‘You fix my community, you have fixed my life’: the disruption and rebuilding of ontological security in New Orleans

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Using the concept of ontological security, this paper examines the physical and psychological loss of home and community following Hurricane Katrina. This qualitative longitudinal study includes 40 heads of households with school-age children who lived in New Orleans during Hurricane Katrina. Participants describe a breakdown in their social fabric at the individual and structural/community levels that contributes to a sense of community loss and social displacement, disrupting their ontological security—their notion of safety, routine and trust in a stable environment. Three interrelated reactions were common: 1) experiencing nostalgia for their old neighbourhoods specifically and New Orleans in general; 2) experiencing a sense of loss of people and things that represented a level of security or constancy; 3) initiation of a process for re-establishing ontological security whether or not they returned to New Orleans. The paper concludes that intangible losses have an important psychological effect on community redevelopment and recovery from trauma.

Keywords: community, disaster, Hurricane Katrina, ontological security, social support, trauma

Introduction

Following Hurricane Katrina in August 2005, New Orleans experienced a near complete loss of its population. Approximately 1.3 million people were evacuated to shelters, homes and private residences in all 50 US states (Nasser and Overberg, 2005). The hurricane and subsequent floods left 80 per cent of New Orleans under water, and nearby St Bernard Parish was completely submerged. Nearly 1,500 people died, while approximately 275,000 homes and 900 places of worship were either damaged or destroyed. About 400,000 jobs across the Gulf Coast were lost, while 81,000 small businesses throughout Louisiana suffered damages. More than 18,000 businesses have closed permanently, with the majority in New Orleans shutting down after both Hurricane Katrina and Hurricane Rita (September 2005) (Associated Press, 2006; Brinkley, 2006; US House of Representatives, 2006).

Katrina evacuees not only suffered through the hurricane, flooding and displacement, they also experienced the well-documented seeming indifference and inaction of local, state and federal officials in the slow rebuilding of their city. The recovery and rebuilding process has been tedious, overwhelming and wrought with bureaucratic barriers. When residents started to return to New Orleans, some came back to small trailers provided by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA),
while others lived with relatives and friends. Still others were forced to remain in their new communities while awaiting housing in New Orleans.

For residents of New Orleans, whether they returned to their city or stayed in their new locations, their lives had changed and their ontological security had been upset. In this paper, we undertake a qualitative examination of the mental health effect of displacement, community disruption and loss. We examine what residents do to restore their lives and sense of lost security following a disaster.

Disruption of ontological security in New Orleans

This paper suggests that New Orleans residents faced a disruption of what Laing (1965) and Giddens (1990) refer to as ‘ontological security’. Giddens defines ontological security as the ‘confidence that most human beings have in the continuity of their self identity and in the constancy of their social and material environments of action’ (Giddens, 1990, p. 92). It is having confidence in the routine and reliability of persons, places and things (Wakefield and Elliott, 2000). These routines create a cognitive order and sense of safety and trust in the world; they function as a coping mechanism against existential anxiety, enhance psychological well-being, and provide a ‘protective cocoon’ (Giddens, 1991, p. 40) and a ‘firewall against chaos’ (Mitzen, 2006, p. 274). What is ‘secure’ in ontological security is the psychological trust in the reliability and constancy of the world existing in the way it is ‘supposed’ to exist and the narrative that supports the constancy of the social construction of self-identity (Giddens, 1991; Mitzen, 2006). Lack of security is characterised by shattered assumptions of normative social behaviour such that anxiety increases about the safety and reliability of one’s physical, psychological and social environment and one’s sense of personal agency is diminished (Giddens, 1991; Janoff-Bulman, 1992; Mitzen, 2006).

Padgett (2007) found that the benefits of ontological security in having a home are important to recovery for individuals with serious mental illnesses and substance abuse. Though there is equivocation about whether home ownership or renting represents the ‘best’ kind of ontological security, the larger concept of home is understood to provide ontological security in the constancy of a secure base around which individual and community identities are constructed and daily life is routinised (Dupuis and Thorns, 1998; Padgett, 2007; Smith et al., 2003). Although much literature links ontological security to the home, it is a contributing factor but not integral to the definition of the concept.

Our study views ontological security as psychological protection from the anxiety of uncertainty and risk provided by everyday social activities, continuity, the home place and the value of community. Since ontological security has its conceptual roots in mental health (Padgett, 2007), we use a mental health perspective to consider the concept as it relates to the families and communities in New Orleans that were affected by Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath.

Hurricane Katrina and mental health

The unique character of the disaster that hit the Gulf Coast extends mental health issues beyond the parameters of the traditional areas of disaster mental health study,
as more than a million individuals were displaced temporarily and hundreds of thousands permanently. For many residents of New Orleans, what was already a tripartite disaster expanded when it became clear that their home and most or all of its contents were gone, along with the structures and people that made up their community. The very resource that is considered the seat of resiliency and an explanatory factor for low prevalence of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) following disasters—community—was lost in the destruction of neighbourhoods and the wide diaspora of family, friends and community members (Norris et al., 2008).

Following Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, researchers found elevated frequencies of mental illness in the New Orleans population, ranging from 30–70 per cent, across several disorders, from mild to severe (Kessler et al., 2006; Mitchell et al., 2008; Weisler et al., 2006). In a mixed methods study of mental illness prevalence and utilisation of services in St Bernard’s Parish, loss of possessions, house/home and community were frequently cited as the most challenging aspects to people’s mental health. Repairing or relocating one’s home were the most reported future goals (Mitchell et al., 2008). Loss of housing and barriers to rebuilding are risk factors for psychological distress, but are little explored in the context of specific communities. Common meta-theoretical approaches to disaster mental health may be of limited use to address the broad spectrum of traumatic responses, especially given the limited resources and historical contexts of disadvantaged communities such as those caught up in Hurricane Katrina and the 2004 South-East Asian tsunami (Benight and McFarlane, 2007; Hobfoll et al., 2007; Norris et al., 2008; Wang et al., 2007).

Several studies on the prevalence of mental illness post-Hurricane Katrina speak to the need for additional constructs to understand the impact of the disaster. Treatment models and past research have focused primarily on either an individual oriented diathesis stress model of traumatic recovery or a social cognitive theory (SCT) model in which recovery is a proactive process for individuals and communities (Benight and McFarlane, 2007). Both models often include an epidemiological risk and resiliency approach to mitigating negative effects of disaster exposure. Hobfoll’s (1989, 2001) conservation of resources theory (COR) has been shown to predict post-disaster distress (Hobfoll et al., 2007; Freedy et al., 1994; Smith and Freedy, 2000). Both loss of resources and barriers to replenish those resources contribute to increases in psychological stress. COR resources include the critical (for example, housing, water, food) and the psychological (for example, agency, mastery, secure self-identity). These resources are ecologically embedded in the family within the community (‘tribe’) such that the ecological nesting of resources is what gives them their critical value. In another ecology, specific resources have different values. Using a SCT-based model, Norris and colleagues have researched the impact of social support in the context of its protective impact and the impact of the specific support available pre- and post-disaster (Norris and Kaniasty, 1996; Norris et al., 2005; Norris et al., 2008).

From the traumatic grief literature, Boss’s (1999, 2006) concept of ambiguous loss captures the protracted nature of the losses (critical and psychological) due to the disaster, particularly for residents of New Orleans. The politics of New Orleans and
disaster relief management from FEMA at the top down to local authorities has been much criticised (Beaudouin, 2007). The psychological effect is that which Boss defines as physical absence with psychological presence such that the bereavement process remains unresolved. Though the housing and communities are lost, the possibility of rebuilding and returning looms unactualised for many of the displaced. Due to the stilted progress of the rebuilding process there is ambivalence for some in contemplating returning to New Orleans. Not only is there potential for further loss with another hurricane, families that have settled in other areas may not wish to disrupt the bonds and stability of their new communities. For some, relocation has brought opportunities for education, employment and an increase in social capital that were inaccessible in their previous communities, creating ambivalence about rebuilding and returning to New Orleans (Hawkins, 2009).

The grieving process can take many forms. Symbolic objects, photos, possessions of the deceased often play a key role in processing loss for the bereaved. For Hurricane Katrina survivors, the loss of these types of linking objects is part of what they are grieving. The transitional function that these objects often play in linking the mourner to the deceased is not available to them. Volkan (1999), in his work with exiles, posits that nostalgia is a positive adaptive coping mechanism to process the grief and loss of home. Nostalgia, ‘the suffering caused by the yearning to return to one’s place of origin’ (Wildschut et al., 2006, p. 975), can have both negative and positive impact on the grief process. Nostalgia may signify unresolved or complicated grief or it may be, as Volkan hypothesises, an adaptive means of processing the loss and attributing meaning to it, which facilitates integration of that loss.

We posit that what was lost and is being mourned is more than just the physical structure of home or the resources and support garnered from community. The socio-political impact of a compounded natural and man-made disaster combined with physical and psychological displacement is best subsumed under the concept of ontological security. This construct includes the mental health impact of the physical loss of resources, loss of continuity and identity that come from social connections, and loss of trust and security of community membership. The protracted mourning process of the loss of ontological security may increase psychological distress in ways that are not being captured by the standard models of disaster research. Prior research suggests that Hurricane Katrina took an emotional and psychological toll on New Orleans residents due to the multiple losses they experienced. There is little in the literature that discusses the psychological responses to the losses beyond stress, coping and resiliency. Few studies examine the nature of the responses and what those responses mean to rebuilding and restoring communities and lives.

**Study focus**

This paper describes findings from an in-depth, qualitative study of the experience of predominantly low-income families following Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans. It is part of a larger study that examines the families’ background and life experiences, experience with the hurricane and floods, and relocation from and/or return to New
Orleans. This study examines psychological losses at the personal and community levels and the responses of New Orleans residents. While this is a grounded theory study, we have used this analysis to examine the following two questions: 1) in what ways has ontological security been affected by Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath, and 2) how are Hurricane Katrina survivors restoring their ontological security since the storm?

**Methods**

**Participants**

Some participants in this study were drawn from notices posted on websites frequented by Hurricane Katrina evacuees. Others were identified using a ‘snowball’ method. Still others were approached on the streets and in busy shopping areas in communities in and near New Orleans. Participants included 40 (n = 40) heads of household in families with school-age children who had been directly affected by Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans. Those who chose to participate gave informed consent and received USD 40 for the original interview and USD 30 for the follow-up.

The demographic breakdown of study participants included 76 per cent African American, 18 per cent white and 2 per cent Asian and American Indian. The age range was 18 to 63 (mean age 41). Thirty-four of the participants were female and six male. The number of children per family ranged from one to five (m = 2.1). Nineteen participants identified as low-income, ten as working or lower middle class, eight as middle class and one as upper middle class.

**Procedures**

Interviews were conducted by the study principal investigator, a Masters-level social worker and three trained graduate students. Interviewers were trained in one-on-one and group sessions by a senior qualitative researcher. They also participated in workshops on qualitative research methodology, the history and politics of New Orleans, and the impact of Hurricane Katrina on the community. All interviewers were required to take and pass a human subjects tutorial administrated on-line by New York University.

The study included two life history interviews, covering experiences leading up to and following Hurricane Katrina. The interviews occurred approximately eight months apart and each lasted about two hours. Each interview was conducted at a setting chosen by the participant, which included their residence, their workplace, a FEMA-provided mobile home or a suitable public space. Interviewers used traditional grounded theory methodology for qualitative data collection (Charmaz, 2006; Creswell, 1994; Padgett, 1998), as well as ethnographic techniques (Tubbs et al., 2005). These techniques included serving as participant observers, volunteering with the clean-up efforts in New Orleans, and spending time with participants at community events, at participant workplaces or at places of worship (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007).
During the first interview, demographic data were collected and participants were asked to discuss their life situations before, during and following Hurricane Katrina. Participants were specifically asked about their experiences relocating and settling into a new environment or their readjustment process returning to New Orleans, as applicable. The second interview was individually tailored for each respondent, following a process suggested by Padgett (2007). It was designed to learn about changes in the participants’ lives since the last interview, fill in gaps, verify events and clarify questions from the initial interview.

Using the field methods and debriefing techniques suggested by Padgett (1998) and Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) for ethnographic research, interviews were tape recorded and transcribed verbatim. Field notes were also compared and analysed. Researchers participated in written and oral debriefings following each interview. As proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985), we relied on a range of established criteria to enhance credibility and dependability of the data, including prolonged engagement in the field, repeat coding techniques, member checks with participants, and triangulation through multiple data sources and multiple methods of data collection.

Multiple coders read transcripts and developed a systematic coding scheme for the data. Separately, each analysed the transcripts for preliminary themes using open coding and then developed a list of categories and concepts (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). After coders arrived at a consensual list of codes, primary and secondary codes were developed through axial coding. Later, themes and patterns were identified through selective coding. Nvivo software was used to support the coding, annotating, analysing and integrating of interview and observational data.

**Results**

Families affected by Hurricane Katrina described a breakdown in their social fabric at the individual level (friends, relatives and family members having been displaced or separated) and the structural/community level (houses of worship, favourite shops, favourite hangout spots and so on no longer existed). Family members described a strong sense of loss of community and social displacement that disrupted their sense of safety, routine and trust in a stable environment. Frequently residents reported that by being separated from their physical community and from known social networks they were besieged by feelings of uncertainty and disruption to their sense of safety in their environment, in addition to experiencing the immense physical losses of home, possessions and loved ones. Study participants reported that simply not knowing where to go to get help, to find information or to whom to turn was destabilising; there was no routine, no ontological security. Learning to navigate the new environment did not necessarily resolve issues of trauma and bereavement associated with the loss of their homes and previous community.

Respondents showed a pattern of three interrelated reactions to their loss of ontological security: 1) expression of nostalgia for their old neighbourhoods specifically, and New Orleans in general; 2) experiencing a sense of loss for people, places and things...
that either provided or represented some level of constancy in their lives; 3) initiation of a process of re-establishing ontological security whether or not they returned to New Orleans.

Study participants seemed to find psychological comfort in remembering their communities before they were destroyed and the sense of security and safety they represented. Rebecca, a white woman in her early forties, captured the nature of ontological security when she described her own sense of comfort in her Gentilly neighbourhood prior to the floods:

*And my neighbourhood at the end of the day when I was driving home, the closer I got to my neighbourhood, the more relaxed I felt. I mean stress would just like, go away from me, you know? It was just that kind of a relaxed place.*

Similarly, Angie described her neighbourhood as being part of a real community where her children played with friends and she had an active social life through her church:

*Our neighbourhood was really nice; we had a lot of nice neighbours who would look out for you. It was friendly, everybody was friendly. It was a pretty nice community. Everybody was pretty nice. The kids would be able to go play in the park area and go swimming... [My son] had a lot of friends. You see, I've been in church for so long, if I called somebody and be on the phone and her son wanted to sleep over, he come over so they could have company. If we went to Chuck-E-Cheese and he wanted to bring a friend he could bring a friend to game room or something. So they had a lot of friends he could go out and play with a lot of their friends in the neighbourhood.*

Vera, a middle-class, African-American woman in her mid-thirties lived with her family in what she called a ‘tranquil’ neighbourhood, ‘very sort of Mayberry’, where there was a lot of support, helpfulness and community interconnectedness.

*A friend I had loaned some money to came here to return the money to me later and said, 'you know, I put some money in your mailbox but I was really kind of scared cause your neighbour was watching me like a hawk the whole time'. Besides that, everyone was always considerate and courteous. You know, no loud music. If you had a party, you'd come over and say, you know, 'I'm gonna have a little get together, and it's gonna be from this time to this time, so you may hear some noise'. But it wasn't sort of... I hang out at your house you hang out at my house sort of close-knit.*

One African-American minister in East New Orleans expressed that his neighbourhood defined his family and his church. He described a church that welcomed the community to religious services, and also to church socials and recreational activities:

*We have always been from our inception a community church wanting to be involved in the community. Pre-Katrina we had developed a separate tax entity for the church where we began to give grant monies to do community type things like... with the nurse ministry.*
We had another adventure that we did every year... vacation bible school. It was two weeks of guiding the kids, not just spiritually but socially, and intellectually... we've partnered with the public school the last three years... We had play equipment, green space with the park, and then we would tie in our family life centre and gymnasium and it was more accessible to the community. So, we had some swing sets here for the church kids, but the neighbourhood kids (would) come and everybody was welcome to it.

The importance of neighbourhood and community was often expressed by study participants. Whether the nostalgia was accurate or not, participants often described their neighbours as ‘family’, describing strong personal and community connections:

The whole neighbourhood is family... You know I say it like that, family. Everybody cares, everybody knows everybody. It’s good you know; neighbours helping neighbours out, parties and everything, get togethers. Barbecues. It was good before the disaster. It was better, fuller, more people. You know, it was just alive. Just say it like this: it had a heart beat to it. Just say it like that, it had a heart beat before the heart beat stopped. That’s how it was.

Loss of people, places and things that represented security
Following the storm, Hurricane Katrina evacuees could no longer rely on the constancy that had previously existed in their lives. The physical environment that provided the setting and the structure within which community interactions existed was destroyed in the hurricane. Gone were both the people who created the network of security and reliability and the places in which the ontological security generated by those relationships was situated. Nostalgia is mourning for the lost object, be that a person, place or thing—past ontological security. Social and environmental displacement and loss prompted one study participant to say:

Even when New Orleans is back it will never be back... Stores closed, people gone, schools closed... [New Orleans] like that movie with the dead people walking 'round the mall... People don't know what to do... Nothing is normal anymore.

The sense of loss expressed by respondents represented a loss of the ordinary in routine, of people and places, of ontological security. Most evacuees discussed family members and friends who could no longer be found. Even more than one year after the storm, some had not yet reunited with family members. Janet, an African-American evacuee in her late forties now living in Houston, said that her family members were displaced throughout the United States. Their absence dramatically changed her lifestyle and prompted sadness within her:

... my oldest daughter is in Dallas. My youngest son is in New Orleans, my oldest son is in Houston here with me, my youngest daughter is out here in Houston. And my grandchildren are scattered also. I have five grandchildren and two are in Dallas, one is here in Houston, one is in Pineville, Louisiana, and one is in New Orleans, Louisiana. And in
New Orleans, I saw my grandchildren every weekend. Every single weekend, I saw my grandchildren, I took time out to spend time with my grandchildren, you know, before it was time for me to go to work. Their parents would bring them... I picked up [granddaughter] from dancing school every Saturday... And now I only get to see her twice a year, they came for Christmas and they came for the fall break, you know... out there in Dallas. And my grandson that's back in New Orleans, I haven't seen him in a good while. I haven't seen him [in 10 months].

Study participants who could not yet move back to New Orleans but wanted to commonly expressed a deep sadness for their lost community and lost city. They discussed missing the people and the community that they had built personally and professionally. Linda, a mother and grandmother now living in Houston, described her grief for her missing community:

I have a deep hole in me like you can't believe. I miss New Orleans, I miss Louisiana. I miss my neighbours, I miss my job, all of my co-workers, you know, I miss bringing the children to the park for their Little League team, you know, on the days that I was off and they need to go to practice. I miss my grandchildren and we are really scattered.

Across economic lines, respondents discussed losing things that were important to them. Most respondents regretted losing sentimental items such as important gifts or family pictures. Respondents spoke of losing non-sentimental items that linked them to their history, their self-identity and their accomplishments. Objects and things represented a spectrum of loss: a loss of memory, comfort items, income, entertainment or opportunity.

Many study participants pointed out losses their children experienced as well. Children lost not only their communities but also their schools, their school friends and the routine and consistency in their lives that those networks provided. Respondents also spoke of missing ‘the folk’, not a particular person, but the people of New Orleans in general. Those who left the city missed the food, the history and culture of the place, which is deeply interwoven into their personal lives. Kevin described the losses in this manner:

... money is money and you have the (things) with sentimental value that don’t have a price tag on it. Which they lost. I mean, your grandparents’ parents’ pictures on an old black and white when cameras first came out. They gone. Lost ’em. Old plates, watches that were passed down through generations. They’re gone, you couldn’t even find them... This is where we lived at. We had bedrooms upstairs and we saved some stuff but there was a lot of stuff that not even small, but decent sized stuff, I couldn’t even find.

Although Dennis, an evacuee who had moved his family to Baton Rouge, had also lost material possessions, he wasn’t as concerned about ‘stuff’. ‘I can get more stuff,’ he explained, ‘I had too much stuff anyway.’ Yet Dennis described the ambiguous loss within his community:
There are people in your neighbourhood. The guy whose name you never knew, but you saw him every day on your way to work. He was a part of my life and I didn't even know his name but I cared something. . . I'll never see him again. I'll never know what happened to him.

The process of rebuilding ontological security

Respondents described a range of emotions upon returning to New Orleans, from shock to fear to sadness to anger. Like many others, they returned to their homes in hopes of salvaging whatever they could. ‘We lost everything’ was a common statement for study respondents:

The only thing I had left was the clothes we took with us when we left. And remember, we thought that we was gonna to be gone two or three days, a week tops.

Those families who lost all of their physical possessions started the process of re-claiming their lives using hurricane disaster funds or money that was donated by the various community and not-for-profit organisations. They bought the physical necessities: clothes, food and basic furnishings. Families who could began gutting and rebuilding their homes or searching for new homes and neighbourhoods, trying to restore their lives without knowing whether the levees would ever be properly rebuilt to withstand another flood.

Kevin, a 36-year-old white man from St Bernard Parish, was restoring his gutted home. Yet he discussed his ambivalence about returning to live there, even as he was in the process of restoration:

It’s my concern cuz I still love this place. I wanted to come back. We may still come back. . . I don’t know. You know, like I said I got a strong mind, but after the storm, I’m more wishy washy. I want to come back; I don’t want to come back. I got the kids. The oil spill, that plays a big factor. They say its fine; they have quite a few people with cancer. You got the oil refinery. Got all the doubts in your mind, got a lot of oil that was spilt down here.

Nearly all participants expressed concern over the slow rebuilding process. ‘I want my city back’ was a sentiment expressed by several interviewees. Most study participants who had not returned saw themselves back in New Orleans, rebuilding what they lost. Alberta, a 52-year-old African-American grandmother, who had an option to stay in a suburban home in Houston, returned to New Orleans to live in her childhood home in a low-income area. She knows that the city will continue to frustrate her, but she is determined to return and rebuild her life.

Oh, yeah I’m moving back to the old 'hood. We're not moving back to the shee shee 'hood. . . I am moving back to the old house that I actually grew up in, with me and my friends. I'm going back to my roots where I came from. . . My house was pretty much destroyed. Roof caved in, everything. I'm gonna get me a nice house, remodelled and new
floors. . . I can come back. I’ll be frustrated again eventually with the city and the way the system works, but you’re accustomed to it. This is what you are used to.

Betsy, a 43-year-old white, single mother who lives in the Gentilly area, participates in a community group dedicated to rebuilding her neighbourhood. ‘We did not just want it to be rebuilt, we want it to be restored,’ she said. Betsy and her neighbours developed a community beautification project, gardening in the yards of houses that where being renovated. Later, the group bought the material, made and installed their own street signs as the city authorities, a year and a half later, still had not replaced those destroyed in the storm.

If I knew how to repair a traffic light I would do that, too. We have traffic signals that are still out and we are one of the so-called ‘better’ neighbourhoods. . . We want our neighbourhood back, and if the city or the state or whoever can’t or won’t do it, we will do it ourselves. . . We got people of faith, atheists, agnostics, old, young, rich, poor. . . We just want New Orleans back; we want our community back. . . We will get our businesses back too. That’s the next thing we’re working on.

The desire to restore, not just rebuild, came from across economically diverse lines. Andy had been sleeping in his car for four months since returning to New Orleans from Memphis. He travels over two hours a day for his job at a local barbershop in the uptown section of New Orleans, one of the city’s poorest neighbourhoods.

At first I was going to stay in Memphis, where my kids was. . . but they say ‘Daddy, when we gonna get our own house back again? I miss my school’. . . They don’t know. . . we gotta help people get their lives back together, rebuild some houses. . . let’s people get jobs. . . people want to work. . . get their lives back. How a brother gonna come back. . . gotta get things back up. . . No buses running right now. . . get them back up. . . fix the roads. . . get the communities back up.

Restoring ontological security happens within a community, but it also occurs on the individual, more personal level. Many respondents who lost things attempted to retrieve or replace them to re-establish the comfort and security those things symbolised. Carl, who has relocated to Baton Rouge, pointed to his large screen television and sofa, most of the furniture in his house. ‘This is all I need. I had a big screen television before Katrina. Bigger… I took my money I got and this was the first thing I bought. . . This is all I got now.’ But Carl also wants to see his New Orleans community restored. This, he said, is his main priority. He reflected the emotions of many study participants:

You fix my community, you have fixed my life. . . I can return to who and what I used to be. . . and now all of this time has passed. I feel a connection to the place I came from, but I can’t find it. I know that something used to be back there that I loved, but I do not know what it is. I cannot recognise it anymore.
Discussion

Many residents interviewed returned to rebuild their homes and restore their own ontological security. Those who remained displaced reported a longing to return. And residents who did not or could not return to New Orleans mourned their loss of ontological security. The expression of nostalgia, loss and rebuilding were reaction patterns evident in the majority of participants. Yet, issues related to ontological security are not typically addressed in a practice or policy response to the disaster.

These findings are consistent with other research suggesting that losses associated with disasters go beyond the physical and financial; victims of natural disasters also experience psychological loss and disruption in ontological security (Freedy et al., 1994; van der Kolk and McFarlane, 1996). This intangible absence is an ambiguous loss of resources, identity, routines, patterns and community (Boss, 1999, 2006; Hobfoll, 1989, 2001). The destruction of New Orleans is a psychological loss that could last for years, if not generations.

Implications for practice and policy

The disaster mental health field lacks a clear and consistent manner in which to treat displacement and loss following disasters (Hobfoll et al., 2007). In this study, we suggest that to view disasters, especially those where displacement occurs, from an ontological framework may be helpful in developing treatment strategies. Current treatment of victims of disasters is based on a traumatic stress framework that considers loss and grief in a multi-level contextual manner, but does not address the existential or intangible loss and grief of ontological security (Boss, 2006; Kanel, 2007; Vernberg, 2002). Many strategies use a crisis intervention or disaster mental health model to decrease mental distress, including debriefing, cognitive-behaviour techniques and group therapy (Boss, 2006; Hobfoll et al., 2007; Kanel, 2007).

Following Hurricane Katrina, crisis intervention treatment was the primary treatment approach (Madrid and Grant, 2008). This model is short term and may not be suitable for the complex, multiple-event trauma experienced by victims of the hurricane. Multiple traumatic experiences have been shown to increase the risk of developing PTSD (van der Kolk and McFarlane, 1996). Najarian et al. (2001) found that physical displacement itself is associated with a greater risk of depression than there would be with a delayed community recovery effort. Individuals experiencing complex trauma may need more nuanced and longer-term interventions (Kessler et al., 2007).

Post-disaster intervention strategies using a problem- or task-oriented approach and building social support have been shown to be more helpful than emotion-oriented interventions in many cases (Bromet and Havenaar, 2002; Kaspersen et al., 2003; Norris et al., 2008). Indeed, helping an individual focus on rebuilding both their physical environment as well as their social network may benefit in helping re-establish lost ontological security (Hobfoll et al., 2007). This restoring of ontological security in adults could also have ramifications for their children given the
importance of attachment in positive youth development (Corcoran and Nichols-Casebolt, 2004; Martins and Gaffan, 2000). Also important to children could be ontological security’s broader emphasis on community, given a child’s identification with their community and the development of resiliency factors (Corcoran and Nichols-Casebolt, 2004).

In considering an intervention treatment approach, we see ontological insecurity as related to ambiguous loss (Boss, 1999, 2006) for both individuals and community. When losses are tangible—for example, the death of a loved one—treatment interventions focus on helping clients grieve (Kanel, 2007). The loss of ontological security is rarely so tangible. Mourning the more ambiguous losses, however, is also important to psychological well-being (Boss, 1999, 2006). The death of a way of life, of routine and patterns, of possibilities, of objects from one’s childhood, of a community or culture has its own pain not dissimilar from a physical death (Boss, 1999, 2006; Giddens, 1990, 1991).

The concept of ambiguous loss has much utility in restoring ontological security and is consistent with resiliency models and Hobfoll et al.’s COR theory. Boss’s (2006) therapeutic approaches include: 1) finding meaning; 2) tempering or displaying mastery; 3) reconstructing identity; 4) normalising ambivalence; 5) revising attachment; and 6) discovering hope. Hobfoll et al. (2007) propose five similar intervention tenets: 1) promote a sense of safety; 2) promote calming; 3) promote sense of collective and self-efficacy; 4) promote connectedness; and 5) promote hope. Meaning making is an important construct in both re-establishing a sense of safety and as a risk factor for severe traumatic stress reactions when it cannot be made (Janoff-Bulman, 1992; van der Kolk and MacFarlane, 1996). Tempering mastery is especially relevant to restoring ontological security, as mastery refers to having control over one’s life and is an essential aspect of collective strength and self-efficacy. Reconstructing identity occurs at the individual, family and community levels. We saw this attempt at reconstruction in several of our study participants, especially among the citizens of Gentilly, and in Carl, who described his identity as being embedded within his community.

Several study participants described attempts to adapt to the uncertainty of their lives and the community where they lived or had lived—a key element of restoring a sense of safety. Normalising ambivalence is an appropriate way to help loss victims stabilise their lives; not normalising ambivalence can increase anxiety, somatic symptoms and guilt (Boss, 2006). Revising attachment is an attempt to recognise and acknowledge a loss that will allow other attachments to develop, without which promotion of connectedness may be thwarted. Study participants expressed a strong attachment to their homes, communities and New Orleans in general. Yet, while many participants have attempted to rebuild relationships, the slow and unreliable process of rebuilding the city has been a barrier to recovery and ontological security.

Boss (2006) defines the process of discovering hope as coming full circle as people who experience ambiguous loss must determine what and if they can continue to hope. It is not that discovering hope means that situations will work out for the best, but rather that the outcome or final solution makes sense. Many of the Hurricane
Katrina victims in this study were uncertain about what to hope for or if they could hope at all. Others, however, like Kevin and Alberta, were attempting to discover hope: by helping others, they look beyond themselves and saw a meaning and a chance at a positive outcome.

Intervention and treatment plans that include addressing the ambiguous loss of ontological security are helpful in moving victims beyond a psychologically stagnant state, which heightens stress and uncertainty, to a more resilient and productive place that restores trust in themselves and in their community (Boss, 1999, 2006; Hobfoll et al., 2007). This conceptual model is in line with emergent theories of disaster response and recovery (Hobfoll et al., 2007; Norris et al., 2008). Considering the loss of ontological security post-disaster provides a broader and more multifactorial understanding of the losses that victims face.

The disruption of ontological security also has policy implications for rebuilding in New Orleans and other areas. Community rebuilding makes it possible for residents to return to their neighbourhoods, stores to reopen, schools to recommence, community centres to be re-established. Renovations large and small, such as restoring bus services and street signs, have a practical purpose in getting people, supplies and resources in and out of the neighbourhoods. They also have a psychological effect in helping returning families regain their sense of safety and routine, improving coping and lowering mental distress. Re-establishing both material and psychological resources should be a priority for local, state and federal government agencies and non-governmental organisations. Many New Orleans residents longed to re-establish routine, patterns and the perceived security that those factors bring. Our findings, together with previous research, suggest that a quick effort to return residents to their communities is integral to recovery following a disaster. Policy could and should be instrumental in creating temporary measures to support and hasten recovery efforts.

Finally, current policy regarding disaster relief is too narrow in scope (Benight and McFarlane, 2007; Hobfoll et al., 2007; Norris et al., 2008). Rarely does policy take into account the long-term psychological implications for individuals, families or communities. A disaster response plan that uses a comprehensive approach to recovery is needed. Planners must take into account the interconnection between the individual and the environment and consider the sustainability of the community together with the long-term sustainability of individuals and their families (Hawkins, 2009).

Limitations

This study is limited by our snowball sampling method and the small size of our sample. As in most qualitative studies, generalisation is not possible; the intention was not to produce a reproductive sample of the New Orleans population affected by Hurricane Katrina. Rather, an in-depth examination of 40 current and former residents allows us to raise new questions and generate theories using a grounded theory methodology (Feagin et al., 1991; Strauss and Corbin, 1998). Further, the experiences that participants shared with the interviewers for this study only represent a small sample of the experiences of New Orleans residents and evacuees. It is
also important to note that when these experiences occurred, participants might have been under heavy stress; their memories may be fallible or their perceptions skewed. While this is a concern, the importance of these findings is the sense that participants make of their experiences rather than the actual facts of a particular event.

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