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Stranded by Katrina: Past and Present

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Nearly a year after Hurricane Katrina made landfall, the final collection of articles for this special issue of ASAP has been assembled. The articles, submitted in November 2005, explore issues raised during the aftermath of Katrina: the undeniable reality of poverty in the United States, heated debates about racism, the need to provide prompt succor to ease physical and psychological suffering, and the challenges faced by social scientists who hope to conduct research with vulnerable and victimized communities. Although the articles address these issues with respect to the immediate aftermath of Katrina, the same issues remain critical one year later, albeit in different forms. Housing concerns during the recovery period, for example, still include cries for immediate help, are a source of stress and frustration, prompt arguments about racial inequity, and disproportionately affect lower income families. One year later, many of the same people stranded by Katrina's floodwaters remain stranded by bureaucratic inertia, institutionalized inequity, and inadequate mental health services. Their lives show little if any evidence of a return to what they were pre-Katrina.

The August 29 levee breaches in New Orleans stranded thousands of people on roof-tops, at the Morial Convention Center, and at the Superdome. Pre-Katrina, 67% of New Orleans residents were African American (www.census.gov); and 35% of them lived below the poverty line, contrasted with 11.5% of European-American residents living below poverty in Orleans Parish (Nasser, September 2005). Given the general confounding of race and poverty in pre-Katrina New Orleans, media images predominantly showed African-American people trapped by the floodwaters. Critics of the local government queried why the City's evacuation plan made no provision for people without means to evacuate; critics of the federal government charged that the slow, inefficient rescue and relief efforts

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reflected racial bias. Other perceivers blamed the stranded persons themselves, charging that these citizens failed to heed evacuation orders, perpetually relied on government agencies to address their needs, and chose to live in a city below sea level. As the special issue articles discuss, the same objective event was perceived very differently depending on race, socioeconomic background, and sociopolitical attitudes.

These differential perceptions still are manifested in the housing crisis even one year later. Most notably, a large proportion of still-displaced residents comprise the primarily African-American families who lived in New Orleans public housing before Katrina. Only about 1,000 of the 5,100 pre-Katrina public housing units affected by Katrina had reopened by June 2006. The rest remain unoccupied—without gutting, permission to retrieve personal belongings, or mold remediation—behind newly installed locked fencing. In June 2006, the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) announced a plan to demolish four damaged complexes (about 5,000 units), and redevelop the land with mixed income housing (the HUD HOPE VI plan). HOPE VI redevelopment plans purport to rebuild blighted neighborhoods with a mixture of upper-, middle-, and low-income housing. The proposed goals of HOPE VI are to keep upper-income individuals within city limits (i.e., increasing property values; maintaining a tax base) and purportedly to demonstrate to poor families that moving beyond the poverty line is possible by having them live side-by-side with wealthier individuals (Tidmore, 2006, July). The latter rationale presumes, of course, that moving beyond the poverty line is simply a matter of hard work rather than the institutionalized inequities discussed in several of the special issue papers.

Opponents of the proposed redevelopment note that a previous HOPE VI venture—the mixed income redevelopment of the blighted New Orleans St. Thomas public housing complex in the year 2000, reduced housing opportunities for former residents. The redeveloped area now provides public housing for only 200 low-income families, compared to an original 900 low-income families (the remaining space was allocated to middle- and upper-income housing). Opponents of redevelopment fear a similar loss in lower-income housing units (Tidmore, 2006, July), and have organized demonstrations and filed a class action lawsuit. Even if lower-income housing became available elsewhere, former residents view these complexes as their neighborhoods; they want to live near their own neighbors, not to be ordered to particular locations. One attorney working with the residents commented, "Public housing residents are not disposable. You can't move them around like checkers." (Filosa, 2006, June 28).

Like views of the immediate Katrina aftermath, alternate viewpoints appear to co-vary with race, socioeconomic status, and sociopolitical attitudes. The anonymity of online forums, both local and national, permits viewpoints rarely expressed in public. "Katrina got rid of poverty in New Orleans," "Let another city deal with the problem for a while." Presumably, these viewpoints stem from

perceptions that public housing residents are the primary perpetrators of crime and that they drain societal resources without rendering any contributions to society. (These views persist despite a crime spike in the virtual absence of public housing residents, and despite an acknowledged frustration with an insufficient workforce to fill low-income jobs.) Perhaps most telling are the perceptions of puzzlement: "Why don't they take the Section 8 vouchers that HUD just raised?" "How can people be picky if they are living off our tax dollars?" Such perceptions reflect ignorance—or a disinterested unwillingness to consider—that individuals without vouchers pre-Katrina cannot access new vouchers, that people in need of apartments far outnumber available units at any price, and that most housing development residents pay a portion of their rent. These disparities in how people view the housing crisis warrant empirical attention as a complement to disparate perceptions of the immediate Katrina aftermath.

The housing crisis in New Orleans extends beyond public housing to problems with FEMA (Federal Emergency Management Agency) trailers (i.e., delay in or failure of delivery and/or hook-up, denial of assistance, political arguments about trailer park sites), to problems with insurance claims, to cyclical threats to evict from hotels or discontinue rental assistance, and to problems with federal monies for rebuilding the city. In stark contrast to these travesties, debacles, and frustrations with governmental policies and practices, nonprofit and grassroots organizations across the Gulf Coast have risen to the housing challenge just as private citizens generously contributed funds, goods, shelter, and volunteered time during the immediate aftermath. Nonprofits and grassroots organizations provide infrastructure through which individuals can help, and these organizations reach out to potential helpers with websites, public service announcements, word-of-mouth, and community connections (e.g., asking a local psychology department to announce volunteer experiences). Who helps, in what fashion, and in which contexts has tremendous implications for the rebuilding of citizens' lives after natural disaster.

To help address the housing crisis in New Orleans, nonprofit organizations have mobilized volunteers from across the nation as well as locally. For example, with an August 29, 2006 deadline looming to gut and mold-remediate homes in Orleans Parish, nonprofits organized efforts for volunteers to help homeowners meet this deadline (e.g., Catholic Charities; CommonGround). Nonprofits identify housing for volunteers—including scores of college students on spring break—and oversee debris removal and house gutting for lower income, elderly, or physically challenged homeowners. Other nonprofits are home builders, and mobilize both long- and short-term volunteers who wish to contribute to the relief effort. For example, recognizing that many New Orleans musicians lost homes in the 9th Ward, Habitat for Humanity began the "Musicians Village" project in conjunction with local music legends Harry Connick, Jr. and Branford Marsalis. Newly constructed and renovated 9th Ward homes are then sold to area musicians at cost

(essentially a no-interest mortgage). Habitat's strategy nicely illustrates both the importance of safeguarding the dignity and autonomy of persons receiving help, as well as helping preserve important aspects of recipients' local cultures. Concurrently, Habitat's "Operation Home Delivery" is coordinating with Major League Baseball, the National Football League, and the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) to construct houses in other parts of the hurricane-ravaged Gulf Coast. Sustained assistance from the national and international communities extends beyond housing (e.g., health care, *pro bono* legal advice, rebuilding of churches, scholarships), but philanthropic efforts to address housing concerns illustrate volunteerism at its best.

Despite the sustained volunteer effort, residents are likely to be experiencing sustained chronic stress. Because of Katrina, people lost elderly family members (and skeletal remains continue to be discovered), family pets (usually left behind because shelters have no provision for pets), and irreplaceable possessions such as furniture passed down from great-grandparents and wedding photos. After the waters receded, houses in southeast Louisiana were marked with an X, the international catastrophe symbol. Symbols note the inspection date, whether anyone was dead, and whether the inspectors entered or relied on olfactory cues to make their assessment. A year later, many of these insignias have been removed in unflooded neighborhoods, but not all. In slower-to-recover areas, most remain untouched. The Xs continue to symbolize the scar upon the entire community. Recognizing the power of these symbols, school psychologist Stacy Overstreet and her PhD students helped returning school children reframe these images as artwork as part of a stress reduction (Dingfelder, 2006, June). Overstreet notes that although most of returning children are resilient, echoing research following other natural disasters (Bonnano, 2005), chronic stress and residual fears must be addressed. Other children present symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and present bone-chilling thoughts such as "if I go to sleep in my bed, I might drown." Whether there will be heightened prevalence of such symptoms among families returning a year or more later—or those who never return to southeast Louisiana—merits empirical attention.

The chronic stress among individuals who have returned is especially problematic in the New Orleans metropolitan area. Local mental health care professionals—and very few are practicing in the crippled health-care system—report that returning individuals initially presented moderate stress in their efforts to address the recovery effort. As the months have progressed, obstacles to securing more permanent housing—and other significant stressors—have worn people down. A recent report from Tulane University's School of Public Health noted that a significant risk for PTSD symptoms among returned staff and faculty was remaining displaced from their former homes, particularly if a FEMA trailer served as their alternate housing (Munter, DeSalvo, & Tynes, 2006). In the community at large, over two-thirds of female caregivers in FEMA-subsidized housing report anxiety

and depression, 20% of police and firefighters (most of whom lost their homes) are presenting PTSD symptoms, and the suicide rate has tripled (McCulley, 2006). Individuals endeavoring to rebuild are worn down by bureaucratic delays in neighborhood planning, indecision regarding flood elevation, and access to Louisiana Recovery Authority funds, as well as an increasingly short supply of contractors, skilled labor, and building materials. With only 22 of 196 psychiatrists practicing again, and 20 of 300 psychiatric beds available, individuals with serious mental health needs are unlikely to receive treatment in a timely and efficacious fashion. In effect, there is no home for such individuals.

The continued crises precipitated by Katrina raise critical research questions for researchers interested in social and public policy issues. Researchers hoping to survey participants among Gulf Coast residents face tough logistic problems, insofar as temporary housing, fluid mobility, and an unprecedented diaspora of evacuees create difficulties in identifying and tracking participants. Moreover, research with historically disadvantaged communities has special challenges, including travel to neighborhoods with increased environmental or social risks, variations and limitations in literacy, and suspicion of institutions conducting research (particularly anything with government sponsorship). Successful examples of community-based research are those that have developed as community partnerships over time, so researchers need to invest time and resources in partnership. New Orleans area school and developmental psychology researchers, for example, provide regular mental health services and tutoring, and also regularly consult with community parents and school officials about their findings and ascertain what the community wishes to understand. Researchers who fail to cultivate a relationship with a community, beyond dropping by for a few follow-ups, are unlikely to find active and interested participants.

These types of challenges likely have been exacerbated by Katrina. People may want their concerns heard, but also may be skeptical that researchers truly can give them voice. They may be suspicious that findings ultimately will harm their communities, particularly research under the auspices of government agencies. Even individuals enjoying relatively favorable circumstances—employed, house repaired—suffer from what locals term "Katrina-fatigue." Such individuals may be too short on the goodwill necessary to assist with research endeavors, may be sick of completing forms, and may be tired of telling their stories to "outsiders." Participants from the hurricane-ravaged Gulf Coast have much to teach: how to be resilient in the face of institutional racism and classism, how to transition from victim to volunteer, how to rebuild community despite diaspora, how to come home. But they will teach in their own time, not one imposed by researchers.

Thus the issues raised in the ASAP special issue articles remain critical one year later. Perhaps the reason is less an issue of slow progress in New Orleans and along the Gulf Coast, and more the fact that the authors address issues that are critical and, for all intents and purposes, timeless. Institutionalized inequities stain

human history, and yet largely are ignored in contemporary societies across the world. Katrina may have forced national and global attention to these inequities, but if collective memories are short, attention simply will turn away instead of turning to action. An important question is the obligation of social scientists to use their theories and tools for the public good. Will there be only short-term fad research on disasters, or will events like Katrina result in a sustained, ongoing focus of social science theory and evidence on understanding and preventing human catastrophes when natural catastrophes occur? Like the volunteers and charitable individuals who refuse to forget the victims of Katrina, social scientists must continue to address these issues through theoretical pieces and empirical research. In this way, responsible social science in the years to come can play a role in mitigating the effects of future natural disasters and the stranding of entire communities.

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