Toward Self Reliant Communities

A Cultural Comparison of Disaster Response in Thailand, Guyana and the United States

Deborah Clark Vance

McDaniel College, Westminster, MD

Abstract

This research provides a cross-cultural look at communication's role in community disaster preparation and recovery. Cultures in three diverse sites were investigated: Individuals and community groups in Thailand's Phuket and Phang-na provinces which experienced a tsunami in December 2004; in eastern Guyana where flooding devastated coastal areas in January 2005; and in New Orleans, Louisiana, where tens of thousands of people were displaced by the winds of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita and the waters that breached levees in fall 2005. Analyzing data from in-depth interviews and focus groups with individuals; members and leaders of faith-based and community organizations; and members and representatives of governmental and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), this study theorizes about the need for community members to strengthen interpersonal and community communication networks as preparation for and survival during disasters.

Keywords: *communication networks, disaster recovery, intercultural communication, individualism-collectivism*

Introduction

Following Hurricanes Katrina and Rita and subsequent flooding in New Orleans during fall 2005, public discourse berated survivors for a perceived incapacity to help themselves, alleging they had waited on rooftops for rescue by government entities. How reasonable were these charges? If accurate, did they exemplify a typical response to disasters? To explore such questions, this research examines ways that individuals acting within local community groups responded to natural disasters in three different situations and across cultures – the aforementioned fall 2005 disasters in New Orleans, the January 2005 flooding in Guyana, and the December 2004 tsunami in Thailand.

When entire communities are devastated, individuals must somehow coordinate with others. For example, many who fled New Orleans' floods could not return because their homes, jobs, neighborhoods – indeed the city's infrastructure – were disrupted. During disasters when governmental systems break down, citizens who expect delivery of services, crucial information and protection of their lives may be disappointed. A group of four researchers explored what happens when official systems collapse during natural disasters in diverse parts of the world. During summer 2006, the team visited devastated areas on three continents to interview survivors, focusing on preparations before the disaster, experiences during and after, and lessons learned about future preparations. We planned to compile methods for material preparations – such as water purification, food supplies, and evacuation – from various cultures. During the research, other cultural questions such as: In disasters, how do individuals perceive themselves vis-à-vis the groups to which they belong; how do they communicate and organize; do they see personal survival dependent on group survival; do theories about cultural tendencies adequately explain how individuals behave when their lives are threatened? As Kreps (1984) says, focusing on devastated areas can provide insight into fundamentals of social organization; looking at such fundamentals cross-culturally should provide a resource of cultural problem-solving.

Research on experiences during disasters has usually focused on psychological trauma, coping, and first response. Not much deals with positive actions of individuals at the grassroots to rebuild communities, but some pertinent literature looks at the importance of social structures.

Literature Review

Humans seem to prefer social stability and tend to conform to social structures (Turner 2006), usually acting, whether individually or collectively, to restore equilibrium during disasters. In times of change, individuals are usually not passive victims of social structures but active users of them, allowing social networks to shape their interactions as they seek new ways to connect (Etzioni 1968; Knoke 1982; Flanigan Stohl & Bimber 2006). While reestablishing systems to secure basic necessities, individuals find that communication networks provide an efficient means of both communication and mobilization. Communication and friendship networks within organizations help mobilize group members: The most acculturated in their social groups are best at motivating, legitimizing, and coordinating others (Knoke 1982) or teaching them how to use the network (Mote 2004). A hierarchy of group interaction development ranges from loosely interacting with other interdependent groups, to coordinating and filling specialized roles, to forming a network under centralized leadership, to showing willingness to serve the group(Swanson 1992). If a group requires help, Bhugra (2006) stresses that it should come from within the community:

> "The kinship-based societies are most likely to accept help only from within kinship and societies because their self (esteem and regard) is bound up in the kinship. Psychological interventions which do not meet these criteria are doomed to failure . the most successful approaches in times of disasters, especially related to psychosocial interventions, are those which build on existing systems" (Bhugra 2006: 197).

Social structures and networks are comprised of individuals who experience autonomy variously among cultures; individualism has been useful in explaining cultural variation in personality, behavior, emotions and subjective well-being (Schimmack Shigehiro & Diener 2005). De Tocqueville who coined the term individualism worried about its effects on social life but suggested that self-promotion could coexist with a personal dedication to the community (Watson & Morris 2002). Hofstede (1980) assisted cultural comparisons by operationalizing constructs. In his pivotal intercultural study of organizational norms, the taxonomy he devised locates behavioral tendencies along a continuum of binary dimensions across cultures. Though Hofstede focused on employees in organizations, researchers have since looked at individualism in a broader cultural context (Schimmacket al. 2005). Individualism emphasizes inherent separateness of persons and features coping strategies like confrontation and use of formal support whereas collectivism stresses interdependence, interconnectedness and responsibility to others and would more likely value seeking help and support from family and friends (Kaysereta.l 2008). Moreover, individualistic cultures value initiating contact with strangers and creating new social relationships (Schimmacket al. 2005).Paradoxically, individualist behavior can result from conformity to salient group norms, especially in cultures that more highly value it and not only tolerate but expect individuals to go their own way (McAuliffe et al. 2003).

Although the concepts of individualism and collectivism (IC) have been used to explore cultural differences in whether the individual was perceived as more salient than the group, the tendency now is to see them as separate rather than bipolar constructs. Triandis (1995) added the constructs of horizontal and vertical to those of IC, placing equality on the horizontal axis correlating with individualism and hierarchy on the vertical to correlate with collectivism (Oyserman et al 2002). Vertical collectivism is defined in terms of respecting parents, elders, and self-sacrifice. Some values seem to be in opposition because freedom of choice can conflict with sacrificing one's own goals for others (Schimmack et al 2005). Kashima et al. (2005) see individualism as a continuum with one pole more greatly emphasizing individual agency than the other, and suggest that collectivism may be more a difference in how cultural members perceive the agency of the individual rather than the group, and that collectivism may be a lesser degree of individualism rather than its conceptual opposite. An individual may be conceived as a collective self, which more accurately explains Asian American life experience and gives a counterpoint

to the prevalent notion of the individualistic self (Ino & Glicken 1999). In collectivist cultures, group norms more strongly guide behavior and the quest for uniqueness or independence is often viewed as immature (McAuliffe et al 2003).

Kashima et al. (2005) introduced new constructs into IC: Essentialism – a social group's unchangeable underlying essence, that is, the extent to which one can enter or quit group membership; agency – carrying out actions and accepting responsibility for them; entiativity – perceiving a group member as an entity capable of responsibility for another member's action. In individualist cultures, the individual is perceived as more entiative than the group. The relative degree of perceived entiativity may differ across cultures: Some social groups are perceived to be more entiative than the individual in east Asian cultures. In one study, U. S. students held an individual responsible more than the group, whereas Hong Kong students blamed the group (Kashima et al 2005). Some constructs (cooperativeness-competitiveness and agency-communion) currently conflated with IC, would be more informative on their own because they correspond to specific aspects of behavior and are more easily operationalized (Voronov & Singer 2002). Schimmack et al. (2005) believe their constructs differed from Hofstede's, saying the dimension of power distance – the extent to which inequality in power, wealth and prestige are accepted as natural – may be a more likely opposite of collectivism than is individualism. Further, Watson and Morris (2002) found a sense of powerlessness correlated with collectivist values.

Religious or spiritual belief may influence an individual's response to a crisis, thus understanding the role of belief systems is essential to developing a comprehensive crisis model (Kayseret al.2008; Stone et al., 2004). Among belief systems, individualism, collectivism and familism comprise ideologies that guide self-perception and predict how individuals will behave in a culture: An individualistic mind-set sees social assistance as a drain on resources; a familistic ideology sees families as ultimately responsible for each other; a collectivistic ideology thinks society should provide for everyone's needs (Killian & Ganong 2002). Although most individuals tend to look outward for social cues, they still have some degree of control over their behavior.

Some disaster research has sought ways to promote coping strategies (Norris et al. 2003). However, individual survivors exist in a broader familial, interpersonal and social context which can shed light on their experiences during disasters (Hobfoll et al. 1995; Landau & Saul 2004). In such a way, religious communities and families provide a continuous presence during major life events and can serve as a buffer in times of crisis (Stone et al 2004). Social network theory, moreover, posits that strong emotional ties provide trustworthy relationships where one regularly shares information and beliefs (Hammond& Glenn 2004). For example, U. S. Americans perceive clergy as trustworthy sources for information and aid during crises (Gardner 2005). Responses to crises exist in relation to larger narratives (Heath 2004) and within a larger belief system. Disasters have a capacity to unite diverse individuals in a cooperative group effort. Some researchers perceive the community during disasters as therapeutic, synthetic or altruistic because inhabitants share values and necessities, agree on priorities, work cooperatively in democratic task groups and with informal leadership, and display a cohesiveness that derives from their collective experience (Nilson 1995). Still, much coping research has been based on Western concepts of adaptation with little consideration of an overarching cultural context. Those affected by disasters universally seek to reestablish normality and self-sufficiency, but what constitutes "normal" varies across cultures; e.g., in India it has meant being equipped with supplies for needs like cooking and clothing (Kayser 2008).

Researchers have examined the balance between individual and community: Chen and Eastman's (1997) notion of civic culture considers persons as members of groups rather than as independent individuals. McAuliffe et al., (2003) suggest that members of dominant social groups see themselves as a collection of unique and autonomous individuals with an individualist social identity. Durkheim argued that a greater sense of community exists where societal members specialize because all depend on each other performing specific roles for the group's success (McAuliffe eta.l2003). Whereas individualistic societies promote individual responsibility for self-sufficiency, the collectivistic culture defines self-sufficiency within an interdependent communal context (Kayseret al. 2008). Even where individualism is salient, a group thrives when its members choose social over personal goals and seek to maintain harmony and where they value collectivist over individualist intragroup behavior (McAuliffe et al. 2003).

Communities contain collective problem-solving networks of trust and reciprocity as do civic organizations where frequent interpersonal interactions occur. Identifying others who share common interest in a public good, communicating messages to them, and coordinating their contributions provide bases for collective action. Such actions can be flexible rather than formal and centralized with identifiable leaders and prescribed roles, and can transcend traditional boundaries and adjust quickly to group needs. Collective action perspectives seek to explain how individuals with some level of shared interests coordinate efforts to secure a common goal that none could obtain alone. Collective action has mostly been studied from the standpoint of utility in economic theories rather than for its communicative nature. Yet, it can be considered a communicative phenomenon because it deals with connecting people with shared interests in a public good, communicating messages to them, and coordinating their behaviors (Flanaginet al. 2006). In collectivistic societies exists an expectation of shared resources for all members of the local community, a sense of responsibility to care for one another, and help-seeking behavior, all of which indicate a high value placed on community connectedness as a foundation for coping with catastrophic events (Kayser et al. 2008).

The literature raises questions regarding the establishment and use of communication networks as well as cultural differences in individual and collective behavior during disasters. These research questions guided this study:

- Following a disaster, how do individuals reconcile their role as independent agent or group member?
- How do interpersonal, community and institutional communication networks interface following a disaster?
- Do disasters alter cultural tendencies in creating and using communication networks?

Procedures

This interpretive study sought to locate the lived experiences of individuals who endured devastation from natural disasters and recovered thereafter. To examine ways individuals had prepared and organized themselves to cope with the aftermath, our research team visited three locations during summer 2006: Phuket and Phang-na provinces in Thailand, devastated in the December 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami; Georgetown, the capital of Guyana, and its surrounding towns and villages on Guyana's east coast which experienced flooding in January 2005; and New Orleans and its environs which suffered through Hurricanes Katrina and Rita and broken levees during fall 2005.

We garnered information from media reports before traveling, leading us to church groups and NGOs, and began with purposive sampling of first responders. Following their leads, we proceeded with a snowball sample among individuals, community groups, and local government officials. Among our respondents were some of the hardest hit residents who had remained in the affected areas: At the time of our research a large number of inhabitants had abandoned New Orleans, and many in Thailand had died. We interviewed 30 individuals in Guyana, 19 in New Orleans, and 14 in Thailand, roughly half male and half female across all sites. Interviews lasted from 30-120 minutes. In Guyana we also held three focus groups among some of the respondents and in New Orleans we held one. Except for several interviews among shopkeepers in Thailand that were translated by a local resident, we conducted interviews there in English; one was with a hearing impaired shopkeeper who could read the lips of our translator and mimed her experience. Each researcher used the same set of semi-structured, open-ended questions focusing on disaster preparation and recovery. Interviews were videotaped.

A phenomenological approach assumes the world is best described via internal states expressed by those who live them, as the researcher focuses on matters important to respondents. It holds that such lived experiences rather than hypothetical situations need to be examined and understood, and studies how individuals express their realities. Moreover it retains respondent subjectivity and shuns the imposition of expectations – researchers are enjoined to bracket their assumptions and biases as they join with respondents to frame experience in ways that make mutual sense (Gubrium& Holstein 1997; Holstein & Gubrium 1994). The interview itself is a social event where interaction between interviewer and

respondents constructs a version of the world; interviewing serves to "generate data which give an authentic insight into people's experiences" which is visible in the language used (Silverman 1993: 90). Interview data can be seen as culturally defined narratives that provide a way to access stories by which individuals describe their world (Silverman 1993; 2005). Such narratives give a framework for organizing and understanding one's view of the world. An interpretive analysis involves combining the narratives from the local cultures with the vocabulary and focus of the researcher to create a mutually shared view of reality (Gubrium & Holstein 1997).

The research team itself was comprised of a white man, a white woman, a Chinese woman, an Afro-Guyanese woman and a Trinidadian woman, all of whom had met as graduate students at Howard University. We spent 7-10 days in each of our targeted sites. Of possible sites hit by the tsunami, we selected Thailand but later found we had overestimated Thai familiarity with English. Besides the language barrier, we found our lack of familiarity with Thai culture and a Thai tendency not to elaborate limited our ability to get as much detail from respondents there as we did in New Orleans and Guyana. Another limitation is that we collected retrospective data, dependent on respondents' memories. Yet, we benefitted because a research team member was Afro-Guyanese with family and friends residing in Guyana, enabling us to attain more emic understandings of local experiences. The hardest hit population of the New Orleans crisis were African-American: Although all the research team were residents of the United States and had followed news reports and discussions about New Orleans, still all were outsiders to that empirical field. We were, however, able to gather information from Chinese residents of New Orleans because of a team member's fluency in Chinese.

Although we planned and gathered data as a team, each researcher performed analyses independently. Upon initially collecting interviews, I coded responses to signal key data to help reduce and focus it. Combining data from field notes and transcripts from video-recorded interviews, data were sorted and resorted using Glaser and Strauss' (1967) constant comparison method to develop a conceptual understanding of respondents' experience. Constant comparison means to assess and compare data fragments in each case (Silverman 2005). The emerging themes could more precisely be described as narrative frames (Gubrium & Holstein 1997) that provided both factual data and their frame of explanation (Silverman 2005). I examined narrative linkages to look at units of meaning in responses to find how respondents assemble meaning (Gubrium & Holstein 1997), using incidents from data to construct and define the properties of a concept (Lindloff 1995). This research was triangulated by using interviews, focus groups and member checks among respondents.

Results

Across all sites, three themes emerged: repairing and using disrupted communication networks, perceiving power distance from official entities, and experiencing themselves as members of a collective. In each site – differing by culture, politics, economics and religion – individuals recounted how they escaped powerful natural forces, what they lost and what their new lives looked like. Each disaster had been an unprecedented event for which no one in any of the localities reported to have been prepared, each involved water that flooded homes and businesses. Also, all informants reported that for a period, the government did not adequately safeguard their personal lives and all had to fashion a response that made sense to them. For clarity's sake, in this section I organize the narratives from each site separately in order to highlight its unique experiences and characteristics.

Phuket Island, Thailand

As the wall of water barreled down the street, residents of Patong, Nang Tong, Pang Ang and Karon beaches on the island reacted by spontaneously running to higher ground. Many had been at home with family with whom they fled but in some cases the water divided them in flight. One recounted how he ran with his wife whose hand slipped from his as she was swept away; Woot ran with his mother and wife, and although he saw his mother get washed away, he simply never saw his wife again. Nisa never saw her husband again. A Vietnamese respondent injured her leg so her children carried her to safety. Once on higher ground, respondents waited in rest stops, in cars, or along the roadside, for periods lasting from a few hours to several days until they heard an all clear. Many looked to relatives for more permanent

shelters: Thanatorn spent a week in his sister's house with nine other people; Aree stayed with an uncle and then his grandmother; Woot received money, food and clothes from a cousin. The most basic communication network was family, but many familial relationships had perished.

The few who were familiar with tsunamis said they never expected one to strike Thailand: A Vietnamese man in Patong Beach who had recognized the strange tide as a tsunami fled without telling anyone for fear he'd be labeled crazy; Jate thought he recognized the warning signs and told his brother who didn't believe him. Others had felt like shaking beds or swaying light fixtures from the initiating earthquake but did not realize what those symptoms foretold.

Defining themselves as "a hospitable people" who typically share and assist each other, respondents noted how they worked among their networks of co-workers and friends to do such things as care for a bleeding man, give rides, help tourists, take the injured to the hospital, donate clothing and other items from their shops, and lend money to relatives. Jate brought medical supplies from his physician uncle and with two European friends, bought wood and nails to build boats for 20 families. Patricia attributed this spirit of helpfulness to the culture's Buddhist teachings and the concept of karma – the more you help, the more help comes to you. In these tourist areas populated at that time with hundreds of foreigners, the underlying networks among shopkeepers, their friends and relatives offered crucial support when official systems were absent. Respondents said that for two days, all levels of government failed to provide water, shelter, food, medical care, electrical service and police protection so community members helped each other – shopkeepers, divers, and hotel employees worked among their own networks. Although police had designated Buddhist temples, hotels, and schools uphill from the beaches as temporary shelters, authoritative voices were not present to announce this. Instead individuals got the news from each other. Eventually the government distributed emergency supplies only to official residents of Phuket and Phang-na provinces. European countries had donated money to Thailand but it had not arrived in Patong by the time we visited two years later. Some informants perceived that the government gave help to their friends and family, and boats to people who didn't need them.

Although the Department of Disaster Mitigation now believes it has a workable system in place, respondents said the warning system had never been tested. They "didn't tell us about the drills, just sounded the alarm." Only one respondent was aware, after the fact, of an evacuation plan, having noticed signs pointing away from vulnerable coastal areas. Most said that news broadcasts failed to warn about the tsunami. Respondents in Phuket saw themselves as what Kashima et al. (2005) would call less agentic: They required information of an official nature to come from the proper authority – including news media – to have credibility. Pramonte, a lifeguard in Patong Beach who witnessed the tsunami, said that despite his experience affording him the expertise to warn people, only the police were authorized to do so. However, official sources often lacked credibility: Though some trusted the news, many distrusted the government.

Respondents generally believed the tsunami to be a unique, divinely ordained event due to karma, had ceased thinking about it, claimed to be neither afraid nor worried, and told their children it wouldn't reoccur. They had not previously worried about preparation because they generally didn't plan for the future but spent earnings soon after payday. However, although Italian diver Adriano thought it was "amazing how people were able to move on," other respondents struggled to find peace. Jate became a monk for four months, some permanently left the beach, whereas others stayed in communities with people who, like themselves, had also lost loved ones. Nine months after the tsunami, PTSD, anxiety and depression rates were still high (Kayser et al 2008,p. 88).

Guyana's East Coast

We interviewed respondents in the east coast communities of Buxton, Friendship, and Plaisance, particularly hard hit by flooding, as well as organizers and members of Red Thread and Women Across Differences in Georgetown, who before the flooding had worked with east coast women on economic and non-violence issues. The area lies in a basin below sea level so houses tended to be built on stilts leaving open space at ground level. Dutch colonists who settled Guyana in the 1600s built a drainage system of canals, ditches and trenches, and a sea wall to reclaim land below sea level, but this drainage infrastructure is deteriorating and Guyana lacks resources to fix it (Montero, 2006). Because of decades of scant rainfall, people had enclosed ground level spaces as living quarters for humans or livestock. With

regard to the possibility of flooding, Andaiye said, "It was like we all put it out of our minds." The flooding occurred when clogged canals were unable to process water which rose up to 15 feet deep, drowning animals trapped in their pens. The floodwater carried detritus from graves, latrines, and dead livestock, creating a toxic brew that killed those who fell in and contracted leptospirosis, a bacterial infection carried by water contaminated with animal urine.

Respondents realized that, despite being deemed a government priority, a widely publicized civil defense plan was non-functioning. No official systems existed either to prevent this unprecedented disaster or to help afterward, a situation Paulette described as, "Everyone was caught with their pants down." After two days of being stranded in their homes without fresh water and electricity, respondents said, "people were frantic," and "it was really terrifying." The government neither declared a state of emergency nor delivered supplies for up to two weeks, and had neither an evacuation plan nor shelters; and although the NGOs had plans, they too were unprepared. Respondents expected the government to have communicated via media, especially radio. NGOs received desperate phone calls across the communities (Fraser, 2006).

Communities and political parties in Guyana are split along racial lines. Since the 1960s when Afro-Guyanese had elected Communists, the United States has supported the Indo-Guyanese who took power. The racial divide extends to religion as well, with an Indo-Guyanese Muslim population and an Afro-Guyanese Christian population, whose relations are poisoned by high levels of distrust. After the flood, the two groups accused each other of receiving preferential assistance while believing their own group had been treated unfairly. Indeed, the U.S. State Department warns tourists to avoid Buxton where some bore such resentment toward the government that they had resorted to political kidnappings and criminal activities bordering on terrorist tactics.

Buxton residents worried about the safety of their homes should they evacuate, which factored into their decisions. Afro-Guyanese squatters inhabit Buxton, where the government had encouraged settlement but provided inadequate infrastructure. Respondents there noted that although the official response after the flood had been to fix the dam, there was chronic need for preventative maintenance to keep drains from clogging by freeing waterways of garbage and weeding mucka-mucka plants. Some saw the responsibility for this as that of local government, paid for by their taxes. Paulette said,

> *"One of the biggest problems is…how we deal with garbage. A lot of the flooding had to deal with the fact that things were blocked…I don't think enough work has been done to help people to understand how our system of drainage works and what is required by whom to ensure that the system works efficiently."*

Randolph, Buxton's mayor, said those who lament about clogged canals are the ones creating the problem. The government had hung educational posters informing about keeping the canals clean: Some respondents said they had wanted more information about this but didn't know where to get it.

Many complained that help was not distributed fairly: accusations were hurled about officials, aid groups and even churches of helping their own, helping those who weren't in need, and being incompetent. Andaiye of Red Thread said that women "were bitterly sarcastic about the ways in which the religious organizations dealt with the flood." Red Thread members said they "put on a turban and Muslims would help you." Randolph said relief had been unfair and people received the same check despite the magnitude of their losses.

Despite anger and cynicism toward government and religious institutions, respondents displayed a stubborn reliance on assistance from such sources and were less aware of help provided by local networks, several of which had organized in their communities. A Buxton woman named Colonel had previously organized anti-violence work with Women Across Differences which led her to obtain street lights for her town. After the flood, she participated through her network to move children to higher ground. The international relief agency Oxfam inspired Colonel to rally community leaders and stakeholders, including Paulette who headed an interfaith disaster relief committee that received contributions from Guyanese emigrants in North America, some of whom were "poor as church rats."

This group organized kitchens to cook for the neighborhood. In nearby Plaisance, another family distributed food hampers and cleaning suppliesdonated by a friend from their religious community who owned a general store in Georgetown.

The local networks, however, had not reached far enough to quell all chaos. Red Cross officials bemoaned east coast communities where rioting disrupted their food distribution efforts as boys in the front of the line pushed away othersand took food to sell at the end of the line. Buxtonians criticized individuals who competed for aid when it finally appeared, and boys who looted boots from supply trucks. They lamented that such people treated the disaster as a money-making opportunity, charging fees for rides in rickety boats fashioned out of refrigerator doors to carry neighbors as a sole means of transportation for about two months after the flood. Fredericka said, "Refrigerator boats were the order of the day."

New Orleans

As Endasha said, "Hurricanes equal snow. No one panics." People had prepared for the hurricane as usual, but not for flooding from broken levees. A respondent in St. Bernard Parish said the disaster had been predictable but the government had spent money on projects other than levees. The evacuation order included no provisions to help people stranded by the flood. Residents lived without running water or power for a week and without fresh food for over two days in most areas, relying on any bottled and canned provisions. Cell and local phone services failed. Vulnerable populations were hard hit: Many elderly who feel safe in their homes had refused to leave; many poor were immobilized by a lack of access to transportation; a large population of deaf people remained ignorant of events because live news broadcasts didn't include closed captioning; those who wouldn't abandon pets were stuck when rescue workers refused to take them. Some residents who had experienced false alarms or looting during previous evacuations opted to stay during Katrina. To critics who blamed residents for not evacuating, Sarah said, "How do you tell a town some place else you're bringing 20 thousand people?"

The failure of federal, state and local governments to effectively respond led to a near fatal collapse of the city of New Orleans. Organized strategies for aid and recovery came mostly from volunteer groups who operated within community networks: Interfaith and religious groups and a coalition of public housing residents coordinated food and organized evacuation for their members and others, and helped evacuees return to their homes. (At the time of our visit, the public housing respondents were living in a makeshift camp on the street, having been locked outside their communities.) For the first five days in St. Bernard Parish, individuals organized caravans of cabin cruisers which they "appropriated from people unknown" in the now vacated, affluent Lakeview community. Lynette said in her neighborhood, neighbors and families helped and the church had identified those who needed help. "Everyone in our neighborhood assisted everyone and we worked on our own homes and picked up branches and fixed fences and worked together checking on everyone." Further, a Chinese Baptist minister networked with sister congregations in other areas to pair welcoming homes with evacuating families. Steve said, "The pastor knows who to help and what city to go to." At the Convention Center which was used as emergency shelter, medical and mental health practitioners volunteered professional assistance.

Respondents indicated the Vietnamese community as having a particularly well-coordinated network. As Father V. said, Vietnamese culture has mastered disaster preparedness and evacuation and that theirs was "a community, not a group of neighborhoods" where a church hierarchy was led by himself, a trustworthy source in the community. He asserted that because of this hierarchy, "in crises, it's easier to communicate. Everyone knows who they need to listen to." Father V. had summoned all 300-some members of the local community to the church for a month, bringing their food which was pooled and rationed. The community benefited from his strong leadership, but also the chain of command within the Catholic Church community allowed messages to filter from priest to block captains who carried out his plans.

Some religious and volunteer organizations had made preparations ahead of time. Members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS) operated a cannery near New Orleans that served meals and distributed supplies. An interfaith group in Lafayette that had emerged after a previous hurricane coordinated the donations pouring in from around the country, cared for evacuees in emergency shelters and prepared several thousand meals before the Red Cross arrived. Father V. had arranged with sister congregations in Texas to take in his entire community, however, residents heeded the order to evacuate to the Convention Center, leaving Father V. to care for a stroke victim dependent on a machine

powered by the church's generator. Fearing that the Vietnamese-speaking elders might get lost, he advised his congregation to only leave the Convention Center as a group. Discovering they could not so do, they returned to the church and proceeded to help each other clean and move back into their homes. Father V. then assured the utility company that the homes were re-inhabited, so power was reconnected, all within a matter of weeks, whereas entire neighborhoods still lay vacant at the time of our trip. Further, the Chinese Baptists had provided members contact information of out-of-state sister congregations from whom they could and did request assistance.

Respondents had expected help from government, including earlier and more serious warnings, and thought the news media should have stressed the severity of Katrina. They also had expected authorities to direct the recovery and coordinate it at the local level. However, the government and NGOs were absent.

Discussion

A key finding in this study is that communities fared better where, before the disaster, members knew each other, had collaborated and had a clear community structure whose leadership they recognized and trusted. Interpersonal and community communication networks contain relationships with emotional ties: Across cultures, individuals reached out to family, friends, neighbors and co-workers. Although respondents hadn't recognized these interpersonal and community connections as comprising communication networks, nevertheless they eventually used them: The interfaith group, Vietnamese Catholics, Chinese Baptists, and public housing cooperative in New Orleans; Women Across Differences, Red Thread and the interfaith group in Guyana; divers and shopkeepers in Phuket all used existing channels to facilitate evacuation and recovery.

Several theories provide a framework for understanding these dynamics. Heath's (2004) assertion that disasters exist in a larger narrative was evident at each site which experienced its particular relationship to institutions, and where individuals viewed the world through their particular cultural lens. Also, Chen and Eastman's (1997) civic culture theory, which suggests that individuals be seen as parts of groups, helps understand how to prepare individuals and institutions to respond to disasters. Across all cultures, although respondents understood disasters in the context of social, political, economic and racial conditions specific to their culture, the sites also shared commonalities, the examination of which can help answer the research questions. Each area contained interpersonal and community communication networks that residents used to restore community life, whereas interfacing with institutional communication networks was initially absent. Moreover, the disasters served as a leveler that made individualistic behavior a self-defeating strategy. Although in New Orleans many residents had the option of saving themselves by evacuation, in Guyana and Phuket, evacuation hadn't been an option and people were left struggling with survival. The site exhibiting the most individualism was Buxton where some individuals exploited the devastation for personal gain.

The disasters exacerbated social and structural weaknesses but also exposed strengths in community members' ability to reconnect and use existing interpersonal and community networks. But reestablishing such networks necessitates that community members know of their existence, usefulness and power. Respondents at all sites noted a breakdown in official networks and wasted time awaiting rescue from authorities: The sooner they recognized the inadequacy of government response, the quicker they tapped into the unforeseen resources of existing interpersonal and community communication networks. According to social network theory (Hammond and Glenn, 2004), the trust that comes from strong emotional ties is crucial to creating communication networks that can be used during disasters. Respondents expressed anger toward governments and NGOs who had appeared biased and incompetent, largely because of their slow response at interfacing with interpersonal and community networks. Because Guyanese political parties split along racial lines, the bitter partisanship created a disunity that hindered disaster response, for instance, by causing Afro-Guyanese respondents to distrust official information once it became available. In Phuket, a barrier to effective response was a social hierarchy wherein a lifeguard, a fisherman, or a diver with expert knowledge of the sea lacked credibility because of their low social status which positioned them outside a mainstream of information flow. On the other hand, strong emotional ties enabled communication with Father V. who was part of and thus close to the

community. His authority – and a chain of command – was clear among his parishioners who were inspired to follow him, confident in his trustworthiness.

Kashima et al.'s (2005) discussion about agency and entiativity as variables in individualism and collectivism help explain some variations in response. Local communication networks based on pre-existing interpersonal relationships among the sites differed primarily in how members self-perceived their agency and entiativity. On Phuket Island, respondents had used existing communication networks but didn't seem to notice or value them: Indeed, members of the lower social class seemed unaware they comprised a local community with common goals and interests. On Guyana's east coast, respondents valued networks but because they so heartily resented the lack of official response, they didn't value them enough, which may be why they expressed the most distress and confusion about who should rescue them. In New Orleans, respondents pointed with pride to their strong community communication networks; they seemed to be the most agentic and entiative among the sites. Among the sites existed some shifting and ambiguous notions about where one's collective allegiance belonged, but most loyalties stayed close to home. Phuket respondents described networking with family and coworkers but also with tourists, whereas they distrusted a government they deemed unresponsive, incompetent, and distant, accusing it of hoarding aid money and abusing immigrants. The Afro-Guyanese saw themselves as victims of oppression, especially from the government – which to them meant the Indo-Guyanese – and believed the canal and pumping system failed because of government corruption. Respondents in New Orleans communities were aware of the government's lack of responsiveness but reported working together successfully without government aid and despite some police hostility. They expressed pride in their autonomy and self-reliance, spoke with affection for their city and neighbors, and saw these traits as intrinsic to their groups. Because of different cultural narratives, they may be more attuned to their agentic role as citizens than the Thai and Guyanese respondents. Agency proved to be a helpful cultural tendency where it existed before the disasters.

Paradoxically, in order for a collective action like communication networking to function, individuals must take initiative. To create successful communication networks, perhaps the necessary component for survival is individuals' willingness to cooperate, oftentimes inspired by personal emotional ties. Pre-flood organized efforts among Buxtonian women who had formed ties of mutual respect and trust within their support groups and churches impressed upon them a need to act. Paulette who had moved outside Buxton, loved the town and her friends there, which propelled her to spark an interfaith group to organize meal preparation. Families in Plaisance were motivated by friendship to collaborate in collecting and distributing cleaning supplies. Divers in Phuket knew and trusted each other and collaborated in rescue and recovery. Thus interpersonal networks interfaced with community ones. These groups not only give their members focus but also embody voices that can be trusted because they had proven themselves at other times. Similar successful behavior occurred following floods in May 2011, when an interfaith community in Memphis, Tennessee, providing disaster relief by giving shelter and food, medical care, transportation and clothing to flood victims. This group had assisted Katrina survivors and continued their work, developing a strategic framework and securing an agreement with FEMA (Schaper, 2011). During their respective disasters, respondents benefited from having trusted community leaders; this facilitated communication, and being among familiar faces facilitated recovery. Further, dealing with institutions seemed to grow from prior interpersonal relationships between individuals and members of those institutions. However, many individuals who took on leadership roles in helping their groups did so from a sense of affection and altruism toward the group.

Most would agree that families should stay together during disasters, but what about entire communities? If using existing communication networks helps individuals during disasters, then it can be inferred that maintaining and strengthening these networks is optimal preparation for disasters. As Etzioni (1968) says, "Many communities can discharge many social missions because they know their members personally" (p. 8). An ideal structure for disaster preparation would blend characteristics of collectivism and individualism. Personal preparedness should be considered in the context of community. In the situations observed in this study, the best prepared were those who worked within networks of mutual assistance and cooperation: Even the LDS, typically well-prepared individually for disasters, relied on each other – when a bishop's food supply was flooded, he depended on others' supplies. Working in social networks helps disaster survivors because such networks contain awareness about members' needs and how to meet them. Those who know their neighbors can identify talents and designate leaders as well as signal the

vulnerable – the deaf, disabled, sick, elderly, and infants as well as individuals with little connection to the community who may be isolated by desire or disabilities. The interfaith group in New Orleans looked for deaf-blind populations. Surely such individuals belonged to a community that, like Father V., might have been able to prevent their becoming lost in the evacuation.

Thus the most important safeguard against disasters is a community – whether neighborhood, religious, work or social – where individuals know each other, including whom they can trust and to whom they should listen. Among the provisions for disaster preparation and recovery should be an inventory of informal, interpersonal communication networks. Insiders rather than socially distant governmental bodies should create detailed community maps: Communities and groups should create and maintain contact with their individual members, and identify community members with expertise, like doctors and nurses. Relief agencies should coordinate with disaster communities' preparation plans so that if they intervene, they can identify, support and assist rather than disrupt existing communication networks.

Conclusion

Existing interpersonal and community communication networks should be recognized as conduits for disaster recovery. Guided by insights gleaned from literature about individualism, collectivism and communication networks, this study seeks to fill a gap in disaster recovery research which has focused on psychology and social systems but not adequately addressed interpersonal networking or relationship formation and maintenance. A disaster response theory grounded in the data holds that individuals who use existing communication networks fare better during and after disasters. Moreover, they canplay important roles in disaster recovery by taking initiative to organize and help others recognize and use existing communication networks and coordinate with institutions which correspondingly should strengthen relationships with individuals during normal times so that feelings of trust exist during stressful ones. Future researchers might look at the organic nature of communication's role in community building, particularly in areas with limited resources. One problem a government agency or NGO might address is what to do when community networks exclude outsiders.

This study hopes to contribute to knowledge useful at the grassroots by offering guidelines for disaster preparation and recovery. It also seeks to remind policymakers to respect the strength and wisdom of existing communication networks and to remind researchers that communication is organic and cannot be entirely managed with top-down approaches. Building strong, self-reliant communities, whose members know each other, know each other's needs and are aware of existing communication networks, looks like an optimum defense against disasters.

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About the Author

Deborah Clark Vance, Ph.D., is associate professor in and chair of the Dept. of Communication and Cinema at McDaniel College where she teaches courses in intercultural communication, gender in communication and qualitative research procedures as well as courses on media and culture. She earned her Ph. D. in Intercultural Communication at Howard University and her undergraduate degree in Communication with an emphasis on media at Northwestern University. Her research interests include how individuals create and circulate cultural meaning, whether face-to-face or mediated, particularly within their perceived group boundaries.

Author's Address

Deborah Clark Vance, Ph. D.
Associate Prof. and Chair, Dept. of Communication
McDaniel College
Westminster, MD
Tel. (410)-386-4688
E-mail: dvance@mcdaniel.edu; dcvance@comcast.net