

2010

“Everything has Changed”: Narratives of the Vietnamese American Community in Post-Katrina Mississippi

Yoosun Park
Smith College

Joshua Miller
Smith College, jlmiller@smith.edu

Bao Chau Van
Smith College

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.smith.edu/ssw_facpubs

 Part of the [Social Work Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Park, Yoosun; Miller, Joshua; and Van, Bao Chau, "“Everything has Changed”: Narratives of the Vietnamese American Community in Post-Katrina Mississippi" (2010). School for Social Research: Faculty Publications, Smith College, Northampton, MA.
https://scholarworks.smith.edu/ssw_facpubs/2

This Article has been accepted for inclusion in School for Social Research: Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of Smith ScholarWorks.
For more information, please contact scholarworks@smith.edu

“Everything has Changed”: Narratives
of the Vietnamese American community
in Post-Katrina Mississippi

YOOSUN PARK

JOSHUA MILLER

BAO CHAU VAN

Smith College
School for Social Work

In this qualitative study of the Vietnamese American community of Biloxi, Mississippi, conducted three years after Katrina, we attended not only to individual experiences but to the relationship of individuals to their collective and social worlds. The interlocked relationship of individual and collective loss and recovery are clearly demonstrated in respondents' narratives. The neighborhood and community of Little Saigon was significant not only as a symbolic source of identity but as a protected and familiar space of residence, livelihood, and social connections. The post-Katrina changes in the neighborhood are, in multiple ways, changing participants' experience of and relationship to their community.

Key words: Vietnamese Americans, community, collective loss and recovery, social ecology, phenomenology, resilience, psychosocial capacity building, place

Much has been written about the devastating impact of Hurricane Katrina, the 2005 storm and the repercussions that
Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare, September 2010, Volume XXXVII, Number 3

affected as many as 10 million people, and resulted in approximately 1,200 fatalities (Kao, 2006). Media and scholarly attention have not, however, been applied evenly across the storm-affected areas (Li et al., 2008); the differential impact of the storm in the various micro-communities within cities and townships has not been sufficiently examined. One significant gap is the lack of attention to immigrant populations affected by the storm. In the popular media, there was a near "complete absence of coverage and discussion of Hispanic and Asian American residents of the area, who are also disproportionately poor and many of whom lacked English skills to navigate the little help available to residents" (Kao, 2006, p. 223). Even among the proliferation of post-Katrina scholarship focused on the issues of race, inequality, and minority populations (Bates & Swan, 2007; Elliott & Pais, 2006; Frymer, Strolovitch, & Warren, 2005; Henkel, Dovidio, & Gaertner, 2006; Sommers, Apfelbaum, Dukes, Toosi, & Wang, 2006; The Brookings Institution Metropolitan Policy Program, 2005), scant attention has been paid to the numerically small but vital immigrant communities affected by the storm. In this paper, we focus on one such population: the Vietnamese American community of Biloxi, Mississippi, centered in the Little Saigon neighborhood of East Biloxi. To our best knowledge, this study represents the first scholarly effort focused on this community.

Katrina struck Mississippi on the morning of August 29, with devastating results (Sloan, 2008). One of the hardest hit areas was Little Saigon, located in "The Point" section of Biloxi, a peninsula adjacent to the ocean and the Back Bay, a salt water lagoon. The largely residential neighborhood supported many Vietnamese-owned or -operated restaurants, groceries, nail salons and other such small businesses which served Vietnamese Americans and others living in the greater Biloxi metropolitan area.

The 2000 Census tallied 1,717 Vietnamese Americans (892 foreign born) in the city of Biloxi, comprising 3 percent of the total population of 50,644 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). Prior to Katrina, Little Saigon was a small but vibrant ethnic enclave, begun by a handful of refugees recruited by local seafood processing plants (Arden, 1981), and built over more than three decades of slow accretion of people and resources. It was a

small, linguistically and culturally contained, and therefore necessarily close-knit, island of co-ethnics carved out in the midst of a sometimes hostile environment (Arden, 1981). The community was comprised in large part of "boat people," whose flight from the war and the repressive communist regime were fraught with privations and dangers (Starr, 1981). They had endured long stays in refugee camps awaiting resettlement, and suffered longer years of separation from family left behind. In the scattered host communities in which they were originally settled throughout the U.S., Vietnamese Americans often experienced hostility, as well as cultural, social, and linguistic isolation, and economic hardship. Biloxi's Little Saigon developed, in large part, through the secondary and tertiary migration of refugees seeking a better place to settle.

There is great socio-economic diversity among Vietnamese Americans. But those in Biloxi were, overall, some of the poorest residents of the city, with a median household income of \$25,903, compared to the median household income of \$25,922 for African Americans, and a total city median of \$34,106 (U.S. Census, 2000). East Biloxi, in which Little Saigon is located, had "lower levels of educational attainment and incomes, higher poverty rates, and a higher proportion of Biloxi's minority racial/ethnic groups, especially African American and Asian, primarily Vietnamese" (Kleiner, Green, & Nylander, III, 2007, p. 160). Sixty-five percent of Vietnamese Americans in the U.S. report that they do not speak English very well, and 44% are classified as linguistically isolated (VanLandingham, Norris, Vu, & Fu, 2007).

Methodology

Our study was guided by two frameworks that highlight "the dynamic relations between people and their surroundings" (Stokols, 2000, p. 129): the social ecology conceptualization of disaster and the philosophical approach to disaster recovery known as psychosocial capacity building (PCB). Viewed through the lens of social ecology, disasters, including those constructed as "natural" ones, occur within a complex socio-political terrain. A community's economic, political, social, and cultural profile determines not only the specific ways in which

a disaster affects it, but shape the ways in which its members make sense of, react to, and recover from the disaster (Park & Miller, 2006). A community's profile is, moreover, history-specific. A disaster narrative cannot be separated from that of the larger history of the community and must, therefore, be considered from a wider temporal frame than traditional narratives which locate a disaster's beginnings at the event itself.

A social ecology perspective is embedded in psychosocial capacity building (PCB) approaches to disaster recovery. PCB works in counterpoint to the dominant Western conceptualizations of disasters which focuses on the individual as the locus of investigation and intervention (Halpern & Tramontin, 2007; Ritchie, Watson, & Friedman, 2006; Rosenfeld, Caye, Ayalon, & Lahad, 2005). This symptomology-dependent model, sometime referred to as "disaster mental health," emphasizes stress and trauma reactions (Summerfield, 2004); talk therapy and counseling are its main intervention modalities. PCB emerged out of a growing critique of the disaster mental health approach (Ager, 1997; Kleinman & Cohen, 1997; Miller, *In press*; Strang & Ager, 2003; Summerfield, 1995, 2000; Wessells, 1999; Wessells & Monteiro, 2006; Weyerman, 2007; Wickramage, 2006) as an incomplete, culture-bound vision which assumes the universality of psychological reactions, meanings, and significance (Summerfield, 2004). PCB foregrounds the collective (e.g., social group, community) as well as the individual as the locus of investigation and intervention. While PCB acknowledges the importance of attending to individual psychological sequelae, it insists that the impact of disasters and recovery from disasters cannot be measured by calculating only individual loss and gain (Farwell & Cole, 2002; Kaniasty & Norris, 1999; Landau & Saul, 2004; Miller, *In press*). It locates individual experiences, in other words, within the context of social, economic, political, cultural, and historical forces and understands that there is a collective dimension to disasters and recovery within which individuals suffer and recoup.

In line with this framework, we used a phenomenological interview strategy (Seidman, 1991), a way of exploring respondents' subjective experiences and the particular meaning that respondents made of their experiences. To acknowledge the importance of not only the event, but the socio-historical

context of the event, we framed the interviews to elicit responses about: (1) life before Katrina; (2) experiences during and immediately after Katrina; and (3) the impact and the meaning of Katrina in current life and on future aspirations. In our analysis, we attended not only to individual experiences but also to individuals' perceptions of and relationships to their collective and social worlds.

The narrative data were collected through interviews conducted in Little Saigon in May, 2008. Twenty-five community members, aged 29–70 years, participated in the study: nine were interviewed individually (five males and four females), and sixteen in five groups (three male and two female groups). The participants were recruited through key community institutions: The Boat People SOS (BPSOS), Chau Van Duc Buddhist Temple, and the Catholic Church of the Vietnamese Martyrs. BPSOS, a private not-for-profit organization that administers domestic programs for Vietnamese refugees and immigrants in the U.S., established a Biloxi office in response to the storm. The Temple and the Church, which stand adjacent in the center of the neighborhood, were bulwarks of the community, serving not only as religious institutions but the social and civic centers of the Vietnamese American community in the Biloxi metropolitan area. Both functioned during the hurricane and the days immediately following as refuge for the displaced and as staging grounds for the distribution of aid and information.

We employed two recruitment strategies. First, we distributed recruitment flyers and informed consent forms through key contacts at the three organizations. Second, upon the advice of those contacts who advised that an informal, personal approach to recruitment was both necessary and appropriate for the community, we also recruited participants in person, at community gatherings. At the Temple, we were introduced to the community whom we joined for tea, lunch, and mediation sessions. We introduced and explained the study during these informal events. Interested community members were screened and interviewed in the following two days. A similar process occurred at the Catholic church. Participants opted for either individual or group interviews which took place in four locations: The BPSOS offices, the Temple, the Church, and the

nearby marina. The interviews were conducted in Vietnamese or English depending on the preference of the participant(s). All sessions were audio-recorded, transcribed, and translated into English if conducted in Vietnamese.

Before the Storm

“And, living here ... I feel that there is a sense of community.”

Despite the common tendency to think of immigrants, particularly limited-English speakers, as perpetual new arrivals, many members of Little Saigon’s community had long roots in Biloxi.

I’ve been [in Biloxi] so long, I really like it here ... I go visit different places already. I go Texas, I go California. I like there but ... I don’t know why it seems like this is home. So I feel like that I grow up in USA more than in Vietnam ... Vietnam only 21 years and here almost 40 years.

As has been noted about New Orleans’ Vietnamese Americans, the community members’ “profound attachment to place” has “contributed to the strong community identity” (Airriess, Li, Leong, Chen, & Keith, 2007, p. 1344). As one participant explained:

People here tend to have a relationship with their community than other bigger states. This may be because they live quite far apart—not close— whereas we tend to huddle in one place here. So when there is trouble we are able to help and support each other. The people in this community live peacefully with one another.

Several respondents explained their attachment to their community as well as their initial attraction to it, by likening life in Biloxi to that in a remembered Vietnam: “Because it was easy to live here before [Katrina]. The life style here was very similar to that of Vietnam’s ... Life was simple here.” A woman who lived for a time in a northern state explained that she returned to Biloxi “because it was so cold I cannot live there ... I find that the climate here much more suitable. It is very similar

to Vietnam's climate. It's not too hot or too cold and it is close to the sea. Everything is so much like Vietnam."

Along with owning and operating small family businesses, many Vietnamese Americans in pre-Katrina Biloxi were employed in fisheries (Kao, 2006; Pham, Shull, Tranguyen, & Hoang, 2006). As one participant explained: "almost everyone worked at the shrimp factory when they first arrived." The latest among a long line of immigrants working Biloxi's fishing industry, they:

arrived during the late 1970s and early 80s and revived the languid industry by accepting jobs in the packing plants. They built their own boats, opened businesses, and have become a vibrant part of the Biloxi seafood and ethnic community. (Schmidt, 1995, p. 1)

Despite the less-than-enthusiastic welcome by some local residents (Starr, 1981), Vietnamese Americans have become an established part of the industry in many parts of the Gulf. The small numbers originally brought in to work in the industry, moreover, "established receiving communities for secondary migrants initially resettled in other parts of the country, typically for relatives and fellow villagers seeking a more pleasant and familiar climate" (Starr, 1981, p. 228).

Many of the refugees who settled in Biloxi had been fisherfolk in Vietnam: "I am also one of the people who crossed the ocean and succeed ... Originally, my job is fishing. That's why I headed south for the fishing job. That's why over here I work for the boat, shrimp boat." The community worked as a buffer, an economic and socio-cultural enclave for the many who came, well-versed in life on the water but with little formal education and few marketable skills (Starr, 1981): "A lot of those that did not know English went out to sea."

According to my knowledge, peers of my age or older brothers, we immigrated to this American nation at an older age. Therefore, unfortunately, we were not accepted [at school] and not able to learn much of the available courses. Thus, we chose this place to work in a profession that requires not much education, but still pays a salary that is enough to live on.

While the men went out to sea, some eventually buying their own boats and hiring crews of co-ethnics, many women worked in the processing plants, finding there not only employment, but a source of social connections:

Woman 1: You can still work in the shrimp factory if you don't know English. There were a lot of people there.

Woman 2: The owners were American but the Vietnamese were, of course, workers.

Woman 1: And, we would understand each other as we talk back and forth during work.

During the Storm

"A lot of people got torn apart."

While many evacuated before the storm, and others chose to ride out the storm in their homes or fishing boats, still others, for multiple reasons, were unable to leave. As a woman in her 60s recounted, evacuation required resources: "to be blunt, those who were well off had opportunities; they had cars, children, overall they had a family. And, no matter how the hurricane turns out they still have a car that they can quickly relocate with." The language barrier was a factor:

You know, there was also this sense of like there were some people who live alone, you know, and they have limited English skill. They don't know the ... umm ... how important it is to evacuate, you know. They don't know the magnitude because no one to explain it to them ...

Others cited ill health:

My mom wanted to move too but my dad couldn't because he was like the dialysis inspection ... is here and he goes four times a week so he couldn't go anywhere for more than 2 days. So, that's one reason why he didn't evacuate. They didn't leave.

Still another recounted workplace constraints:

We work in the Casino and if you're off that day then you can take off. But if you're working that day ... they wait until really mandatory. I mean like storm, really going hit then they shut down, they only give you 8 hours to get out. So by the time we get out and we get to interstate, that's it. We stuck.

Whatever the reasons for remaining behind, the experience of the storm proved to be terrifying to all who did. Several participants related harrowing tales of survival: escaping the rising flood waters through broken windows, clinging to rooftops and tree branches through the hurricane for hours until the waters receded or rescuers finally reached them. Despite the appalling dangers, fortunately, the community lost no lives due directly to the storm, though as one interviewee recounted, the indirect effects of the storm are more difficult to ascertain:

I am not sure. My father had ... because the arrival of the hurricane and the power went out at the hospital and he was sick and there was a not sufficient resource and it was so hot. There was no oxygen and so he died. He was already ninety-something years old.

The storm and the ensuing floods destroyed or severely damaged many houses and businesses in Little Saigon. The streets were littered with wrecked cars, downed electric lines, and rotting debris and dead animals, creating a toxic brew of mud and stench. Entire streets had been reconfigured into unrecognizable tangles of broken and unmoored buildings: "Oh heavens, there was no way to find the street and the house. Finally, I was able to locate my house. My house was originally here, but I found it on the other block." Food, water, and other basic necessities were scarce in the immediate aftermath: "After a few days, even those that had money could not buy food. I had to bring my granddaughter with me to the street and beg for food. I had to take her to beg for food in the street."

Some participants spent brief periods in shelters run by the local government or organizations such as the American Red Cross, but left as soon as they could to find alternatives.

By the time we got to the camp all the space below was taken and we had to go upstairs by the bathroom. The water broke and everything was a mess. It was just not livable. I did not have anything at the time. There was this newspaper, so I dusted the sand away like this and lay on it. There I stayed for 20 something hours ... My son decided that we needed to move because of the all urine and waste by the bathroom. When morning came we came to the Temple.

Such alternatives were often found within the ethnic community. The Temple and the Church, which sustained comparatively little damage, became temporary shelter for many community members, and staging grounds for distributing food, water, and clothing, and equipment such as tarps and camping stoves. Along with NGOs, the local institutions, and family and friends across the country, the national networks of Vietnamese American organizations became important sources of support and aid: "Vietnamese communities from other places, such as California, Atlanta, Houston, rallied up truckloads of rice and food to churches here where the food were distributed." Even for those who evacuated, such ethnic networks functioned as resources:

Any Vietnamese that, who, went to Houston ... we gathered at the same place at the Hong Kong market. That, I guess, that's the landmark out there for that time, you know, or the Vietnamese community. We get all the information there like sign up for FEMA or sign up for Red Cross, you know? We did everything there.

As Airriess and colleagues (2007) explain,

This particular relationship between the local and the co-ethnic regional and national institutions provides a different dimension to the concept of networks of social capital in the sense that ethnic media and the internet rescaled a wider sense of ethnic community identity in a unified space of networks. (p. 1338)

As useful as such local and extended community networks were, however, they were insufficient to meet the needs of the community. While many who had evacuated during the storm returned to Biloxi to begin their long road to recovery, others, rendered homeless and jobless by the storm, left for other parts of the country. Many participants characterized these displacements as difficult experiences of exile. Several respondents cried as they described their experience of separation and sense of isolation from family, friends, and the neighborhood itself. One man went to Houston with his school-age son and was overwhelmed by the scale of the city and his perceptions of the risks and dangers that they faced. A woman, relocated by her Casino employer to an area about a day's drive from Little Saigon, recalled the months of separation from her family as a period of profound sadness and fear.

After the Storm

"So this is a sad scenario, but there are more devastating situations."

The issue of PTSD and trauma have long been associated with refugee populations. There is some evidence that refugees may be at particularly high risk for retraumatization owing in part to their previous traumatic experiences (Chen et al., 2007, p. 325). Conversely, studies have also shown that repeated trauma exposure may function as a kind of immunization (Basoglu, Paker, Ozmen, Tasdemir, & Sahin, 1994; Basoglu, Paker, Paker, et al., 1994; Norris & Murrell, 1988). Overall, the impact of trauma on the mental health of refugees, particularly that of long resettled refugees such as our sample, "remains a contested area" (Silove, Steel, Bauman, Chey, & McFarlane, 2007, p. 467).

There are, doubtlessly, community members who have suffered psychological injury due to the storm. One respondent, a long-term community member who has worked for BPSOS since it opened a branch in post-hurricane Biloxi, lamented that among its clientele are significant numbers with stress and trauma reactions and no Vietnamese-speaking clinicians in the area to treat them. In our sample, however, only one respondent reported trauma-like symptoms:

For three to four months I did not dare to bathe. I would laugh when there is something funny and I would also laugh when there was nothing to laugh about ... It was not until six to seven months later that I slowly began to gain control of what should be said and what not to say ... My younger sibling did take me to the doctor and everything and the doctor would sit and talk with me. But it was hard, because they spoke English and my sibling had to sit there and interpret for me. So, it was like talking to my sibling. Slowly... it has been a few years, and I slowly got back to *nor mal*. But, sometimes when asked of [the hurricane] I cannot hold back my emotion, because I never thought I would still be standing here. That's the truth.

A handful of others also described ongoing emotional and psychological difficulties, including a continued struggle to make sense of the events:

It's been 3 years now. But, some experience I had ... I just want to say it, but I don't know what I'm going to say, what, who to say it to. Just like now ... it's like it's in the closet right now. There's some stuff I want to say but ... but anger ... You were stressed. You were freaking out ... all that stuff, anger and depression.

The narratives of the majority of our respondents appear, however, to support the "inoculation hypothesis" (Norris & Murrell, 1988); past experiences had prepared them to deal with this newest in a long line of disasters, had rendered them "more resilient to the effects of Katrina" (VanLandingham et al., 2007, p. 7). A man in his 60s explained that Vietnamese Americans like himself "know how to handle" danger, explaining, "I was in the battlefield for 3 years. So, I was familiar with the situation. I feel it's dangerous but was not so frightened. I don't feel so frightened." Others, including some who were visibly upset during interviews or described lingering emotional difficulties insisted, however terrible their experiences of the hurricane, "the hardship is incomparable to that in Vietnam. If you endured hardship in Vietnam, nothing in

the U.S. is hard." Even the challenges of rebuilding a life post-Katrina was unmatched by the those of the initial resettlement experiences.

And it is still better than when we first emigrated from Vietnam to the refugees camp on the islands and finally to the U.S. We came with empty-hands, a few documents, and the clothes on our body, and we slowly started from there up. Now, the flood took almost everything away and whatever lost is lost. We just have to do it all over again. However, it is still better than when we first arrived here, because we still have whatever few things that were left.

Even the inefficient, inadequate, and culturally obtuse governmental aid (Park & Miller, 2007) was analyzed from this comparative perspective and made more palatable:

Whatever they can give is good. We still have to find a way to survive if they decided not to give us any. I mean, they're nice enough to provide assistance here. If it was Vietnam, people would be so poor and suffer so much during the aftermath of the hurricane. We will be devastated and so horribly poor that we have no way to start over and turn our lives around. We are able to start over again with their supports.

It must be noted that the participants' tendency to invoke the past to make sense of and mitigate the present was neither a naïve undertaking nor an immigrant's reluctance to criticize American institutions. Most respondents appeared to have a complex and in-depth knowledge of the byzantine systems of government and non-governmental aid and offered clear analyses of the pros and cons of the workings of both insurance companies and relief programs. As the following response to a question about finding resources indicates, social networks moderated barriers such as language (Pham et al., 2006):

Woman 7: No, we just spread the words by mouth.

Woman 6: Dear heavens, we're Vietnamese. If one of us is going, a dozen of us are right behind (laugh).

Woman 7: That is right. We like to have our friends with us (laugh).

While they expressed gratitude both for the aid they received and for their life in the U.S., theirs was a pragmatic analysis, derived in part from a broader knowledge and lived experience of the world outside Biloxi and the U.S.:

Not really a great place [USA], but a place with greater opportunities than Vietnam. But great? No, there's nothing great about it. It gives the opportunity to do what you can, especially in the economics and monetary area. You don't have the opportunity to improve your financial means in Vietnam. It's so constrained, unlike over here. There are more opportunities here.

This pragmatic frame has been understood, and misunderstood, as a type of fatalism peculiar to Asians, a passive, and therefore problematic acquiescence to circumstances (Larsen, Kim-Goh, & Nguyen, 2008). This, in our view, is a reductionistic analysis, reflective of the universalizing tendencies of Western psychological models that view only specific kinds of reactions and narratives as positive and functional (Kienzler, 2008). It is also an exoticizing analysis, that relegates such non-western and thus non-normative behaviors to the black box of culture. As the anthropologist Renato Rosaldo (1993) puts it, "Social analysts commonly speak as if 'we' have psychology and 'they' have culture" (p. 202). In our analysis, respondents' tendency to analyze their present circumstance through the comparative lens of their difficult past experiences can be understood, instead, as a utilitarian coping method. It is a functional use of past experiences as lens through which present difficulties can be mitigated; a transitional pathway to their past which increases their resilience in the present (Landau & Saul, 2004).

That our sample of refugees is resilient was not, in itself, surprising. The salient point in our analysis is that whereas, for instance, Leong and colleagues (2007) located the resilience of the Vietnamese American community in New Orleans in the "sense of strength derived from their experiences as war refugees or as recent immigrants" (Leong, Airriess, Li, Chen,

& Keith, 2007, p. 777), our analysis highlights that such social and cultural capital are not static possessions or essential cultural characteristics, but an active and current construction of meaning and identity performed by the community members. The narratives of this construction was, appropriately enough, most clearly articulated in group interviews. In their transformation of culturally alien, donated canned food from a storm-induced hardship into a new hybrid—a uniquely Vietnamese *and* American post-Katrina delicacy—the respondents enacted, through their social narrative alchemy, this resilience at work.

Woman 1: If I were to sit and think of Hurricane Katrina, it really was not a big deal.

Woman 2: It is a zero! (laugh)

Woman 1: This hurricane in the U.S., please excuse my word choice, is no less than heaven. We still have not finished the canned food that was given to us. For example, there are these canned peas that you can sauté with chopped garlic, scallion, and sesame seed oil. Yes. And, it turns out great. And there are canned beans. You can boil the beans and stir fry them with salt, sugar, MSG, and soy sauce. It is delicious.

Woman 2: Overall, they gave us a lot of canned food then.

Woman 1: If you know how to prepare them they are going to be delicious.

"Oh yes, we are a long way to recovery here."

The National Congress of Vietnamese Americans described the Gulf Coast three months after Katrina:

Gone were the fishing boats and the shrimp trawlers along the Mississippi and Alabama coast. The heavily damaged casinos and seafood processing plants were shut down. The storms also flooded Vietnamese neighborhoods, many of which were located on low-lying land. Small businesses everywhere, whether they sustained damages or not, faced a sudden loss of customers and were unable to stay open. As a result, even three months after the storm, as much as 25 percent of the Vietnamese population of southern Mississippi had left to look for work elsewhere in the

country. Many smaller towns along the Gulf Coast still appeared in May 2006 as ghosts of themselves, with a landscape of rubble and few signs of life." (Pham et al., 2006, p. 9)

Three years after Katrina, we found Little Saigon still struggling to recover. The resilience of this population in the face of repeated adversity was notable. But their resilience did not cancel out the reality of continuing difficulties, just as the respondents' good humored recounting of the services provided by organizations such as FEMA and the American Red Cross were not indications that the aid provided was adequate or effective.

A few participants who were able to return to their former jobs and homes felt that life had returned to normal, but for most, life in Little Saigon, for themselves and for the community as a whole, had significantly changed for the worse. As one former fisherman summarized:

This city has changed a lot after the hurricane ... There's nothing about it that's optimistic. This means, ever since the hurricane, life has been very depressing. There are a few people that have somewhat stabilized and there are those that remain a wreck like these boats, got washed on shore, pulled down, and now the motors don't even work. Everything is wrecked; nothing is settled ... Hopefully it will be good in the future. As for now, it has yet to be ... There's nothing about Biloxi that seems stable, from land to sea. It's still very sad.

A critical change has been the out-migration of people: "If there were 100 people here back then, there are only about 20, 30 people here now." The daily contact with family and friends, a defining characteristic of life in Little Saigon, seems to have become a permanent loss for many: "I do have friends before the hurricane. I had sisters, friends, relatives, and stuff. It was very happy. They all left ... they all left. Their houses were all destroyed ... Lost all connections." Family configurations and interactions have been radically reshaped: "To be honest, my family came apart because my children were not able to reunite. They had to deal with all this and they became

depressed and ended up leaving. It was like they lost their wives and I lost my sons." One woman encapsulated, "The truth is it changed the destiny of my family members not by a little but by a lot."

It was, more often than not, the younger members of the community who left to find jobs and establish lives elsewhere: "the children are all scattered." The same set of socio-cultural and economic constraints and attachments that tied many older and poorer community members to Little Saigon in the first place and had made evacuation difficult, also made relocation infeasible. One long-time fisherman explained his reason for staying: "the real reason is I am somewhat old, my English proficiency is not that great, and I do not have any degree or certification." A woman in her 60s explained: "I do not know anyone out there to go to. And, I know all the streets and roads from living here. I can walk about. I know how to get from here to the grocery stores ... I do not know English, but ... if I have any trouble the people here will help me with their best." A woman in her mid-50s summarized:

A lot of people here do not know English and they do not wish to relocate to the North. Many of the young people that were born here, such as my children, they are up there now but if they do not like it there they will move to another place. But for me and my husband, there is nothing else we can do.

In our analysis, an individual's reaction to the storm as well as his or her orientation to the future was shaped in large part by the individual's particular socioeconomic location before and after the storm. Those who entered the storm with capital—whether it was economic capital such as land, houses, money, or human capital such as education or English language facility—and had capital that survived the storm, tended to report a faster emotional and psychological recovery, and a more active orientation to the future. The outlook of younger, better employed, English-proficient participants is typified by the following: "Uh, probably stay busy ... Yea, keeping busy ... keep, you know, moving forward." Such respondents typically reported that despite some sadness and frustrations, they

were getting on with their lives and trying to look towards the future: "like me and my husband said ... let's look forward, we work. If the insurance pay, they pay, if not we see what's gonna happen, we not gonna sit there waiting."

The ability to look forward with a sense of hope seemed to be more difficult for older people, many with limited English and few alternative employment prospects, who had little to begin with and could not imagine recouping their losses in the near term. One woman explained, "there's no miracle (laugh) ... you only get wishes in fairy tales." One fisherman poignantly summarized:

I only pray for good health and that I will be able to work and put food on the table each day. That is all. I do not know. There is nothing for me to plan. I just sit here with my eyes shut and whatever will be will be. I do not have any plan right now. Honestly, I do not know what to expect. What am I to hope for? Those who had houses need to fix them because they are damaged and if they had insurance then they were compensated and if they did not then there is no other way. And, there are those that bought hurricane insurance but not flood insurance, therefore they have no other way either. And, since they bought only hurricane insurance and not flood insurance the insurance company will not compensate them. You see? There are so many situations. So many difficult situations that I cannot explain. All I can do now is close my eyes, let go of my hands, and whatever will be will be. I do not know what else to think of. How else am I going to think of this?

"Landmarks that were here are no longer there."

Physical changes to the neighborhood, the destruction of houses and businesses and the subsequent encroachment of Casino developments were responsible in part for the out-migration which has so greatly altered not only the lives of individuals and families but the collective community itself.

Out of 10 houses, 7 to 8 of them were destroyed. Therefore, people did not have a place to stay. There are some that evacuated to other states and have not

yet returned. There are a lot of houses that got cleaned but not fixed. They are just vacantly sitting there.

Housing prices rose dramatically in the post-Katrina years in part because so much housing stock was destroyed and few replacements built: "Newly built three bedrooms homes were around \$100,000 before the hurricane. After the hurricane, the cost of homes increased by 30% and they became \$130,000." The lack of housing stock has also resulted in a shortage of rental units and a consequent rise in rental prices.

There's very limited few resource for renters here. And renters before the hurricane were a significant part of the population, the Vietnamese population. And because there's very little, nothing or very little for them to come back to, they evacuated and they may never return.

The temporary FEMA trailers have also had a role in the scattering the community:

Say a Vietnamese person was living ... a renter living in East Biloxi, he had a roommate, but then the house was destroyed or something and he was placed in a FEMA trailer. You know, maybe his roommate had some family or friends out of state and he moved away, right? That leaves just this person, right? And this person, because he doesn't own his own property, land or home, he's sent to a commercial site all the way, say like 30 miles from here or something ... You may say 'well I want to stay in East Biloxi' but if there's no site in East Biloxi then you have to go somewhere else.

While disaster devastates many, it can open up new possibilities for those eager to exploit the crisis (Klein, 2007). Once restricted to off-shore locations, post-Katrina changes to zoning laws now permit casinos on land; Little Saigon, abutting the original off-shore Casino district is a prime target for encroachment. As one woman explained "after the hurricane, the casinos were able to move closer inland, right? They were allowed without input, without a lot of community input, because people were displaced there. So how could people

give inputs when they're displaced all over? Another woman noted, "you're not going to see what you used to see ... before the storm, you know? You lose all like the motel Mom and Pop's on the beach, you know? They're all going to be casinos and condos now. Not like what it used to be."

Given the multiple difficulties of insurance and financing community members faced in their quest to rebuild homes and businesses, the incentive to sell to Casinos were high. One former restaurant owner described her plight of being effectively priced-out of her own neighborhood:

The Casino is expanding ... like we try to build the place back after the hurricane. ... So, I spend some money and hire some people try to fix it up, to build the restaurant there. But we checked the insurance and they don't sell to us ... too close to the water ... we cannot build everything in cash, so we have to get a loan ... and you cannot get insurance. So, really, your hands are tied. So you have to sell ... everything is so expensive now in Biloxi, land to build back the home ... even if you build your home here, the insurance is so high you cannot afford it.

Not only casinos, but upscale development projects for condos and resorts to serve casino clientele promise to further raise property prices. The changes have benefited some community members: "some people are richer [than] before Katrina. Yeah. They sell the lot to the casino ... their lot like about seven or eighty thousand dollars. But after Katrina, some people sell over two hundred thousand dollars. God bless! (laugh)." But not all property owners gained: "some of the neighborhoods' values have gone up because they are close to the casinos, but there are neighborhoods that have no value" because they are not.

Like all changes, the casino developments have had complex effects, and the interviewees expressed ambivalence about their impact on the community and its people. Casinos have provided much needed jobs: "If not for the casinos a lot of people would be unemployed, right? Without the casino a lot of people would be out of jobs." But while the jobs are beneficial, especially to "the young ones, the young couples," they are not open to all members of the community: "a lot of

them were not able to work in the casino because they do not have much education and know very little English. They only know the sea and they live by working on the sea." As some participants expressed, moreover, casinos are a double-edged resource: "the more casinos we have, the more the residents will suffer (laugh) ... Yes, they bring us jobs but they also bring away our money (laugh)."

The community's sources of livelihood have also been significantly affected. Along with the loss of multiple small businesses which were unable to rebuild, the fishing industry was crippled. Life in fisheries was never easy: "season from season ok. Sometimes good, sometimes ok. Not so bad." But since Katrina, fishing has been virtually at a standstill: "I feel that the ocean has been more and more quiet each day, the fishing business seems harder to live off than it was before the hurricane." Boats were severely damaged during the storm, and most fishermen, with no or inadequate insurance, have been unable to restore their boats back to full capacity. The near seas, to which the small boats typically operated by the community members are limited, were still full of "trees and shrubs that got blown from the forest or land ... also refrigerators and cars that got washed into the sea," and were hazardous to boats and nets. For many fishermen, a lifetime of work and investment have been rendered useless. Even for those with functioning equipment, the cost of oil was so high and the cost of shrimp so low at the time of the interviews, that it was economically infeasible to put out to sea.

Everything is priced high. After the hurricane, I have five people sitting around, spaced-out and do not want to do anything. The two boats have been sitting there. ... Fishermen seem to be losing the battle. If they were to switch shrimps for oil they would not be equal.

The seafood processing plants have not been repaired, leaving many, particularly older women, without work: "before the hurricane I was working with shrimps. There's nothing for me to do."

As casinos encroach and the businesses and fisheries remain shuttered, Little Saigon was contracting, not only economically and demographically, but socially. Its disintegration

as a neighborhood was intimately tied to its attenuation as a community. Most respondents reported that community interactions had diminished. Little Saigon remained still the heart of the Vietnamese American community: "yes, my life still in Biloxi because I could go to church in Ocean Springs but I go over here as much as I can." Many had moved to nearby towns, but "they still come back to East Biloxi because the church is there, the temple is there, some grocery stores, you know? So, they still come back to East Biloxi, you know?" But it was clear that "it's never going to be the same." As the neighborhood and its composition changed, the community and individuals' connections to it, though not entirely lost, had become more tenuous:

You know, you used to go into the Vietnamese church for Mass or the Buddhist temple. And now you live 25, 30 miles away. You have no transportation or have transportation issues. You lose that connection to that community because you can't go back there as readily anymore ... See, it's different when you lose one or two homes versus when you lose hundreds of homes at once. See, so there's like a big humongous difference. Granted you know losing is tragic but when it's on a big scale you lose your friends and your neighbors. That severs a connection you have to the community and you feel very lost.

Conclusion

Our findings were undoubtedly shaped by the composition of our sample, comprised entirely of first generation immigrants. This is a population more likely to maintain close ties to ethnic-specific institutions and the neighborhood than younger, U.S.-born populations. Our recruitment through community institutions likely increased the possibility of netting not only the first generation, but those among them who actively participate in community life. The sample consisted, moreover, of those who remained behind, a group whose very presence suggests a higher likelihood of having close attachments to the community than those who left.

We believe, nevertheless, that a compelling and often

haunting portrait of the community has emerged. The narratives support our social ecology perspective on disasters. The interlocking relationship between the individual and collective are clearly demonstrated in the narratives that show that the shifting shape and content of Little Saigon are, in multiple ways, changing the community members' experiences as both individuals and as members of the collective. Despite their active resilience in the face of adversity, moreover, these changes are experienced by the community members as profound losses.

Perhaps most clearly, the narratives support our understanding of the concept of place as "an important aspect of the self that is simultaneously a physical setting outside of the person and a symbolic presence within the person" (Falk, Hunt, & Hunt, 2006, p. 116). In particular for the older and arguably the most vulnerable respondents, Little Saigon was significant not only as "a symbolic center of ethnic identity" (VanLandingham et al., 2007, p. 6), but as a physical location, a linguistic and cultural enclave which functioned as a protected and familiar space of residence, livelihood, and social connections. Strong social networks and community bonds have been identified as protective factors for communities and societies undergoing social and economic upheaval (Sztompka, 2004). But in the case of Biloxi's Vietnamese American community, those social networks and bonds were embedded, to a significant degree, in the neighborhood itself: the neighborhood and the community were bound together as a place, of not only symbolic but material importance.

It seems unlikely that the neighborhood of Little Saigon will return to its former state. These narratives demonstrate that the loss and recovery for each individual community member is intimately tied to that individual's particular social, economic, and political location in the world. The scale of losses and speed of recovery for the community and the neighborhood are similarly tied to such factors, constituted through multiple interdependent sociopolitical forces. Little Saigon, a racially, linguistically, culturally, and economically marginalized entity, was of profound importance to its community members but had little sociopolitical clout in the world at large. As the land developments in the post-storm years indicate, the larger recovery planning for the neighborhood appears to be

progressing without significant input of those who depend most on its outcomes. If “indeed, a person’s social and existential identity is, to some degree, a by-product of where they live” and individuals “are in part *who* they are because of *where* they are” (Falk et al., 2006, p. 117), how the individual community members will fare, and whether their collective bonds and social networks can be maintained, remains to be seen.

Acknowledgements: The authors wish to express appreciation to the Smith College School for Social Work’s Clinical Research Institute, which provided funding for this project.

References

- Ager, A. (1997). Tensions in the psychosocial discourse: implications for the planning with war-affected populations. *Development in Practice*, 7(4), 402-407.
- Airriess, C. A., Li, W., Leong, K. J., Chen, A. C.-C., & Keith, V. M. (2007). Church-based social capital, networks and geographical scale: Katrina evacuation, relocation, and recovery in a New Orleans Vietnamese American community. *Geoforum*, 39, 1333-1346.
- Arden, H. (1981). The troubled odyssey of Vietnamese fishermen: Wanderers from Vung Tau. *National Geographic*, 160(3), 378-395.
- Basoglu, M., Paker, M., Ozmen, E., Tasdemir, O., & Sahin, D. (1994). Factors related to long-term traumatic stress responses in survivors of torture in Turkey. *The Journal of the American Medical Association*, 272(5), 357-363.
- Basoglu, M., Paker, M., Paker, O., Ozmen, E., Marks, I., Incesu, C., et al. (1994). Psychological effects of torture: A comparison of tortured with nontortured political activists in Turkey. *American Journal of Psychiatry*, 151(1), 76-81.
- Bates, K. A., & Swan, R. S. (2007). *Through the eyes of Katrina: Social justice in the United States*. Durham, NC: Carolina Academic Press.
- Chen, A. C.-C., Keith, V. M., Leong, K. J., Airriess, C., Li, W., Chung, K.-Y., et al. (2007). Hurricane Katrina: Prior trauma, poverty and health among Vietnamese-American survivors. *International Nursing Review*, 54(4), 324-331.
- Elliott, J. R., & Pais, J. (2006). Race, class, and Hurricane Katrina: Social differences in human responses to disaster. *Social Science Research*, 35, 295-321.
- Falk, W. W., Hunt, M. O., & Hunt, L. L. (2006). Hurricane Katrina and New Orleanians’ sense of place: Return and reconstitution or “Gone with the Wind”? *Du Bois Review*, 3(1), 115-128.

- Farwell, N., & Cole, J. B. (2002). Community as a context of healing: psychosocial recovery of children affected by war and political violence. *International Journal of Mental Health, 30*(4), 19-41.
- Frymer, P., Strolovitch, D. Z., & Warren, D. T. (2005). Katrina's political roots and divisions: Race, class, and federalism in American politics. Retrieved October 28, 2005, from <http://understandingkatrina.ssrc.org/FrymerStrolovitchWarren/pf/>
- Halpern, J., & Tramontin, M. (2007). *Disaster mental health: Theory and practice*. Belmont, CA: Thompson Learning.
- Henkel, K. E., Dovidio, J. F., & Gaertner, S. L. (2006). Institutional discrimination, individual racism, and Hurricane Katrina. *Analyses of Social Issues and Public Policy, 6*(1), 99-124.
- Kaniasty, K., & Norris, F. (1999). The experience of disaster: Individuals and communities sharing trauma. In R. Gist & B. Lubin (Eds.), *Response to disaster: Psychosocial, community and ecological approaches* (pp. 25-61). Philadelphia: Brunner/Mazel.
- Kao, G. (2006). Where are the Asian and Hispanic victims of Katrina? A metaphor for invisible minorities in contemporary racial discourse. *Du Bois Review, 3*(1), 223-231.
- Kienzler, H. (2008). Debating war-trauma and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in an interdisciplinary arena. *Social Science & Medicine, 67*(2), 218-227.
- Kleiner, A. M., Green, J. J., & Nylander, III, A. B. (2007). A community study of disaster impacts and redevelopment issues facing East Biloxi, Mississippi. In D. L. Brunnsma, D. Overfelt & J. S. Picou (Eds.), *The sociology of Katrina: Perspectives on a modern catastrophe* (pp. 155-171). New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.
- Kleinman, A., & Cohen, A. (1997). Psychiatry's global challenge. *Scientific American, 276*(3), 86-92.
- Landau, J., & Saul, J. (2004). Facilitating family and community resilience in response to major disaster. In F. Walsh & M. McGoldrick (Eds.), *Living beyond loss* (pp. 285-309). New York: Norton.
- Larsen, S., Kim-Goh, M., & Nguyen, T. D. (2008). Asian American immigrant families and child abuse: Cultural considerations. *Journal of Systemic Therapies, 27*(1), 16-29.
- Leong, K. J., Airriess, C. A., Li, W., Chen, A. C.-C., & Keith, V. M. (2007). Resilient history and the rebuilding of a community: The Vietnamese American community in New Orleans East. *Journal of American History, 94*, 770-779.
- Li, W., Airriess, C., Chen, A. C.-C., Leong, K. J., Keith, V. M., & Adams, K. L. (2008). Surviving Katrina and its aftermath: Evacuation and community mobilization by Vietnamese Americans and African Americans. *Journal of Cultural Geography, 25*(3), 263 -286.
- Miller, J. (In press). *The social ecology of disaster and psychosocial capacity building*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Norris, F. H., & Murrell, S. A. (1988). Prior experience as a moderator of disaster impact on anxiety symptoms in older adults. *American Journal of Community Psychology, 10*, 157-167.

- Park, Y., & Miller, J. (2007). Inequitable distributions: A critical analysis of the Red Cross and its response to Hurricane Katrina. *Journal of Intergroup Relations*, 33(1), 45-59.
- Pham, V., Shull, S., Tranguyen, T., & Hoang, L. (2006). *Vietnamese Americans in Hurricane-impacted areas: An assessment of housing needs*. Washington, D.C.: National Congress of Vietnamese Americans.
- Ritchie, E. C., Watson, P. J., & Friedman, M. J. (Eds.). (2006). *Interventions following mass violence and disasters: Strategies for mental health practice*. New York: Guilford.
- Rosaldo, R. (1993). *Culture and truth: The remaking of social analysis* (2nd ed.). Boston: Beacon Press.
- Rosenfeld, L. B., Caye, J. S., Ayalon, O., & Lahad, M. (2005). *When their world falls apart: Helping families and children manage the effects of disasters*. Silver Springs, MD: National Association of Social Workers Press.
- Schmidt, A. (1995). Down around Biloxi: Culture and identity in the Biloxi seafood industry. *Mississippi Folklife*, 28(1), 1-15. Retrieved from <http://www.olemiss.edu/depts/south/publish/missfolk/backissues/biloxi.html>
- Seidman, I. E. (1991). *Interviewing for qualitative research: A guide for researchers in education and the social sciences*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Silove, D., Steel, Z., Bauman, A., Chey, T., & McFarlane, A. (2007). Trauma, PTSD and the longer-term mental health burden amongst Vietnamese refugees: A comparison with the Australian-born population. *Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology*, 42(6), 467-476.
- Sloan, S. (2008). Oral history and Hurricane Katrina: Reflections on shouts and silences. *The Oral History Review*, 35(2), 176-186.
- Sommers, S. R., Apfelbaum, E. P., Dukes, K. N., Toosi, N., & Wang, E. J. (2006). Race and media coverage of Hurricane Katrina: Analysis, implications and future research questions. *Analyses of Social Issues and Public Policy*, 6(1), 39-56.
- Starr, P. D. (1981). Troubled waters: Vietnamese fisherfolk on America's Gulf Coast. *International Migration Review*, 15(1/2), 226-238.
- Stokols, D. (2000). Social ecology and behavioral medicine: Implications for training, practice, and policy. *Behavioral Medicine*, 26(3), 129-138.
- Strang, A. B., & Ager, A. (2003). Psychosocial interventions: Some key issues facing practitioners. *Intervention*, 1(3), 2-12.
- Summerfield, D. (2004). Cross cultural perspectives on the medicalisation of human suffering. In G. Rosen (Ed.), *Posttraumatic stress disorder: Issues and controversies* (pp. 233-247). New York: Wiley.

- Sztompka, P. (2004). The trauma of social change: A case of post-communist societies. In J. C. Alexander, R. Eyerman, B. Giesen, N. Smelser, & P. Sztompka (Eds.), *Cultural trauma and collective identity* (pp. 155-195). Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- The Brookings Institution Metropolitan Policy Program (2005). *New Orleans after the storm: Lessons from the past, a plan for the future*. Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution.
- U.S. Census Bureau. (2009, April 9). United States Census 2000. Retrieved March 15, 2009, from <http://www.census.gov/main/www/cen2000.html>
- VanLandingham, M., Norris, F., Vu, L., & Fu, H. (2007). *Katrina-related health impacts on Vietnamese New Orleanians: A longitudinal study*. Paper presented at the Population Association of America.
- Wessells, M. G. (1999). Culture, power and community: intercultural approaches to psychosocial healing. In K. Nader, N. Dubrow & B. H. Stamm (Eds.), *Honoring differences: Cultural issues in the treatment of trauma and loss* (pp. 267-282). New York: Taylor and Francis.
- Wessells, M. G., & Monteiro, C. (2006). Psychosocial assistance for youth: Toward reconstruction for peace in Angola. *Journal of Social Issues*, 62(1), 121-139.
- Weyerman, B. (2007). Linking economics and emotions: Towards a more integrated understanding of empowerment in conflict areas. *Intervention*, 5(2), 83-96.
- Wickramage, K. (2006). Sri Lanka's post-Tsunami psychosocial playground: Lessons for future psychosocial programming and interventions. *Intervention*, 4(2), 167-172.

Copyright of Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare is the property of Western Michigan University and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.