# Center for Studies of Displaced Populations (CSDP) Working Papers Series

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Version: May 18, 2017

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Resilience among vulnerable populations: the neglected role of culture[1]

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## Abstract

Disaster scholars and other social scientists should have expected the Vietnamese community to fare poorly after Katrina. The community was geographically and socially isolated in a remote section of the city that flooded badly. Many members of the community were only marginally fluent in English if at all. Most had arrived decades earlier as disenfranchised refugees, and many had been emotionally scarred by horrific experiences associated with the final stages of the Vietnam War and their subsequent exodus. And yet on the principal measures of post-disaster recovery – housing stability, economic stability, health, and social role adaptation – we now know that the Vietnamese are faring better than those in other communities that experienced similar levels of flooding and damage.

Why?

Differences in post-disaster recovery are typically attributed to variations in *resilience*, which includes dimensions such as ecological, social, economic, institutional, infrastructure, and community competence. I argue that none of these conventional dimensions of resilience provide much leverage in explaining the post-Katrina success of the Vietnamese community *vis-à-vis* other communities that flooded just as badly. Instead, I argue that in spite of the disadvantages that the Vietnamese community faced, it made a strong post-Katrina recovery because of 1) unusually high levels of community cohesion resulting from a set of factors that are best thought of as cultural; and 2) a set of other types of advantages that are often confused with culture. I conclude with some recommendations for incorporating a role for culture in our models of disaster-related recovery and community resilience.

**Key words:** Vietnamese Americans; disasters; Katrina; longitudinal research

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[1] A more lengthy treatment of culture, resilience, and disaster recovery can be found here: VanLandingham, M. (2017). Weathering Katrina: Culture and Recovery among Vietnamese-Americans. New York, Russell Sage Foundation.

**Introduction**

Disasters discriminate. Even among those disasters that affect wide swaths of geography and a broad range of communities, those who were disadvantaged before the event generally fare the worst afterwards. Hurricane Katrina flooded about 80% of New Orleans when the federal levees failed soon after the storm came across the city. Much of the heaviest flooding occurred in communities that were located in some of the poorest – and lowest lying - sections of the city, like Central City and the Lower Ninth Ward. Rates of return among whites far outpaced rates of return among blacks, an inequitable feature of the recovery that can be explained by levels of damage and depth of flooding (Sastry and VanLandingham 2009).

But pre-disaster features such as poverty and elevation do not fully explain patterns of post-disaster recovery. Flood waters reached many working-class, middle-class and affluent sections of the city, too, such as Eastern New Orleans, Mid-City, and Lakeview. Driving through these areas today, eleven years after the event, provides a stark picture of differential recovery by neighborhood. Within Eastern New Orleans, for example, seemingly similar neighborhoods have experienced vastly different trajectories of recovery. The Vietnamese American community centered in the Southeast corner of Eastern New Orleans had similar levels and ranges of pre-Katrina socioeconomic status as the African American neighborhoods that surround it, and suffered similar levels of storm and flood-related damage. And yet on the major indicators of post-disaster recovery, the Vietnamese American community is faring better than those that surround it.

Why?

**The Resilience and Recovery Frameworks**

*Resilience*

After a major disaster, why do some communities recover more quickly and completely than others? Obviously, communities that experience more impact from a catastrophe would be expected to take longer to recover. But what about communities that are affected to the same or to a similar degree? Why do some of these communities fare better than others? The major paradigm for explaining differences in post-disaster recovery among similarly-affected communities is based on a concept called resilience.

Resilience is conceived by major disaster scholars to represent a set of attributes that enable recovery from disaster-related setbacks; it is the flip side of vulnerability (Cutter, Boruff et al. 2003, Cutter and Emrich 2006). Fran Norris defines disaster-related community resilience as the "linking a set of adaptive capacities to a positive trajectory of functioning and adaptation after a disturbance" (Norris, Stevens et al. 2008). The adaptive capacities they have in mind are economic development, social capital, information and communication, and community competence.

Strong economic development facilitates more resilience to potential disaster-related setbacks by providing adequate levels and distribution of wealth and jobs to the affected community. Dense and helpful social capital facilitates more resilience directly through connections with others who can be helpful in the rebuilding process and indirectly by providing links to other sources of help. Similarly, well-developed information and communication flows ease access to resources that can help. Community competence is less well-defined, but refers to more general community-level features that facilitate collective efficacy. These four dimensions of resilience are more effective when they are robust, redundant, and can be deployed rapidly (Bruneau, Chang et al. 2003, Norris, Stevens et al. 2008).

*Recovery*

Like resilience, the formal treatment of recovery in the disaster literature accords with intuition: recovery refers to the recapturing of a quality of life comparable to what affected individuals, families, and communities had before the disaster occurred. David Abramson and his colleagues propose five dimensions of post-disaster recovery: housing stability, economic stability, physical health, mental health, and social role adaptation. Housing stability helps ensure that members of the household - children in particular – regain some constancy in their day to day lives. Economic stability provides a steady income to the family, and reduces the need to be constantly on the lookout for income generating activities. Health, both physical and mental, underlies all of the other dimensions: without it, the ability to secure and maintain a stable home and job becomes all but impossible. Health is also an omnibus proxy measure for general well-being. Social role adaptation is a bit vague, but is intended to capture the degree of post-disaster engagement with other community members (Abramson et al. 2010).

*Resilience and Recovery*

The presumed links between resilience and recovery are direct and straightforward: better resilience leads to better recovery (Figure 1). Again, this simple conceptualization corresponds well with our intuition:



Figure 1: Resilience and recovery

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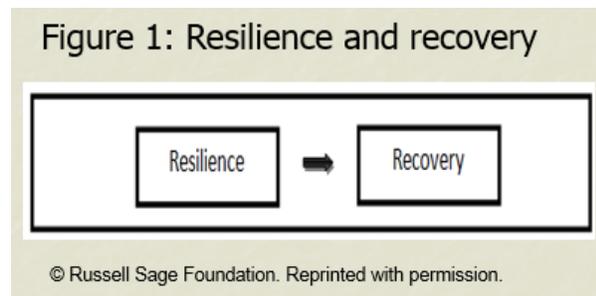
communities that had well-developed adaptive capacities in economic development, social capital, information and communication, and community competence should fare better in a post-disaster context than should communities that were less endowed with these capacities. That is, the more resilient communities should fare better on post-disaster housing stability, economic stability, physical health, mental health, and social role adaptation than should more vulnerable (less resilient) communities.

**Application of Current Frameworks to the Vietnamese American Community in post-Katrina New Orleans**

*Recovery*

On each of the standard measures of post-disaster recovery described above, the Vietnamese community is doing remarkably well. Regarding <u>housing stability</u>, using data that are representative for the city of New Orleans at the time of Katrina and data from a population register of the entire Vietnamese American community in New Orleans taken just a few weeks before the hurricane, we find that the pace of return for Vietnamese Americans to New Orleans outpaced that of either blacks or whites (VanLandingham 2017). Regarding <u>economic stability</u>, two years after Katrina, Vietnamese Americans had only about a third of the unemployment suffered by their non-Vietnamese neighbors living in communities with similar socioeconomic status that had suffered similar levels of flooding (VanLandingham 2017). Regarding <u>physical and mental health</u>, standard health assessments based on the SF-36 show that while both dimensions plummeted for the Vietnamese (and everyone else) during the first year after Katrina, by the second year, levels of physical and mental health had bounced back to their pre-Katrina levels for Vietnamese-Americans (Vu and VanLandingham 2012). Also, Vietnamese Americans showed much lower levels of PTSD than did other groups experiencing Katrina (Norris, VanLandingham et al. 2009). Regarding <u>social role adaptation</u>, post-Katrina community mobilization within the Vietnamese American community has been nothing short of remarkable (VanLandingham 2017).

Was this remarkable recovery due to the fact that the Vietnamese community was more resilient?

*Resilience*

Like many communities, the Vietnamese community in New Orleans exhibits features of both resilience and vulnerability. Economic development is moderate, both within the principal enclave in Eastern New Orleans in the smaller enclaves elsewhere. Compared with immigrants from other countries in Asia, Vietnamese Americans do not fare as well on economic and occupational outcomes (Lee and Zhou 2014). Compared with whites and blacks born in America, Vietnamese immigrants fare worse on measures of health insurance (Smedley, Stith et al. 2002). Social capital is dense and helpful within their ethnic group (Fu and VanLandingham 2010), but outside of it, many Vietnamese Americans are quite isolated from social networks with members of other segments of American society. Similarly, information and communication flows well within the Vietnamese community but less well beyond the ethnic borders. Community competence is difficult to assess, given the vagueness of the term. The Catholic Church provided the training ground for a few leaders who would emerge in Katrina's aftermath, but there is little evidence to suggest that community competence was significantly more developed in the Vietnamese community than in other communities prior to Katrina.

In sum, based on conventional views of community resilience, there really weren't any strong grounds for predicting that the Vietnamese community would recover quickly and well; and yet they did.
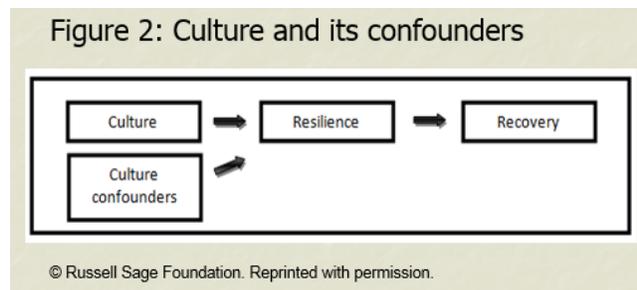
Might something be missing from these conventional views of resilience and recovery?

**The Missing Piece: Culture**

Culture has been omitted from frameworks explaining post-disaster recovery – and from more general frameworks explaining a wide array of other outcomes – for good reason. Culture is both difficult to operationalize and politically fraught.

Many researchers still avoid discussions of culture due to politically-charged debates in the 1960s and 1970s that invoked culture as a mechanism for perpetuating poverty across generations. Many scholars became discouraged from studying the connections between culture and outcomes because they did not wish to be seen as blaming the unfortunate for their own problems. While culture has experienced an academic resurgence of late, this legacy still discourages many social scientists – including disaster researchers - from engaging in a reckoning with cultural influences.

This academic squeamishness is reinforced by echos of these earlier debates in widely-read takes on how culture affects success in the popular press, such as recent books by Amy Chua that lionize the success of some immigrant groups while implicitly disparaging others (Chua 2011, Chua and Rubenfeld 2014) without accounting for confounding influences of class and other sources of privilege. I think of these omitted variables as Culture Confounders (see Figure 2). The omission of these Culture Confounders can make it appear as if culture is solely influencing outcomes (post-disaster recovery in this case) when in fact a host of other



Figure 2: Culture and its confounders

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factors that co-occur with cultural factors are driving much of the differences across groups. Three examples of these Culture Confounders are specific patterns of migration characteristic among some groups that favor families with extensive economic and human capital ("selection"); advantages associated with living in closely-knit ethnic enclaves ("barrio effects"); and social expectations of success among members of the broader society at destination ("stereotype promise") (VanLandingham 2017).

But as implied in Figure 2, I think culture – properly defined and properly delimited – can help explain differentials in post-disaster recovery, too. Most recent definitions of culture contain the following elements: *the specific systems of beliefs, values, and meaning that members of a particular community use to weigh and consider their social world* (Beldo 2010, Alexander, Thompson et al. 2012). Survey researchers have focused on the beliefs and values part of the definition, because these features

are easier to operationalize than is the "meaning" part. Unfortunately, research relying on beliefs and values as leverage for investigating the role of culture on a wide array of outcomes have not seen much success (Steinberg, Brown et al. 1996, Kim 2002). Qualitative research focusing on the "meaning" part of the definition has been more fruitful, focusing on shared narratives about the cultural group's history; which in turn can lead to shared perspectives or frames through which one views the world and a shared sense of symbolic boundaries regarding who is included and excluded within the cultural group (Small, Harding et al. 2010, Clair, Daniel et al. Forthcoming) (Panter-Brick 2015).

**Application of an Expanded Framework to the Vietnamese American Community in post-Katrina New Orleans**

The rapid and robust recovery of the Vietnamese American community after Hurricane Katrina was driven in part by features that appear to be cultural but in fact have little to do with it, *i.e.*, by Culture Confounders. But culture, properly defined and delimited, played an important role, too.

*Culture Confounders*

One set of pre-Katrina advantages that the Vietnamese community had over other communities that have done less well – and that has little to do with culture – is related to what demographers and other social scientists call "selection," which in this case refers to the selective migration to the United States of some of the best and brightest in South Vietnamese society. In the initial exodus, many high- and middle-level government and military officials and their families were evacuated to the United States and settled in places like New Orleans (Stone and McGowan 1980, Strand and Jones 1985, Rutledge 1992, Do 2002, Lipman 2014). This concentration of talent and experience helped in the establishment of ethnic communities that were well-functioning by the time refugees from subsequent waves arrived.

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A second set of advantages that has little to do with culture is the benefits of living in closely-knit ethnic enclaves. Migration scholars refer to these effects as "barrio effects" (Jargowsky 2009). Earlier research on this same Vietnamese community in Eastern New Orleans by Min Zhou and Carl Bankston found that being surrounded by other Vietnamese immigrants helped to facilitate information flows within the community about perils and opportunities with regard to employment, education, and other topics (Zhou and Bankston 1998).

A third set of advantages that has little if anything to do with culture is related to what social scientists call "stereotype promise." Vietnamese enjoy a positive reputation that has been nourished and reinforced by positive portrayals by official spokespersons and in the media since their arrival in 1975 (Lipman 2014, Dao 2015). These positive impressions contributed to a remarkable outpouring of post-Katrina support for the community by foundations, government, and businesses(VanLandingham 2017).

*Cultural Influences on post-Katrina Recovery*

Analysis of various types of qualitative data has also discerned a number of avenues through which cultural elements have facilitated community resilience and post-disaster recovery for the Vietnamese American community. I think of these elements as "Cultural Abutments". One example is a shared narrative of survival. Central elements of this narrative include the exodus of many of the community's elders from North Vietnam to South Vietnam in 1954 to escape anticipated persecution from the new communist government; the subsequent exodus from South Vietnam to the United States after 1975 as their government and society were collapsing; and the subsequent reestablishment of a vigorous and successful community at these new destinations. This narrative of survival helped to put the disruption caused by Hurricane Katrina into perspective and also engendered a kind of collective self-confidence that the community would overcome these new challenges (VanLandingham 2017).

A second example is a shared <u>frame of hierarchy</u>. Traditions of Confucianism and Catholicism reinforce a comfort with hierarchical social relations among Vietnamese Americans. Unlike many other Americans who are more egalitarian in perspective, the Vietnamese were well-positioned to both produce and follow a chain of command after Katrina, which gave them some clear advantages navigating the chaos that ensued (VanLandingham 2017).

**Conclusions**

The especially strong recovery of the Vietnamese American community after Hurricane Katrina was facilitated by resilient features of their community which were in turn buttressed by several sources of community cohesion that are best described as culture. Culture is neglected in most current conceptualizations of pre-disaster resilience and post-disaster recovery because of challenges of operationalization and a legacy of political baggage. This is unfortunate, because an incorporation of cultural influences can help to explain why some communities fare better than others after a disaster, despite suffering similar levels of disaster-related damage and disruption and enjoying similar levels of pre-disaster affluence.

For the Vietnamese American community, elements of culture that facilitated their recovery include shared narratives, such as one that focuses on a history of surviving previous crises. Their strong recovery was also facilitated by shared perspective or frames, such as one that casts social relations as hierarchical. Invoking culture as a panacea is misguided; other advantages were important, too. Non-cultural features that facilitated their strong recovery and that are often confused with culture (Culture Confounders) include an initial wave of immigrants who were especially gifted and talented (selection); some natural advantages that come with being surrounded by co-ethnics (barrio effects); and some predispositions among the non-Vietnamese that made the Vietnamese seem especially worthy of assistance (stereotype promise).

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Understanding what facilitates post-disaster recovery – and clarifying this distinction between influences that are cultural and influences that are not – is important for several reasons. First, such a clear understanding will help to avoid policy recommendations that are misguided and counter-productive. For example, one ill-advised policy recommendation that can arise from a misunderstanding of these mechanisms would advocate for those who are not Vietnamese to become more like them, as if a set of cultural attributes can be adopted at will.  Second, a better understanding of what facilitated the recovery of the Vietnamese American community will help us to better understand why some communities thrive – and others falter – after future disasters.

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