoted scholarly accountability, reflexivity, and, we believe, a higher quality final research product. And it was clear that the overall experience of the collective was beneficial not detrimental as every member of the collective who faced tenure and/or promotion received it.

A third limitation of this approach is related to the financial costs associated with bringing collective members together to meet in person, regularly. Our collaborative received private foundation funding (US$30,000) to support travel to a series of workshop meetings. As those funds dwindled, we became creative, scheduling our meetings concurrently with professional meetings many of us would attend using departmental funds. We also distributed funds to collective members who worked at institutions without funding to support attending conferences. We prioritized in-person meetings based on their value, meaning that collective membership did come with some financial costs.

Maintaining group cohesion was a fourth challenge for our 12-member group. Inconsistent participation, largely emerging from varied personal and professional availability for meetings and differing levels of financial support meant some group members became more peripheral, while most remained core. For instance, when one collective member lost her tenure track position because her university closed her department after Katrina and she was displaced outside the Gulf Coast region, finding the time and funding to attend the meetings became harder, despite her deep commitment to the project. When two senior members accepted administrative jobs, their availability dwindled. These changes made it more difficult for the collective to assemble, yet we sustained engagement over six years through the process previously described.

A fifth limitation of the collective method was related to power and status issues, even with the group's commitment to equality and flat hierarchical relations. There were moments when some researchers or certain findings were privileged over others. Additionally, some inequalities remained. Some of us had grant funding. Some of us had tenure. Some of us were living in more stable and secure home environments. Some of us worked at more research intensive institutions with more resources available. As with all other activities, we did our best to recognize when these hierarchies and privileges presented themselves and to find the most agreeable resolution.

Suggestions for reproducibility

In the end, despite the challenges, we believe four key components of the collective method enabled our success: 1) communication; 2) funding; 3) encouragement of all voices; and 4) a shared vision and goal.

Frequent, regular, real time communication is important. We achieved consistent group contact in-person and virtually. We met at least annually and held semi-regular conference calls (see Table 1). Importantly, these calls allowed us to sustain communication and relationships when there were no resources to meet face-to-face. They also lessened isolation, increased mentoring opportunities, and aided the group's support function. Frequent email communication offered an outlet to discuss topics and share new resources. Lastly, we concluded our collaboration with a community conversation/book launch in New Orleans, which served as our closing ritual, and almost all collective members attended.

Access to funding was essential to unify and maintain the group over time. The initial funding that was dedicated to our group financed five gatherings over two years; we then relied on professional development funds and other sources to support our meetings for four additional years. In-person meetings require travel, lodging, meeting space, and meals. Our collective benefitted from financial support from many of our institutions as well.

Third, as intersectional and other feminist frameworks contend, it is imperative that all members enter with the willingness to listen to, encourage, and negotiate a diversity of voices and perspectives which are structured by relations of power (Clarke, 2012; Hesse-Biber, 2012; Lather, 2007). This reflexive practice increased scholarly accountability. In face-to-face interactions and in editorial reviews, we allocated equal time for contributions from all members, especially encouraging junior members to speak freely.

Fourth, and perhaps most importantly, our group shared a vision and a tangible goal. Our vision was working together as a true collective, a network of researchers dedicated to enhancing our scholarship and to working ethically in the communities and with the people we were studying. In addition, our common goal was producing 12 individual research chapters, to be published in one edited volume. This end goal focused our efforts and kept our group moving forward.

Closing thoughts

The collective method requires a substantial investment of time, money, emotions, and intellect. These considerations may diminish short-term productivity for a longer-term goal. Even for graduate students and untenured faculty, the reward, potentially, comes through expanded networks, access to multi-disciplinary mentors, national exposure for one's work, new publication opportunities, and a collaborative, non-competitive experience that produces high quality scholarship.

Our individual pieces were strengthened by access to a diversity of voices, from both inside and outside the Katrina diaspora. Each study was informed and evaluated from multiple perspectives and angles. Due to our internal peer-review process, we were held to high standards of transparency and accountability, perhaps even higher than in the typical journal review setting where feedback is unidirectional and asynchronous. We each had to justify our methodological, theoretical, ethical, political, and personal decisions whenever asked to do so by our peers. This hyper-transparency strengthened the quality and calibre of our individual and collectively synchronized analyses.

More importantly, the collective method maximized our methodological depth and breadth because the edited volume represents an expansive research cross-section that no single study could have achieved. We identified common themes across multiple studies conducted by independent researchers in numerous contexts. As a result, this high level of integration reinforced conclusions across book chapters, producing not only a new method for scholarly engagement, but a new standard for research accountability.

Finally, the collective method required we examine the applied ethics of conducting research, from decisions made and their justifications, to biases and limitations. Through this reflexive, critical process, we grew as scholars, coming together to create a body of work that is more unified, accountable, and transparent than we could have ever achieved individually.

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Notes

1. A levee is a human-constructed earthen mound or cement wall on both sides of a river that directs the water flow on a path. Importantly, that path is determined by engineers rather than nature.
2. Some study respondents indicated they were Black and specifically not African-American.
3. Race terms and the issue of capitalization are heavily debated among journalists, scholars, and writers, and there is no consensus (Perlman, 2015). Throughout the article, we use the terms African-American/Black, with capitalization, in recognition of the minority status of this group, while white, as the dominant majority group is represented with the lowercase white.
4. Most of our group members' previous work had addressed questions of race, racism, and structured inequalities.

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