



Changes in the social relationships of individuals with disabilities displaced by disaster



Laura M. Stough^{a,*}, Elizabeth McAdams Ducey^b, Judith M. Holt^c

^a Texas A & M University, Department of Educational Psychology, Center on Disability and Development, MS 4225, College Station, TX 77843, USA

^b Sonoma State University, 1801 E. Cotati Ave, Rohnert Park, CA 94928, USA

^c Utah State University, Center for Persons with Disabilities, 6800 Old Main Hill, Logan, UT 84322, USA

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Disaster
Disability
Social relationships
Social networks
Social support

ABSTRACT

The role of social relationships, social networks, and social support in disaster contexts has been investigated extensively. However, few studies have examined how social relationships, networks, and support change for people with disabilities affected by disaster. Thirty-nine people with disabilities displaced by Hurricane Katrina were interviewed about their long-term recovery experiences three years following the disaster. Results were analyzed using grounded theory methodology. Additional analysis of the category of social relationships revealed six underlying properties; 1) proximity to others, 2) frequency of social interactions, 3) diversity of relationships, 4) intimacy with neighbors, 5) cohesion with family, and 6) formality of relationships. Findings suggest that perceived quality of life diminished post-disaster due to the loss of social networks and belongingness, rather than to a diminishment in perceived instrumental support.

1. Introduction

Research on disasters suggests that individuals with preexisting disabilities are disproportionately vulnerable in several different respects. Households of people with disabilities are less likely to evacuate in advance of natural disasters [42,68] and are particularly at risk when quick evacuation is necessary [13,66]. These households also experience greater housing losses and suffer more costly damages to their properties [68]. In addition, in some natural disasters, people with disabilities die at a higher rate [12,37,49]. Post-disaster, people with disabilities receive less assistance from emergency personnel and volunteers [11,14,51], take longer to recover [68], evidence specialized mental health needs [58,59], require more intensive case management [62], and are less likely to be included in post-disaster reconstruction and recovery planning [33,54]. However, studies focusing on the social aspects of disaster for people with disabilities have been exceedingly limited, despite evidence that social relationships can serve psychologically protective functions during disaster recovery [44,48,70].

2. Social relationships and social support

The term “social relationships” is an overarching term that generally refers to the human connections amongst individuals. Positive social relationships are consistently associated with positive physical and

mental health [7,15,32]. As a related term, “social network” is used to describe “the web of social relationships that surround an individual and the characteristics of those ties” [8]. Social networks are often described in terms of relational distance between individuals, reciprocity, and embeddedness- the quantity and strength of relationships maintained with others. Embeddedness in a social network during stressful life events, such as disasters, has long been established as having beneficial effects and social ties to others contribute to a sense of belonging [32,65]. In contrast, individuals who are less socially integrated have been found to be not only less psychologically healthy, but less physically healthy [7,15].

In the academic literature “social support,” which refers principally to interpersonal assistance, has received much attention. Scholars generally agree on the central importance of social support, defining it as “a causal contributor to well-being ([16], p. 310) and even “the cornerstone for the quality of human life” ([3], p. 149). Common types of social support studied in the psychological literature have included emotional (e.g. providing comfort or friendship), appraisal (providing evaluative feedback), informational (providing someone with information or advice), and instrumental support (e.g. tangible assistance such as resources or money), (for a review, see [7]). Instrumental support has been of particular interest to both disaster scholars and to disability scholars as it typically involves providing financial assistance or help with daily tasks.

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: lstough@tamu.edu (L.M. Stough), ducey@sonoma.edu (E.M. Ducey), judith.holt@usu.edu (J.M. Holt).

2.1. Psychological perspectives

During disasters, social relationships appear to serve both psychologically protective roles and coping functions. For example, robust social networks allow survivors to share and process their disaster-related experiences ([55], p. 347). However, social networks are fragile in disaster; significant others are lost, social embeddedness is disrupted, and relocation changes social patterns [44]. Furthermore, the loss of social support can be particularly severe and long-lasting when a disaster leads to displacement [48], as was the case following Hurricane Katrina. The work of Norris, Kaniasty, and colleagues (e.g. [27,28,29,31,45,46]) suggests that individuals with weak or deteriorating social support have an increased likelihood of negative outcomes following disaster. However, when the level of social support post-disaster is perceived positively, psychological health is rated more highly [31,45,46].

2.2. Disability perspectives

For the last three decades, research on the social relationships of people with disabilities has been dominated by discourse on “natural supports.” “Natural supports” or “informal supports” refer to interactions with and assistance provided by family members, friends, or neighbors while “formal supports” refer to assistance provided through agencies or organizations. The distinction highlights that many people who regularly interact with people with disabilities are paid care providers such as social workers, doctors, and personal attendants and that the social networks of people with disabilities are often small [21,23]. The concept of natural supports holds as its premise that “relying on typical people and environments enhances the potential for inclusion more effectively than relying on specialized services and personal” ([43], p.5). Braithwaite and Eckstein [10] point out that while social support is usually conceptualized as temporary in the disability literature, some people with disabilities will actually require ongoing and persistent assistance across their lifespans.

3. Social relationships of people with disabilities in disaster

While some have suggested that disruption of social networks leads to unique support needs by people with disabilities [67,68], few studies have directly examined the social relationships of people with disabilities within disaster contexts. One study [71] of deaf evacuees reported that support provided by deaf community members was most effective during Hurricane Rita. In another study following Hurricane Ike, teachers offered important instrumental and emotional support to displaced students with disabilities and their families [19]. Echoing findings from psychological studies on social networks, Fox, White, Rooney, and Cahill [24] found that faith, family, and work were major support mechanisms for people with disabilities post-disaster. Most recently, Bourke, Hay-Smith, Snell and Schluter [9], found that strong social connections contributed to the community inclusion and well-being of adult wheelchair users after the Canterbury earthquakes. Conversely, participants in the study who experienced a weakening in their social relationships reported a lower sense of community belonging. Although these findings suggest that social relationships are important post disaster, research on the specific nature of these relationships and how disasters change them has not been forthcoming.

Scholars have repeatedly noted challenges the disability community experiences in establishing and increasing both social networks and social capital [23,57]. Factors such as higher poverty rates, lower employment rates, inadequate housing construction, and secondary health conditions additionally place people with disabilities at a disadvantage during disaster [60]. The exclusion of people with disabilities in many societies heightens their vulnerability to disasters through limited access to people, networks, and power structures which provide assistance in disaster situations [60]. Priestly and Hemingway [54] point out that

“Human disasters may be lessened by reducing vulnerabilities, particularly for poor or socially excluded groups” (p.25, 2007), such as people with disabilities.

The purpose of this study was to examine how social relationships changed for people with disabilities affected by Hurricane Katrina. Few studies have focused on the post-disaster challenges unique to individuals with disabilities [61]. And, though much has been written about social relationships post disaster, the social ramifications of disaster for people with disabilities have not been fully explored. Attention to the experiences of people with intellectual disabilities is particularly warranted as they often experience social exclusion as well as have smaller social networks [1,57].

4. Method

Data for this study were obtained from a larger project which examined the long-term recovery of people with disabilities displaced by Hurricane Katrina. Our epistemological and ontological approach came from a critical disability perspective which holds that people with disabilities in western societies are typically marginalized by virtue of social, political, and economic factors (see [18,39]). Given this stance, we held the expectation that participants would encounter barriers attributable to their disability status following the disaster. Our methodological approach and analysis, in contrast, came from grounded theory [25].

4.1. Participants

A total of 39 people residing in the states of Louisiana (24) and Texas (15) were screened and selected for participation in this study. Louisiana and Texas were chosen as interview sites as the majority of individuals affected by Hurricane Katrina were currently living in one of these two states post-disaster. Potential participants were screened to ensure that they had lived in the Greater New Orleans area during the disaster, had been relocated from their home for a period of at least 60 days following the storm, and had been diagnosed prior to Katrina as having a disability that affected their ability to work or live independently. Participants self-disclosed and self-defined their disabilities. Included in the sample were individuals with intellectual disability (23), individuals with a physical disability related to diabetes (8), other disabilities, including mobility or sensory impairments (7), as well as 1 individual with both an intellectual disability and a diabetes-related disability. A total of 24 females and 15 males ranging from 24 to 77 years of age were interviewed. Of the sample, 30 (76.9%) were African American, 4 (10.2%) were white, 1 was Asian (2.5%) and the remainder (10.2%) did not report their ethnicity.

4.2. Data collection

Disaster research has made extensive use of semi-structured interviews to collect data on the mental health effects of disaster [50]. In addition, qualitative methods have an established tradition of use in disaster research [53]. The focus of these interviews was on the long-term recovery experiences of the participants, however, pre-disaster and during-disaster information was also elicited to provide context for the responses. A set of three predetermined question sets were used:

- 1) How has Hurricane Katrina affected your life? What was your life like before the storm? What was a day like from the time that you woke up until you went to bed?
- 2) How did you come to live here [referring to current living situation] today?
- 3) What is your life like today? What is a typical day like from the time that you wake up until you go to bed?

Follow-up prompts were asked in connection with the first and third

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/5116053>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/5116053>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)