

# An Introduction to the Special Issue: Identification and Applications of Lessons Learned by the Tulane University Community

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This is an introduction to a very special set of essays that incorporate a form of oral history and multidisciplinary analysis. The essays are written by members of the Tulane University Community. They share the lessons learned from the catastrophe caused by Hurricane Katrina that closed down Tulane University and devastated its hometown of New Orleans when the levee system failed. The essays also represent a scholarly tradition of oral history, a field of study and a method of gathering, preserving, and interpreting the voices and memories of people, communities, and participants in past events. According to the Oral History Association, oral history is both the oldest type of historical inquiry, predating the written word, and one of the most modern in the use of various technologies.

## Trauma on a University Campus

The Tulane Community shares a level of awareness about the immediate and long-term effects of disasters like few other universities anywhere. One other example of a university affected by disaster is Virginia Tech in Blacksburg, Virginia. On April 16, 2007, Seung-Hui Cho killed 32 people and committed suicide. This massacre remains the deadliest shooting incident by a single gunman in U.S. history, on or off a school campus. On the anniversary of that tragedy, this journal published a special issue, coedited by the editor and a prominent Virginia Tech psychology professor, Dr. Russell Jones. The issue contained a set of essays by Virginia Tech faculty and graduate students that focused on what they experienced and the lessons learned from the perspective of their areas of expertise. These areas included computer science, psychology, agronomy,

sociology, and others. The issue provided a lasting legacy to this tragedy and a wake-up call for other campuses equally vulnerable to such incidents. More important, it provides useful lessons and models for university communities that find itself in the grips of such a crisis and requiring actions, both short and long term, that are in the best interests of its most vulnerable members, especially undergraduate students. So it is with this special issue.

## Background

Before discussing the purpose, structure, function, and content of this special issue focusing on the lessons learned from Hurricane Katrina, it is important to provide some background information about the storm and subsequent levee failure.

Forty minutes after midnight, Sunday, August 28, 2005 in New Orleans Hurricane Katrina reached Category 4 intensity with 145-mph (233 km/h) winds. Seven hours later, Hurricane Katrina was declared a Category 5 storm, with maximum sustained winds of 175 mph (281 km/h), gusts up to 215 mph (346 km/h), and a central pressure of 902 mbar. Three hours later, the National Weather Service (2005) issued a bulletin predicting "devastating" damage. By the time it reached Louisiana's shore (near Buras-Triumph) and in the costal parishes of St. Bernard and St. Tammany, the storm intensity had lowered to a Category 3 and swept across southern Louisiana and New Orleans. By 08:00 a.m. water was seen rising on both sides of the Industrial Canal in New Orleans and a flash flood warning was issued minutes later by the National Weather Service and advised people to move to higher ground immediately. By then it was too late.

By 09:00 a.m. there was 6 to 8 feet of water in the Lower Ninth Ward of New Orleans and by 11 am there was approximately 10 feet of water in St. Bernard parish. By 02:00 pm, New Orleans officials confirmed a breach in the 17th Street Canal levee and two others. This pattern of levee breaching and flooding most of New Orleans continued and the water remained for weeks. This accounts for most of the damage in the city, including Tulane University's uptown campus and its health sciences complex downtown.

Obviously, the Tulane Community was shaken by this experience and continues to be affected by it in some ways as the third anniversary of this horrific disaster is past. Official reports from the university have emerged discussing the institutional lessons learned regarding evacuation decisions and plans, for example. However, there was no record of the lessons learned by members of the Tulane Community, the faculty in particular, that might be useful for faculty in other universities recovering from similar catastrophes. Like the journal's special issue by faculty at the Virginia Tech University in the wake of the April 16, 2007 shootings (Figley & Jones, 2007), perhaps a similar set of faculty essays would contribute to an emerging analysis of university community responses to disasters.

Therefore, early in 2008 the authors met to design a special issue with a focus similar to the one by members of the Virginia Tech faculty. The first step was to contact members of the Tulane Community who may wish to contribute. The next was to assemble a cadre of experts who could review these submissions, blind to authorship, with a degree of sensitivity to academics from a wide variety of fields that mix both personal and professional discussions.

We sent invitations by email to select members of the Tulane faculty and administration to submit a manuscript. We explained that their article would go through the same review process as other submissions to the journal (peer review, blind to authorship) using the journal's automated, Web-based manuscript management system. There was no guarantee that their submission would be accepted. The faculty was asked to follow a general outline that included information about their own personal experiences and reactions and ended with lessons learned through the lenses of their field.

## Special Issue Content

From our efforts, 11 articles emerged from the peer review process and appear in this special issue. Each of these scholarly articles addresses three interrelated questions: (1) How did the storm affect you and your work? (2) What did you do to respond to this trauma both personally and professionally? (3) What have you learned after 3 years that is informed by your area of specialization that might be useful to other communities vulnerable to such trauma?

The first article in the special issue, "Life Lessons From Inside the Storm," is written by Scott S. Cowen, the President of Tulane University. Dr. Cowen was appointed Tulane University's president in 1998 and holds appointments both as the Seymour S. Goodman Memorial Professor of Business at Tulane's A. B. Freeman School of Business, and Professor of Economics in the School of Arts and Sciences. He is widely viewed—by faculty, staff, students, parents, alumni, sister university communities, and the media—as a hero because of his leadership in responding to and recovering from Hurricane Katrina and the collapse of the levee system in New Orleans. First, he closed the university August 28, 2005, in time to escape being trapped in the city. Then he declared that everyone on payroll will remain so. Then he worked tirelessly to make a miracle happen: opening the university the next semester to the great relief of thousands inside and outside the university community. He has received numerous awards that recognize his leadership, including but not limited to his responses to Katrina. He notes in his essay how Tulane, like other institutions in New Orleans, was overwhelmed by the storm. He provides a picture of the situation on the ground as the crisis unfolded and the actions taken by his leadership team, temporarily headquartered in Houston, to both reassure and retain contact with the widely dispersed students, staff, and faculty. The campus was repaired and 87% of its students returned for classes in January 2006.

The second article, "Canoeing Home: A Personal and Professional Journey Through Murky Waters," written by the Ron Marks, dean of the Tulane School of Social Work and coeditor of this issue, tells of the integration of profound personal and professional experiences that began with the storm and continue to this day. A central thrust of this story is to convey to the audience the impact and significance of this disaster on both the individual and

community level and the hundreds of thousands of individuals affected by it. In this article, we travel with Dean Marks as he struggles to find the school's faculty and staff and communicate with the student body in the days immediately following the levee breaches. He writes,

On a personal level, in the early days following the storm, it was as if we had the uncanny opportunity to peer across an empty coffin with our name on it and see the quantity and quality of the flowers that were sent to our funeral by the people who care about us. One of the most profound aspects to this as I think back on those early days is to remember the friends and family who worried about their loved ones and who went to great lengths to find them and hear that they were alright.

Throughout this piece, we have the opportunity to enter a world turned upside down and, in part, to peer into a deeply private space. The lessons expressed in this article are, indeed, both personal and professional and, in the telling, Dr. Marks makes the point that often they are inseparable. We learn that it is easy to arrive somewhere, but hard to enter.

The third article, "The Aftermath of Hurricane Katrina: A Trauma Researcher's Perspective," is written by Jennifer Vasterling. Dr. Vasterling is a clinical neuropsychologist and one of the leading authorities on posttraumatic stress disorder, particularly understanding of the cognitive and emotional changes that accompany war-zone deployment. When Hurricane Katrina hit Tulane, Dr. Vasterling held the appointment of Clinical Associate Professor of Psychiatry and Neurology at the Tulane Medical School and the leadership position of the Associate Director for Research for the South Central MIRECC (Mental Illness Research, Education, and Clinical Center), Veterans Administration Medical Center. Because of the upheaval caused by the storm—both personal and professional—Dr. Vasterling eventually moved to Boston as Chief of Psychology at the VA's Boston Healthcare System and as a leading clinical investigator within the Behavioral Sciences Division of the National Center for Posttraumatic Stress Disorder. In her essay, she notes the ways in which Hurricane Katrina affected the New Orleans community and how the impact of the storm has evolved over time. She describes her experiences within a longitudinal framework, followed by a discussion of the contextual factors that alternately challenged or facilitated recovery as a native of New Orleans where her

family has lived for more than 200 years. She begins her story with the evacuation of her family, 10-year-old daughter, husband, pet guinea pig, and herself. Throughout her story, she was able to draw on her field of neuropsychology to place evacuation reactions in a scientific context. The latter portion of her article discusses the lessons learned where she first addresses the relationship between the storm and the prevalence of posttraumatic stress disorder. She notes the scope and trajectory of stress-related responses and the value of social and institutional networks.

The fourth article, "Scarred but Smarter: Personal and Professional Lessons Learned From Surviving a Hurricane," is by Fred Buttell. Dr. Buttell is the Director of Elizabeth Wisner Center for Research on Children and Families and an associate professor of social work at Tulane University. He is one of the leading experts on the social psychology of violence with special attention to male batterers and their treatment. He begins his essay with a description of the events leading up to the storm; how he was away giving a series of lectures at the University of Alabama when he received a call from his wife instructing him to reserve another hotel room. She was to bring their children and her grandfather to Tuscaloosa to escape the impending storm. Like other evacuees from New Orleans, their initial relief that Hurricane Katrina might have spared the city, was replaced by terrible realizations:

Then, however, things got interesting as the levees broke and we watched the water begin to rise. It was at this moment in time that we had our mutual epiphany, which, if you eliminate the expletives, loosely translates as "OH MY GOD", and realized we were going to have to make some longer term plans to stay gone for awhile.

Dr. Buttell fortunately had an older sister with a small condo near Mobile, Alabama that was vacant and provided a place to stay during their months as evacuees. Though deadly serious, his descriptions of life away from New Orleans are extremely funny and easy to read. That latter section, however, draws from his areas of expertise. He first discusses the aftereffects of the disaster on the New Orleans domestic violence service provisions (law enforcement, court system, social service agencies, and victim service programs). During this discussion, he addresses the lessons learned and points out that the destruction of Katrina provides New Orleans with an opportunity to rethink and reinvent the content

and delivery of domestic violence services that were not possible prior to the storm.

The fifth article, “A Student Social Worker’s Reflection of the Self and Professional Identity Following the Impact of Hurricane Katrina on New Orleans,” is by Ellen Boyer. Ms. Boyer is now a practicing social worker in New Orleans but was a graduate student at Tulane at the time Katrina hit. She survived living in New York City during the September 11, 2001 terrorist attack and relates her experiences there with those of the storm. Boyer’s identity while in New York was a journalist. She was employed at *Gourmet Magazine* as a writer and editor. However, due to her experiences during and following 9/11 she decided to become a social worker and “advocate for those rendered voiceless through injustice.” She was forced to evacuate only months before her graduation with a Masters of Social Work. She evacuated not far from New Orleans and volunteered with the Red Cross. She describes how hard it was accompanying New Orleans residents going back to see their home for the first time. The devastation of the neighborhoods was far more upsetting for her clients and herself, than any amount of damage to one’s own home. At the end of her essay, she draws parallels between the phases experienced by concentration camp prisoners explicated in Victor Frankl’s *Man’s Search for Meaning*. The final period is postcamp life that requires adjustment to the reality of living and finding meaning in life again. Boyer notes that she is very fortunate to have a professional sense of self that is thriving and liberating in part due to her two traumatic experiences and making a difference in the post-Katrina New Orleans as a social worker.

The next article, “From 9/11 to Hurricane Katrina: Helping Others and Oneself Cope Following Disasters,” is written by Lynn Renee Schechter. Dr. Schechter received her PhD in psychology at Columbia University. Like the previous author, Ellen Boyer, Dr. Schechter was in New York during the 9/11 attack. She was completing her PhD in psychology at Columbia and was on her way to the Albert Einstein College of Medicine clinic where she worked. She discusses her experiences with that disaster and how she volunteered to provide counseling services to the survivors. One question she had, which still remains unanswered, is the following: And who’s to say what is more helpful to fellow survivors: Relating on a professional or a basic human level? She emphasizes the extraordinary conditions

counselors face in providing crisis services immediately following a disaster and the lessons she learned from doing so. The latter portion of her essay focuses on Katrina and New Orleans where she moved in 2002 with her husband and young child. She describes the evacuation from their home with only enough supplies for a few days and ended up staying at a shelter in a tiny Baptist church in Chopin, Louisiana. In contrast to other authors who wrote for this special issue, Dr. Schechter and her family went home after the storm and experienced the effects of the levee breaches firsthand. She discusses the lessons learned from this latter crisis in light of her earlier experiences with the former one (9/11). One of the lessons of special note is her observation that the suffering of colleagues took its toll because psychologists not only lose their practice—in patients and offices—but they also had to counsel clients whose loss sometimes was less than their therapist’s.

The seventh article is “Denial of Hurricane Risks: Reflections of an Addictions Researcher.” It was written by Dr. Richard D. Ager, an associate professor in the Graduate School of Social Work at Tulane and an expert in substance abuse and its treatment. Dr. Ager’s major areas of interest and research expertise are substance abuse, treatment outcome, and teaching/training counselors and students in evidence-based practices. Ager developed a postgraduate educational program called the Certificate Program in Addiction Studies. He is also experienced in developing grassroots substance abuse programs in the inner city. Ager’s current research interest focuses on adapting an evidence-based practice employed in substance abuse to intimate partner violence. Early in the article, he describes his personal experiences with the storm starting with his orientation to hurricanes and evaluations during his 12 years living in New Orleans prior to Katrina. The ongoing theme of his article is denial; how denial is managing the fear of change, including evacuating when the time was right. As stated in the title of his article, he applies his knowledge of denial among substance abusers to assessing hurricane risks of not only those who lived in New Orleans and worked at Tulane University, but also news reporters who covered the disaster. In the latter section of his article, Ager offers three suggestions that are interrelated and draw from his expertise and personal experiences: (1) reduce the denial of the denial, (2) develop new strategies that target those in denial, and (3) heighten efforts when the target group is particularly susceptible to change.

The next article is “Reflections From the Field: On the Road to Recovery” is by Judith S. Lewis and Heather Gillis. Dr. Lewis is an associate professor and Director of Field Education and Coordinator of Student Affairs. Her research interests and activities center around campus and community violence prevention, social justice models for clinical/community practice, resilience in older adults, and integration of field and curriculum. Heather Lewis is Clinical Assistant Professor, Assistant Director of Field Education and Coordinator of Tulane School of Social Work’s Community Service/Federal Work Study Program. In their essay, they related their experiences of response and recovery from the trauma and aftermath of Hurricane Katrina—from a personal and professional perspective. Our personal experiences were intertwined as well as uniquely individual. Professionally, this disaster affected our orientation to work and our ways of finding new paths for helping our students continue their learning and recovery. They discuss specific efforts to complete meaningful work during the crisis including helping masters in social work students scattered throughout the United States and beyond. In the latter portion of their article, they offer several lessons based on their collective experiences and knowledge of social work education: (1) share personal experiences in the wake of the storm to enhance learning and preparation; (2) recognize that social workers have an ethical mandate to respond to disasters with their communities, which includes their academic units and the fields they represent; (3) have easy access to complete lists of all faculty, staff, and students and be sure that more than one person has access to this information; (4) designate primary and secondary point persons with thorough knowledge of the curriculum so that advising with students can be done to connect them quickly with other schools to continue their studies; (5) have the ability to offer every course online, through the Web, and be prepared to offer courses in nontraditional ways; (6) a school dean can communicate quickly with the National Network of Deans and Directors to report the situation and clearly communicate what help may be needed; and (7) develop a national and international network with point persons from every school to quickly relay information about disaster-related events and needs.

The ninth article, “Leaving New Orleans, Again,” is written by Elizabeth Fussell. Dr. Fussell is an assistant professor at Washington State University. Professor Fussell joined the Tulane faculty in Fall

2001 and departed for Washington State in 2007. She has two main areas of research: international migration, specifically from Mexico to the United States, and the transition to adulthood from a demographic perspective. Fussell’s research in international migration focuses on migration from the northern border region of Mexico, where free trade and proximity to the Mexico–U.S. border have shaped the dynamics of migration, and the process of cumulative causation of migration from different types of places within Mexico and in other countries in Latin America. More recently, she has begun interviewing Latino migrants who have arrived in New Orleans since Hurricane Katrina. In her article, she relates that early on how she and her family were forced to evacuate to Baton Rouge, endure power outages and her Tulane email service going offline for months. She draws from an earlier article (Fussell, 2006). Eventually, she and her husband volunteered at the Red Cross shelter at the River Center in Baton Rouge. They returned to New Orleans in January 2006 to find a city in a state of shock and shared loss and suffering, but in a sense of unity. Because of these and other pressures they found jobs at the Washington State University 2 years after Katrina. Among the lessons learned was that being an untenured assistant professor, in addition to the stressors of a disaster create considerable vulnerability. Also, setting boundaries separating home and work life is critical. Finally, disasters can lead to important opportunities for scholarship, especially for social scientists, as long as they maintain sufficient objectivity in their work.

The penultimate article, “Pompeii on the Mississippi: The View From New Orleans,” is written by Susann Lusnia. Professor Lusnia is an associate professor in the Department of Classical Studies at Tulane University and offers courses in the ancient languages (Latin, Greek, and Hebrew), the fields of Greek, Roman, and Near Eastern archaeology, ancient history, ancient religion (Greek, Roman, ancient Judaism, and early Christianity), and ancient culture in general. Her current research and teaching interests include archaeology of Italy and the Roman Empire; Roman material culture and civilization; politics and propaganda in art and architecture; urban topography and monuments of Rome; and monumentality in ancient art and architecture. In her article, Dr. Lusnia discusses that Hurricane Katrina’s landfall on August 29, 2005 has had a profound affect on the lives of everyone living in coastal

Louisiana and Mississippi. Leaving behind a vast swath of destruction and many dead, the storm has reshaped lives, careers, and perspectives. This article is largely a personal statement about her own experience of teaching a course on Pompeii in post-Katrina New Orleans. Prior to the storm she had taught a course on the material culture and lives of the Romans at Pompeii. Her course changed significantly in the spring of 2006 as Tulane reopened following the clean up from Katrina that closed its doors. She began to include the lessons one might gain from understanding Pompeii and other past disasters, which is reflected in her article. She notes that the Katrina experience has led her to think “less about how Pompeii informs and influences our view of post-disaster New Orleans and more about how our own experiences in New Orleans might change our view of Pompeii.” This is reflected in the lessons she offers that are applicable to both contexts. Among other things, she notes,

I began to ask different questions about the Vesuvian disaster. In all the years that I had taught the Pompeii course, I had paid little attention to what, if any, aid was offered to the survivors of the eruption. Now, what the emperor Titus did or said following the disaster and how writers interpreted the events have greater relevance.

The final article in this special issue on the Tulane Community’s experiences with Katrina is positioned here for a reason. “Wisdom in Wind and Water: Katrina and Other Lessons From a Social Work Educator” is written by Jane Parker. Professor Parker is a licensed clinical social worker, teacher, and administrator whose practice and research interests are in leadership development and effective crisis interventions with individuals, groups, and communities. She consults with national and international companies on issues of organization development and programs to boost resiliency in primary responders. In addition to coordinating the Certificate Program in Disaster Mental Health at Tulane University School of Social Work, Professor Parker provides community training in supervision and psychosocial health. In her article, she describes the unfolding disaster from the perspective of the Associate Dean of the School of Social Work.

She notes, as the associate dean at the time, several accounts of personal and collective losses and victories in the devastation of Hurricane Katrina and the broken levees in New Orleans provide social

work education both as confirmation of and challenges to traditional thinking about trauma, recovery, and resilience. Departing from the conventional structure, Professor Parker describes the unfolding disaster and weaves in the lessons learned. Among other things, she relates that as she was forced to evacuate her home in New Orleans, her husband, Capt. T. A. (Arthur) Hawley, U.S. Navy (Retd.), was becoming overwhelmed by brain cancer that took his life 7 months later. She also challenges the traditional concern for denial by suggesting that it was more an “adaptive compartmentalization.” She also talks about joyous time such as being with her family in Mississippi and celebrating her birthday in the hospital caring for her husband. I will not spoil for the reader the meaning of wisdom of wind and water but this is her final paragraph that is a fitting end of the special issue:

My Katrina experience was filled with multiple traumas in a compressed time period, making personal recovery a bit more challenging but by no means impossible.

Both Katrina and cancer knocked me to my knees, but only for a season. While the pain and the anxiety remain, they lessen daily. My teaching is better, my relationships are more selective, and my expectations refined. In summary, I know that I can “ratchet down” into survival mode; that I have a strong network of social support; and that most things we humans fear are just not that serious. More research and teaching on resilience and its elements would be a good balance for all the dissection and treatment recommendations for trauma so thoroughly covered in schools of social work and other helping professions.

## Conclusion

If conventional wisdom is defined as the generally accepted belief, opinion, judgment, or prediction about a particular matter, this special issue has generated wisdom through a form of oral history and multidisciplinary analysis. Abraham Lincoln is frequently cited associated with wisdom and life experiences with the following quote: “And in the end, it’s not the years in your life that count. It’s the life in your years.” The life experiences of these survivors of Hurricane Katrina described in this special issue deserve our attention. The perspectives of these scholars are important as both contributions to their respective fields of study and toward an emerging field of disaster mental health.

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