



Discovery

Documenting the invisible damage of Katrina

Anthropologist's account of a family's eight-year recovery after Hurricane Katrina yields lessons for future disasters



Evacuees expected to be gone only a few days. Instead, it was months.

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The most iconic images of Hurricane Katrina are those of the people. Families who had lived there for generations, with cultures and modes of livelihood specific to that place, were forced to flee. It would be months or years before they could return.

Cultural anthropologist Katherine E. Browne was on the ground shortly after the storm. With support from the National Science Foundation's (NSF) Social, Behavioral and Economic Sciences Directorate's Cultural Anthropology Program, Browne worked to make sure the human devastation was recorded as it unfolded in the storm's immediate aftermath and the years that followed.

In her academic writings and her new book, "Standing in the Need: Culture, Comfort and Coming Home After Katrina," she shows how her work can be applied to future disasters, and how understanding a culture and applying that knowledge to recovery efforts can make the process easier on survivors, and more effective.

Browne's NSF support helped her to produce "[Still Waiting: Life After Katrina](http://www.nsf.gov/cgi-bin/good-bye?http://www.stillwaiting.colostate.edu/) <<http://www.nsf.gov/cgi-bin/good-bye?http://www.stillwaiting.colostate.edu/>>," a 2007 documentary that follows the members of one family, representative of a way of bayou life, as they were suddenly displaced 500 miles from home and then gradually made their way back.

She says the long duration of her study allowed for insights into the entire recovery process, a rare opportunity for anthropologists.

"The real insight of this work is that the suffering was made much worse by the outsiders in control of recovery efforts because they had no awareness or knowledge of the local situation," said Browne, a professor at Colorado State University. "With that kind of attention to cultural meaning, we could lessen suffering in a systematic and profound way."

As we reflect on the storm and its aftermath 10 years later, Browne shares other thoughts about her research with NSF.

Q. How, as a scientist, do you approach research like this?

A. I'm a cultural anthropologist, and we operate with the assumption that to make sense of a group's way of life and adaptations to change, we need to approach it holistically. This recognition carries implications for research and doing it right can take a long time. When something like a disaster happens, people have to adapt in one way or another.

In my case, I knew it would take not only systematic interviewing with as many people as possible, but also successive interviewing with those same people again and again over time. That's the surest window into seeing the complex nature of cumulative effects and how these effects are distributed, understood, experienced, and what, in the end, they mean.

Q. Your NSF-funded work examined the coping strategies of families after Katrina. How did you choose these families?

A. I began my research effort with the goal of locating a large African American family. I knew from my long-term Caribbean research and reading about New Orleans, such large, interconnected families were typical. We were fortunate to locate a family in Dallas that included 155 people, and they were willing to be the focus of our funded documentary.

Q. That seems like an enormous number for a family.

A. Yes, and the amazing thing is that the 155 who had evacuated to a relative's home in Dallas were just about half of the larger family group of more than 300 relatives. Making those kinship charts was quite a project! Before the storm, they had lived in close proximity to each other, within 15 minutes' drive. Like other big families in the area, their everyday world involved spending time together, cooking big meals and gathering to share them. They shared child care and skills and knowledge. The concept of "nuclear family" just does not resonate for people like this. Big families like theirs are partly legacies of slave adaptations.

Q. What were some of the factors affecting them in Dallas?

A. The real hardship was less about their grief or not having their "stuff" than about being in an alien environment. It was total culture shock. They didn't have their food. They didn't have their neighborhoods. They weren't around people who spoke like them. They didn't have the bayou landmarks and smells. They were cut off from their larger network. They might as well have been on the moon. They were *without*.

In the film we captured the resourceful ways they replicated everyday cultural practices like gathering together in large groups to cook, eat and talk, made possible because their Dallas relative had a big kitchen and a big back yard. They found comfort by returning to these habits.

Q. You followed this family for a long time. As an anthropologist looking at these important cultural touchstones, did you find that these people were able to continue their way of life? Rebuild? Or was this an event that essentially ended it?

A. I believe that, for the moment, this culture is healthy. All but two people of those 155 who fled to Dallas are back, in rebuilt or new homes.

They returned to a total wilderness of ruin. Most of them had to live in FEMA [Federal Emergency Management Agency] trailers for years because getting funding from the Road Home program [a program to compensate homeowners funded by the federal government and administered by the State of Louisiana] was so slow. The isolation imposed by the FEMA trailers cut off the circulation of information, childcare, cooking and helpfulness that characterizes black culture on the bayou.

Ultimately, the most serious culture shock they experienced was returning home to find a recovery "culture" directed by people who brought their own assumptions and paperwork and language and who knew nothing about the people hurt. They had no idea that their lack of knowledge would significantly slow recovery. They did not work to understand local dialect, or local ways that family systems work and thrive. By neglecting everything that was steeped in group meaning and cultural comfort, they imposed a second disaster, one much worse from the point of view of people themselves, because they lost their sense of agency, their sense of optimism, their access to collective-level comfort.

Q. What does "comfort" refer to in this context?

A. It's worth pointing out here that the word "comfort" means "with strength," and as an anthropologist, I am trained to identify how some human experiences, like comfort, operate at a collective level. I documented the joy and satisfaction and strength that family members drew from practicing their familiar habits of everyday life. These practices help maintain the health and vitality of the group.

For example, we in this country place a high value on the notion of self-reliance, and we tend to value it as an individual quality. But in many cultural groups outside the U.S., and in domestic cultural settings like this one, the importance of self-reliance may also function at a collective level. The family I studied was self-reliant, together. They helped each other. They shared child care, they shared skills, they shared food and they shared information. None of them had ever gotten any government assistance. They made things work as an interdependent system, a system I refer to in the book as similar to a rhizome. They constantly renewed their bonds, and survived through the resilience of the group's strength.

Q. You later received NSF funding to study how the 2010 Deepwater Horizon oil spill affected a region still recovering from Katrina. That involved going back to the same family. How did the two projects fit together?

A. They are related because I never stopped researching the experiences of members of this family. The big insight for me related to the oil spill was that, in this case, most people doing research were studying people directly impacted because their livelihoods were

destroyed. I was interested in learning how indirect impacts of the damaged environment can also be significant. In 2010, the family was five years into recovery. The BP oil spill was a dispiriting double dunk.

Seafood is at the center of the everyday diet of people on the bayou. When fresh shrimp and crab disappeared, people had to substitute--they used things like turkey necks to make their gumbos. I had learned from five years of study just how important the right ingredients were to the cultural art of cooking.

Q. Without research that follows the recovery process from start to finish, would we see these types of problems people were facing?

A. Very few scholarly studies cover the full trajectory of recovery. So much of it is invisible, and we wouldn't know about it without this kind of whole-frame study. I can't tell you how much I value NSF for the support I've gotten over the years. It's allowed me to do work at a consistent, long-term, fully human pace. It's the kind of work that helps us understand the "how" questions and the "why" questions. And in the end, I believe the results offer some of the richest insights science can produce.

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Cooking and the right ingredients were important comforts for the displaced.

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Browne describes family members as remarkably close, playing active roles in each other's lives.

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Investigators

Katherine Browne

Lori Peek

Related Institutions/Organizations

Colorado State University

Related Programs

[Cultural Anthropology \(/funding/pgm_summ.jsp?pims_id=5388\)](#)

Related Awards

#1049048 RAPID: A Double Dunk: How the Oil Spill is Affecting Katrina-Impacted Residents
[\(/awardsearch/showAward.do?AwardNumber=1049048\)](/awardsearch/showAward.do?AwardNumber=1049048)

#0555146 SGER: Loss and Survival: Culture, Community, and Family Following Hurricane Katrina
[\(/awardsearch/showAward.do?AwardNumber=0555146\)](/awardsearch/showAward.do?AwardNumber=0555146)

Total Grants

\$89,390

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