

SHOULD NEW ORLEANS BE FIXED? RESPONSES TO KATRINA RECOVERY BY PERSONS OUTSIDE OF NEW ORLEANS

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After visiting New Orleans in December 2007, our McMaster Learning Community recognized that, in spite of very significant continuing needs, the sharing of resources for rebuilding churches, schools and homes damaged by Hurricane Katrina has drastically declined. It appears that without another strong wave of giving, many projects that could bring life back to the city will not be supported.

The primary goal of my project was to better understand how people distant from New Orleans perceive aspects of the Katrina-related disaster and rebuilding efforts. A secondary goal was to explore the possibility that sharing more information about the human causes of the hurricane damage would increase the likelihood of support for hurricane recovery and for more adequate storm protections for the coastal areas of the United States.

The academic framework for this research is the sociological field of Symbolic Interactionism. A basic premise for research within this framework is that groups of people feel connected to each other when they share commonly



held stories and pictures. With the accompaniment, if not the inspiration of, commonly held symbols, informal and formal groups function more effectively, especially if pictures and stories explain the meaning of actions the members of the group support – or conversely don't support. (Duncan 1962; Duncan 1968; Benzies and Allen, 2007)

METHODOLOGY

I designed this qualitative study in order to better understand the perceptions and attitudes of people who have in the last year actively supported needs and causes related to hurricane recovery. I then wanted to compare this group to people who have not so contributed, or who feel that contributions to Katrina recovery are inappropriate.

I used twelve open-ended questions. The first seven probed any personal experiences the interviewee may have had with Katrina damage and/or Katrina recovery. The next five probed basic understandings of the disaster and the interviewee's feelings about possible support for a national effort to rebuild wetlands and levees. My overarching research question was, does an understanding of the human-caused aspects of the hurricane disasters of 2005 correlate with an increase in the motivation of individuals to contribute actively to Katrina recovery, and to potential support for a national effort to rebuild wetlands and levees?

The results of the survey were as follows. First, in relation to levees: People who feel a relationship with persons or churches in New Orleans want to fix them. People who understand the human factors in the failure of the levees want to fix them. People who felt that race played a factor in the disaster and/or recovery efforts want to fix them.

Second, in relation to the wetlands: The loss of wetlands is seen by many as a national problem, particularly when combined with an understanding of global warming. People who understand the function of wetlands for storm protection want to fix them everywhere in the United States. Wetlands are also needed up north to soak up rainwater rather than have it run off into rivers and into the ocean as quickly as possible.

In general, responses that strongly support taking action as soon as possible were based on 1) having relationships with people in New Orleans; 2) understanding how the damage of the storm took place; and/or 3) a shared feeling of vulnerability to disaster. Responses opposing or limiting action at this time were based on 1) other national priorities (e.g. health care, federal budget deficit, and so forth); 2) global warming, specifically the idea that the ocean levels are going to rise so much that no real protection is possible for

any of our lowest lying coastal cities; and/or 3) a reluctance to help people and a city about whom only negative stories had been heard. The results of this study underline the importance of sharing as much information as possible about both the people of New Orleans and how the damage of the storm took place. My study suggests that more attention needs to be placed on the task of education about why the damage of these hurricanes was so great, and what can realistically be done to protect against future damage.

A primary interest of mine in doing the study was to help the Churches Supporting Churches organization. I have used the information gained in the study both to help update the website at www.cscneworleans.org, and to work on a website of my own at www.nolahealing.org. Additionally, the information collected in this study gives limited support to the hypothesis that when people possess more understanding of the human-caused factors in the damage resulting from contemporary storms, there is a greater likelihood that they would support a movement to lobby for rebuilding wetlands, strengthening levees, and creating other storm protections.

REFERENCES

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