

Sexuality and Natural Disaster

Challenges of LGBT communities facing Hurricane Katrina

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“In a very real way, the deepest roots of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered life and liberty in the United States must be looked for not in New York or San Francisco, but in N’Awlins.”

– *Patricia Nell Warren; Love, Bourbon Street: Reflections of New Orleans*

“In a society that allows its most vulnerable citizens to drown and starve and then go homeless, can the fragile parts inside any of us be safe?”

–*Mark Sam Rosenthal; Blanche Survives Katrina in a FEMA Trailer Named Desire*

Terminology and Definitions

LGBT: Acronym referring to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender. Although all of the different identities within “LGBT” are often lumped together (and share sexism as a common root of oppression), there are specific needs and concerns related to each individual identity.

Bisexual: a person who is emotionally, physically, and or/sexually attracted to more than one gender. Also referred to as “bi.”

Coming Out: to declare and affirm both to oneself and to others one’s identity as lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, etc. It is not a single event but instead a life-long process.

Gay: of, pertaining to, or exhibiting sexual desire or behavior directed toward a person or persons of one’s own sex; usually refers to men but may describe women as well

Heteronormative: cultural bias in favor of opposite-sex relationships of a sexual nature, and against same-sex relationships of a sexual nature

Heterosexual: a person who is emotionally, physically, and/or sexually attracted and committed to the members of a gender or sex that is seen to be the “opposite” or other than the one with which they identify or are identified. Also referred to as “straight”.

Homosexual: a person who is primarily and/or exclusively attracted to members of what they identify as their own sex or gender. A clinical term that originated in the late 1800s. Some avoid the word because it contains the base word “sex.”

In the closet: to hide one’s queer identity in order to avoid negative social repercussions. Many individuals are “out” in some situations and “closeted” in others, based on perceived level of comfort and safety.

Lesbian: a female who expresses romantic or sexual attraction to other females, whether primarily or exclusively

Queer: Used as an umbrella identity term encompassing lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, trans, questioning people, non-labeling people, and anyone else who does not strictly identify as heterosexual. Though originally a derogatory word, it is being reclaimed and used as a statement of empowerment.

Transsexual: a person who feels assigned the wrong gender at birth and feels discomfort of their body and adapts their gender role and body to reflect and be congruent with their gender identity.

FRAMEWORK:

This paper seeks to illuminate the marginalization and unique vulnerabilities at the intersection of sexuality and environmental hazards. Drawing from literature and descriptive case studies, this paper examines the experience of lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans (LGBT) communities in the heteronormative disaster relief system following Hurricane Katrina. Discriminatory policy and a pervasive culture of social stigma rendered LGBT individuals powerless in a response construct rooted in inequity. Through categorizing distinct advantages in capital and political standing, and adversities in service and aid provision, this paper concludes that the federal and local neglect of LGBT communities is an environmental injustice. This paper is a call for a shift in discourse and action to integrate and establish equity for LGBT communities across political and social constructs of disaster risk reduction and response.

Rejecting the notion of a monolithic existence, LGBT communities will be referred to in the plural throughout this paper. This aims to recognize and respect individuality of experience and identity on both a micro and community level. The intention is not to speak for all, but to record trends in accounts as seen in a literature review. By compiling LGBT experiences during Hurricane Katrina, the hope is to garner much-needed awareness through pattern-recognition of unique challenges LGBT communities faced at that time.

Difficulties arise in documenting these experiences due to the anonymous and diffuse nature of LGBT communities.¹ This is particularly true in the southern conservative climate of discrimination. The challenge speaks even more to the necessity of sharing existing stories – to build awareness and a movement for those that are also suffering silently and deserve equitable treatment and services.

HURRICANE KATRINA:

Hurricane Katrina made landfall on August 23, 2005 and wreaked havoc on the Gulf Coast until August 30, 2005. A Category 5 hurricane, winds reached record highs of 174 mph with catastrophic flooding and levee failure. Fatalities totaled 1,836 people, while an estimated 1.5 million internally displaced persons – 16 years and older – managed to leave the affected areas of primarily Louisiana, Alabama and Mississippi. Seventy-five percent of this total evacuated from Louisiana alone.² According to the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), Hurricane Katrina was the most catastrophic natural disaster in United States history.

There is the illusion that environmental hazards are equal opportunity affairs, but Hurricane Katrina challenged the idea of a disaster being solely “natural.”³ Research examines this hazard from intersections of critical points – income, race and class – that revealed a pre-existing socio-ecological disaster exacerbated by the hurricane. Katrina’s impacts unveiled inequities of current social and political structures so they could no longer be ignored. Literature also measures the social vulnerabilities

of gender. However, research reflects the laden issues of the relief system by addressing vulnerability with binary assumptions: “that the category of woman is stable and coherent and that women are heterosexual.”⁴ This fallacy of gender analysis limits the perspective of women, and also points to a clear gap in literature: What were the LGBT experiences during Hurricane Katrina? What unique barriers to services did they face? Who, if anyone, support these communities? The lack of recorded LGBT experiences during Hurricane Katrina renders the communities invisible. This signifies the lack of priority and perception ubiquitous in research, the disaster relief system, and society.

Ironically, LGBT communities received increased media attention from the onset of the hurricane. Natural disasters are chaotic, leaving society fearful and searching for answers and someone to blame. Historically, LGBT communities are an initial scapegoat, and immediate responses to Hurricane Katrina were no exception. The hazard struck only days before the 2005 Southern Decadence – a highly popular festival in the French Quarter of New Orleans that draws tourists from all over in celebration. It attracts the queer community, which in turn attracts public condemnation from religious conservatives.⁵

With mere days between the hurricane and festival, there was an outpouring of blame linking Hurricane Katrina with God’s wrath towards homosexuality. American conservatives to religious international leaders⁶ hailed it as a natural repentance, with American Evangelical John Hagee saying:

‘I believe that New Orleans had a level of sin that was offensive to God, and they are – were – recipients of the judgment of God for that. The newspaper carried the story in our local area [...] that there was to be a homosexual parade on Monday that the Katrina came.’⁷

Already facing high levels of duress induced by a natural disaster, especially one of such scale and magnitude, LGBT communities were forced to recover at the very open disposal of public stigma and hate.⁸ Regardless of validity, responsibility and blame for the hurricane now lay on them and gained enough public traction to cause alarm. This created a distinct social challenge for LGBT communities as they navigated their own hardships in the wake of Katrina. It also placed sexuality as a lynchpin of disaster response power structure. This warrants its presence as an axis of research consideration.

VULNERABILITIES:

Economic

Local perception reflected a similar sentiment, evident in discriminatory policy placing LGBT communities at economic disadvantage before Katrina made landfall. Economic capital is the ability of an individual or population to build financial

capital, and is an essential component of disaster relief and resilience. People need access to financial aid in times of crisis. Ideally, this is an equitable provision.⁹

In Louisiana, Alabama and Mississippi – the hardest hit areas – there was no public or private employment discrimination protection for individuals based on gender identity or sexual orientation.¹⁰ This lack of protection reflects how insignificant LGBT communities are to their local governments and acts as an economic vulnerability. It creates the likelihood that LGBT communities were disproportionately at risk for financial loss during Hurricane Katrina.

Additionally, gays face wage discrimination nationally. According to four recently published studies, “a statistically significant earnings penalty associated with same-sex behavior for males in the US [exists] on the order of 15-30 percent of annual earnings.”¹¹

The hurricane negatively impacted the gay tourist industry as well. Tourism is a considerable financial asset of Louisiana, particularly the queer culture in the French Quarter of New Orleans. Statistical and anecdotal evidence suggest tourism suffered greatly during and post-hurricane as LGBT tourists sought vacation spots outside of New Orleans.¹² An increase in crime and devastation coupled with slow storm recovery had gay populations selecting new destinations in following years.¹³ Consequently, LGBT communities that catered to and economically thrived on tourist appeal were at a distinct financial deficit.

Housing

Even apart from disastrous destruction, property rights are significant to society. Homes represent investment, livelihood, status and memory. Louisiana policy discriminated against LGBT communities in the housing market before the hurricane. The Louisiana Equal Housing Opportunity Act allows discriminatory housing practices based on sexual orientation and gender identity and expression.¹⁴

Adding to the housing insecurity are compounded legal issues when disasters hit. When Hurricane Katrina occurred in 2005, federal and Gulf state laws recognized marriage solely as a legal union between one man and one woman. The Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA), federally adopted in 1996, granted states the ability to bar recognition of legal same-sex marriage contracts from other jurisdictions.¹⁵ The 2004 Amendment to the Louisiana State Constitution upheld this right by legally rejecting validity of any union not of one man and one woman.¹⁶ Mississippi and Alabama both have similar defense of marriage acts denying rights to same-sex couples.¹⁷

The economic implications of these policies are monumental for LGBT homeowners. Rights to a family home are defined by marital status. Lesbian and gay relationships, with no consideration of extent and depth of commitment involved, are therefore not recognized in this property right. Should the family home be in

the name of a deceased partner, the survivor has no rights. Insurance payouts go to the estate of the deceased, and to the closest blood relative of the deceased in the absence of a will. Even if LGBT domestic partnerships had legal documents - wills; powers of attorney; agreements valid in status wherein notarized - there was no guarantee the documents would be documented in states where survivors relocated.¹⁸

Health

The lack of legal recognition of same-sex partnerships on the state and federal level created distinct health barriers for same-sex couples. During Hurricane Katrina, in cases where one partner is hospitalized, the other partner was not guaranteed visitation rights. They may have been in a committed relationship for years, they may own a house together, and they may have children together. None of this has any bearing in a hospital legally recognizing same-sex partnerships in granting visitation rights. The non-hospitalized partner is also awarded no consideration in the decision-making process of medical care.¹⁹

Medical care is a crucial indicator of societal value and inclusion, and its absence of provision and rights strongly discriminates against LGBT communities. Queer communities felt this through primary health care provision. HIV/AIDS is an epidemic in the hurricane-affected states, and LGBT communities were adversely slated with unique HIV health challenges as a disproportionate percentage of those with HIV are gay men.²⁰ Health service provision was a public failure associated with Hurricane Katrina response, especially in the case of evacuees with HIV. These individuals experienced difficulty obtaining antiretrovirals, and often emergency relief doctors had no expertise in handling HIV patients. There is also a strong stigma attached with being HIV+ accompanied by a fear of disclosing such sensitive information in a crowded shelter. This could induce panic in the surrounding shelter community. The fear of reporting also leads to HIV+ individuals keeping their illness undisclosed, which could leave it untreated and unaccounted.²¹

Relief

Social service provision is a direct reflection of societal perception and priority. Services are provided in correlation with what/whom is valued as worthy, and they are distributed according. There is also the misconception of non-excludability and non-rivalness of public goods and services.²² But by virtue of proximity, employment, and political participation, some societal members receive more benefits than others. Hurricane Katrina highlighted the inequitable nature of service provision, and this section will highlight the inequitable nature of service provision to LGBT communities.

Social services for LGBT communities were considerably lacking in disaster-affected states before Hurricane Katrina hit. In the southern metropolis of New Orleans, there were only seven LGBT-specific social service providers pre-landfall. Four of

the seven have closed since the hurricane due to flooding and lack of funding, and one of the remaining seven is a shell of its former self. This lack of social services is a systemic indication of how New Orleans does not and never did prioritize LGBT community services. The main social service provider pre-Katrina was the LGBT Community Center that had been a reputable stronghold in the city since 1992. It blossomed from a New Orleanian LGBT activist movement that spoke to the need for a communal space for its marginalized queer community members. The LGBT Community Center had 800-1000 members before the storm. Since Hurricane Katrina devastated its facility, they have struggled to retain presence and 2012 marks them at 200 members.²³ They have since closed services apart from a small room downtown full of brochures, leaving no active community-building centrality for LGBT New Orleanians.

The LGBT battle for services extended to the federal level with continuous challenges navigating FEMA. Following Hurricane Katrina, there were countless accounts of FEMA “horror stories,” detailing FEMA’s inadequacies and failures as an agency to provide for hurricane-affected populations. LGBT communities experienced these same issues, but on top of additional challenges unique to dealing with a heteronormative system of binary terminology and legislative inflexibility. Upon applying for grant funding, LGBT couples were stonewalled by a blatant lack of recognition of domestic partnerships. There was a lack of overall understanding and sensitivity of legal rights applied to domestic partnerships, and FEMA assured that DOMA hindered equitable distribution of aid to gay and lesbian couples as families. This was later discounted as an inaccurate and unfounded assumption. According to the Robert T. Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Act (SDREA) of 1998, federal authority is granted the right to:

provide financial assistance, and if necessary direct services, to individuals and households in the State who, as a direct result of a major disaster, have necessary expenses and serious needs in cases in which the individuals and households are unable to meet such expenses or needs through other needs.²⁴

SDREA does not hold a predefined definition of household. It was therefore legally possible under SDREA for FEMA to define household as “one or two cohabitating individuals and the dependent children of either individual, regardless of biological relation or adoptive relationship, for whom and individual is currently acting as the primary caregiver.”²⁵

This interpretation of “household” is under FEMA authoritative discretion and did not legally conflict with the Defense of Marriage Act. It would ensure coverage for LGBT families along with heterosexual families. Unfortunately, FEMA interpreted household purely in the heteronormative, rendering FEMA regulations insufficient in assisting same-sex couples and families that were in fact eligible for assistance. FEMA’s lack of recognition of LGBT status and rights caused familial separation even if relationships were state-recognized. Additionally, couples had to file for support

independently, leading to relief aid distribution as individuals, which may not take into account children raised within the family.²⁶

A Battle Against FEMA

Keeley Williams, a nationally registered paramedic for the city of New Orleans, evacuated her family - including her domestic partner - before the storm hit. She returned to her unit in New Orleans East, which was one of the first areas to flood when the hurricane made landfall.

Williams and her partner were living in St. Bernard Parish and everything was lost in the flood. They decided to turn to federal government assistance and started to feel the direct challenges of being LGBT. Though registered as domestic partners in the city of New Orleans, FEMA did not recognize their union.

Talking about the experience, Williams expressed that she felt a lot of the FEMA agents she spoke with were uneducated on LGBT communities and rights. She said they had no understanding of domestic partnerships. This led to specific LGBT challenges: filing separately and not qualifying for financial assistance because Williams and her partner weren't married. Paradoxically, when applying for FEMA trailers, they only qualified for one because they were in a domestic partnership. Assistance and rights were at the government's advantage.

Williams felt that she was fortunate to be employed by the city of New Orleans so that her partnership was respected on the local level. But on the federal level, "had [they] been a heterosexual couple, things would have gone a lot smoother."²⁷

With federal systemic relief failure, community organizations historically rise to the occasion as social service providers. Faith based organizations have been hailed as an emergent success story in relief provision during Hurricane Katrina. They acted as main sources of support for racially and socio-economically marginalized communities. Unfortunately, there were accounts of rejection of services to LGBT communities. Religious doctrine often strictly condemns deviance from the heterosexual norm, and this lack of religious recognition of status led to a lack of service provision for LGBT individuals in a time of need.²⁸ This held particularly true for trans individuals. Many faith based organizations required proof of identification to receive aid. Trans individuals that did not publically identify as the birth-assigned gender listed on their IDs were rejected due to confliction.²⁹

Personal self-identification and physical card identification gender disparities extended to shelter discrimination, where trans refugees faced refusal of gender-identity change recognition. Trans women were often required to stay in male-only

shelters and trans men were often required to stay in female-only shelters. This led to deep personal discomfort on behalf of the individual, and also public shaming due to the other shelter occupants' lack of understanding and acceptance.³⁰

Shelter Trauma

Sharli'e Dominique, a pre-operative trans person who lives her life as a woman, was arrested and thrown in jail for showering in the women's restroom of a Hurricane Katrina refugee shelter at Texas A&M University.³¹ She had received permission from a sheltering authority to use the women's restroom after expressing discomfort of using the men's restroom. Despite this, she was charged with criminal trespassing and spent five days in jail before the charges were dropped. While incarcerated, she was told she could expect to be imprisoned for up to a year because courts were "backed up."³²

Stigma persisted in the non-trans identified LGBT communities as well. LGBT individuals are often selective in their personal "outing" process and preferences, and are publically in the closet while privately "out." When natural hazards occur, the boundaries between public and private are blurred, especially in the sheltering system. LGBT couples faced outing by default as they attempted to retain their relationship and familial structure within a shelter when perhaps they had never been "out" in public before.³³ This led to personal unease in the shelter construct – facing high stress mixed with ignorance from other occupants while battling inner feelings of consistent discomfort.

This amass "outing" extended to flooding of households and loss of items. Items that may be intimately tied to LGBT identity are revealed in the clean-up and recovery process following Hurricane Katrina floods. Even in cataloguing loss of assets, LGBT communities struggled with determining the extent of personal revelation through asset delineation.³⁴

INTERSECTIONALITIES:

An intersectional lens is important in examining social vulnerabilities. Just as LGBT communities challenge a structured binary system, each individual experience is nuanced and personal. "There is no such thing as a single issue struggle, because we do not live single-issue lives" (Audre Lorde) and acknowledgment of differences in experiences and challenges is critical.

Race, income and gender are often at the intersection of sexuality in accounts of Hurricane Katrina. Many falsely assumed the LGBT community was safe and prioritized, but that was under a myopic view. The French Quarter received less impact, and was recovered fairly quickly due to its tourist value – but that area is comprised of wealthier, white gay men. Though affluent neighborhoods were largely spared, Mid-City New Orleans – an "area with a traditionally high proportion

of lesbians and queer people of color”³⁵ experienced devastating floods and loss. “Although lesbians, transwomen, and queer women of color were disparately affected by the flooding, this fact is often ignored as New Orleans tries to reclaim its gay industry,” highlighting the role of class in determining societal priority and perception.³⁶

The LGBT community is rendered invisible even within its own community. The nature of being diffuse and anonymous presents the unique collective action issue of “individual decisions to ‘pass’ as straight sap[ping] the political strength of the community. Being in the closet undermines solidarity”³⁷ Those out and in solidarity may have experienced more outright discrimination than those whose sexuality is non-disclosed. But the stories of closeted LGBT individuals remains unheard, and there are different axis of experiences within LGBT communities during Hurricane Katrina that may speak to a broader picture.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS:

Relief and recovery efforts are designed to mitigate the stress and loss of disasters, but the adverse impacts Hurricane Katrina had upon LGBT communities highlights this failure of the system to perform its task. Consequential increased suffering, and uncountable number of fatalities, speaks to overall failures in the federal and state social support systems for the forgotten. Hurricanes and environmental hazards are a natural aspect of increased climate change, and we can inevitably expect more in the future in the Gulf Coastal states. This presents the essential and invaluable opportunity to rethink values, develop new guidelines, and establish equity in a structure that has failed its own.

On the federal level, the Defense of Marriage Act has been overturned and effects on FEMA operative procedure remains to be seen. In ensuring FEMA authoritative understanding of the LGBT experience, regulations should be issued to clarify the provisions of SDREA by defining “household” as “one or two cohabitating individuals and the dependent children of either individual, regardless of biological relation or adoptive relationship, for whom an individual is currently acting as the primary caregiver.” The administrator of FEMA should also issue guidance stating the inclusion of same-sex couples in this regulatory definition of “household,” regardless of state law.

Additionally, there should be increased focus on gender identity and sexual orientation sensitivity and understanding trainings in FEMA staff structures. Raising the level of discourse to include recognition of accepted terms and navigation of context-specific state laws should be a required facet of FEMA training. This would help ensure increased understanding for LGBT applicants and increased coverage for LGBT families, overruling state discriminatory policy. This is consistent with the goals of SDREA.³⁸

On a state and local level, there is a need for increased and nuanced attention to the LGBT experience and unique disaster relief challenges. Trainings and anti-discriminatory policies are necessary in this level of authority to ensure an inclusive approach to future efforts. LGBT organizations and leaders should be consulted in future disaster management planning, and throughout the local response. HIV/AIDS treatment and services need to be provided throughout the response. These measures need to be taken in times before disasters, and contribute to a shift in local focus to reduce stigma and increase awareness and acceptance.

Aid organizations need to adopt a policy of gender-equity and sexual orientation anti-discrimination. Trainings of shelter staff, equitable distribution of aid regardless of identification, and sensitivity to LGBT specific-challenges and families is necessary moving forward.

CONCLUSION:

Moving forward, there is much more to be learned and documented. In terms of examining the nature of social capital and the LGBT diaspora experience, qualitative research will be conducted to gain further understanding. There will also be research of positive underground support systems that helped LGBT communities recover from Hurricane Katrina. More nuanced policy recommendations at all levels will follow.

This paper as it stands hopes to incite productive discourse. The unique plight of LGBT communities in disaster settings requires not only acknowledgement, but progressive action that places LGBT individuals at the decision-making table. It requires an integration of LGBT-equity in not only the disaster relief system, but in every component of society. As LGBT voices gains in strength and recorded LGBT experiences increase in number, they can no longer be rendered invisible by a heteronormative system.

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