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Social Science Research 35 (2006) 295–321
Social Science RESEARCH
www.elsevier.com/locate/ssresearch

Race, class, and Hurricane Katrina: Social differences in human responses to disaster

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Available online 24 April 2006

Abstract

Hurricane Katrina pounded the Gulf South at the end of August 2005, devastating lives and raising questions about how race and class influence human, as well as institutional, responses to disaster. This study uses survey data collected from over 1200 Hurricane Katrina survivors to examine these influences on a wide array of responses, ranging from evacuation timing and emotional support to housing and employment situations and plans to return to pre-storm communities. Results reveal strong racial and class differences, indicating that neither of these dimensions can be reduced to the other when seeking to understand responses by survivors themselves. This intersection renders low-income black home owners from New Orleans those most in need of targeted assistance as residents work to put themselves and the region back together.

Keywords: Racial and class stratification; Disasters; Evacuation and recovery

1. Introduction

The devastating and seemingly arbitrary nature of disasters such as Hurricane Katrina can reinforce the popular notion that such events are random in their social dimensions. After all, if the physical infrastructure of our communities cannot withstand such catastrophe, how can the social infrastructure that also gives them shape?

Countering this perspective is the view that natural disasters actually provide an ideal setting in which to examine core dimensions of social life. In fact, during the early days of disaster research, Merton (1969, xi) observed that, "sociological theory and research not

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0049-089X/$ - see front matter © 2006 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.
doi:10.1016/j.ssresearch.2006.02.003

only helps us to identify and to understand what goes on when disaster strikes but also, conversely, the investigation of these phenomena can extend sociological theories of human behavior and social organization." In this way, hurricanes and other calamities offer "strategic research sites" for sociological inquiry.

Within this scholarly vein, a growing body of research has begun to document how social identities and resources shape human responses to natural disasters (for reviews, see Drabek, 1986; Peacock et al., 1997). While diverse and relatively new, this literature, along with that emerging around issues of environmental justice, builds from the core premise that communities and regions are not homogeneous, unified systems but rather mosaics of overlapping subsystems cross-cut by social and economic inequalities. Within these subsystems, individuals and families make sense of the threats posed by environmental hazards and respond to them in ways reflective of varying social and economic resources at their disposal. The primary objective of this paper is to contribute to this line of research by examining the extent to which racial and class differences influenced human responses to Hurricane Katrina—the costliest natural disaster ever to hit the United States.

This inquiry is consistent with a core principle of contemporary social scientific research on disasters. This principle, outlined by Klinenberg (2002, 23–24) and tracing to classic observations by Mauss and Durkheim, is that extreme events such as Hurricane Katrina offer "an excessiveness which allows us better to perceive the facts than in those places where, although no less essential, they still remain small-scale and involuted" (Mauss, [1916]/1979). Our research focuses specifically on the "social facts" of racial and class differences in the Gulf South before and immediately following Hurricane Katrina.

2. Background

To set the stage, we begin with a brief history of the Gulf South and then review general hypotheses regarding racial and class differences in social opportunities and behavior. Following this background, we present and analyze data from a survey of over a thousand Katrina survivors administered roughly one month after the storm hit the Gulf coast.

2.1. The Gulf South: A peripheral history

As Elliott and Ionescu (2003) point out, the Gulf South region of Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama has long been demographically and economically subordinate to other parts of the country, including today's "new" New South. To appreciate the historical underpinnings of this peripheral status, it is useful to review the development of the US settlement system as a whole.

Broadly speaking, the collection of towns and cities that comprise the US settlement system, although long including southern port cities of Charleston, Mobile, and New Orleans, took root and spread principally from colonial cities in the Northeast, specifically Boston, Providence, New York, Philadelphia, and Baltimore. According to Eysberg (1989) this uneven geographic development resulted more from historical accident than from regional differences in raw materials and transportation options. Central to this "accident" was the British Crown's policy of encouraging migration of wealthy Anglicans—who, among other things, could afford slaves—to the southern colonies, while encouraging migration of religious refugees to northern colonies. This policy, rather than innate topographical differences, set into motion the development of two distinct socio-economic systems.