

Making and Unmaking “Vulnerable Persons”



How Disasters Expose and Sustain Structural Inequalities

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Faces of vulnerability emerge from an accelerating roster of disasters worldwide catalyzed by climate change, war, famine, chemical accidents and unsafe building practices in unstable, densely populated places. Vulnerability personifies the consequences of inequitable access to social and material resources: disabled children unable to flee ethnic violence in DR Congo; elderly who cannot fight for supplies from relief helicopters after the South Asian tsunami; impoverished children found dead in collapsed schools, while wealthy children in code-built schools survived the Sichuan earthquake. With the concept of vulnerability, disaster studies seek to identify people most at risk of harm by connecting local, national and global sociopolitical and economic inequities occurring everyday with their intensifications during and after catastrophic events. It represents concerted efforts to change paradigmatic cultural narratives from disasters and their harms as “natural” toward understanding their largely human-made, often preventable nature as bell-weather of larger social fault lines.

Yet anthropologists are warned, “Don’t study the poor and powerless, because everything you say about them will be used against them” (Laura Nader in Dell Hymes’ *Reinventing Anthropology*, 1972). It is difficult not to be wary about the ironic vulnerability of the concept of “vulnerable persons” to cooptation by governments and disaster services professionals to justify their actions or sustain entrenched

highlights inequitable social *relationships* to social ecologies that increase risks of harm. Vulnerable persons are certain sorts of people, grouped by their lack of particular physical, emotional, cognitive or social resources which seem to explain their disproportionate harms from disasters and everyday. Hermeneutic expectations follow lists of “vulnerable persons” on disaster preparedness materials on the American Red Cross website and FEMA preparedness materials, preparing publics for their *expected losses*. In this narrative, risks rest in persons, not the social and built barriers that can harm anyone who confronts them—for some, a daily occurrence, for the rest, in disasters.

A “vulnerability paradox” parallels the “disability paradox” (“we are all temporarily able-bodied”). US disaster preparedness expenditures presume a “standard person” who is able-bodied and understands English, has access to cash or credit, no infants, frail elderly or disabled kin, private transport to evacuate and somewhere to go. Everyone else has “special needs” that in the US, at least, are the responsibility of the individual to know and fulfill.

Yet in the aftermath of Katrina in New Orleans, *everyone* caught by the rapidly rising floodwaters experienced downed communication and collapsed political infrastructures, injuries, heat, and scarce survival resources, causing limitations to their abilities to see, hear, communicate, move, think and even survive. For a time the qualities of liminality prevailed, during which everyone suffered from the “militarization first, humanitarian relief second” federal approach, the infighting among disaster agencies,



Evacuees try to get to the Superdome in New Orleans in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina on Thursday, September 1, 2005, several days after the levees broke and the city was flooded. Photo courtesy Lisa Krantz, *San Antonio Express-News*

negotiate social and built barriers in their geographies every day. Those on lists of “vulnerable persons” offer disaster equivalents of curb cuts designed “for” disabled people, now integral to open access for everyone. Rather than invest billions of dollars of public monies in the disaster service industry, more logical would be funding local community organizations—public nursing homes, libraries, schools, and medical clinics that provide accessible services daily—for needs that become widespread after disasters (such as Partners in Health after the earthquake in Haiti). How is it that—dismal records of providing timely, nondiscriminatory and accessible disaster services during Katrina’s aftermath notwithstanding—the same disaster professionals hold sway as experts, fortified by public horror about consequences they contributed to, now claim expertise about “vulnerable persons”?

Discursive Power of Biogenetic Persons in Disasters

One answer lies in the narrative power of root paradigms (Turner 1974) about race and disability that Katrina exposed through the visual images given media precedence. Repetitions of images of violent, predatory black men and visibly disabled victims in New Orleans served to mobilize militarization and also public giving. Testimony in the Congressional Katrina Report

(2006) reveals that President Bush made decisions about militarization by using unverified news coverage of whole-scale looting, helicopter sniping, and even baby raping, as “intelligence,” rather than contrary first-hand accounts from the US Coast Guard. Media coverage led truckers bringing relief supplies to refuse to enter the city, contributed to panic and decisions not to evacuate, and motivated still unpunished vigilante murders of unarmed black men attempting to evacuate at the last open bridge at Algiers.

A photo taken by Lisa Krantz (*San Antonio Express-News*) in New Orleans on September 1, 2005 encapsulates the suffering caused by the mobilization of paradigmatic “narrative prostheses” (Mitchell and Snyder 2001) and also their remediation. A young African American man pushes another young African American man in a manual wheelchair through rising high floodwaters. Behind them are abandoned military vehicles and the Superdome (seen as a large beige wall).

Derided as “stupid” by news commentators for not evacuating before Katrina struck, these residents must evacuate themselves: the useless military vehicles testify to evacuation, response and relief transportation issues attendant to disasters. Further, post-disaster forensics found a tripartite of human-made causes for the levee

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interests. “Vulnerable persons” far too easily becomes another biogenetic classifier with disheartening explanatory power, dovetailing with the disability, race and gender concepts with which it intersects.

The narrative slippage when vulnerability becomes vulnerable persons shifts the locus of responsibility to grave effect. Vulnerability

and their lack of local community partnerships. Significantly, most effective disaster responses came from neighbors, local organizations and locally-based US Coast Guard.

Based on disaster field data, it would seem logical that the oft-touted “lessons learned” after Katrina would be to employ the cultural expertise of those who

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is the goal of disaster assistance? Is it to aid in the recovery of the community or should disaster aid be tied into strategies to develop the community? What is the difference between reconstruction and development in that case, and whose interests are served by different forms of relief and reconstruction?

In some sense one could claim that the tension between knowledge systems in disasters is really the reappearance of the long-standing anthropological debate on emic and etic distinctions in the context of urgent applied circumstances. Indeed, that largely theoretical debate acquires even sharper ethical edges because of the role that knowledge plays in framing need in disasters.

In the final analysis, disaster management must call on all forms of knowledge, while remaining cognizant of the situated character of each. Local knowledge, so frequently ignored by disaster management, is a rich source of important social and ecological knowledge, gained through deep experience and practice in environments. Yet, it is also situated—extremely so in a sociological sense—and can create, distort or mask the forms of social vulnerability extant in the community. Knowledge of the local (anthropological or otherwise) can limit the distorting effects of local knowledge, but, if not used carefully, it can also function in concert with expert knowledge to undermine local initiatives and participation. In employing expert knowledge in the logistics of aid delivery, disaster relief professionals ignore other knowledges at their peril.

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Memoryscapes

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los Inundados to make this a public matter of memory.

Most of the past floods of disastrous scope seemed to have left little episodic trace in the Santafesinian memoryscape. Historical records include accounts of previous floods, but these events were not singled out as community disasters in the local memoryscape. Rather, public discourse depicted flood-prone and peripheral places as risky. The urban poor living in these risky areas were referred to as *los inundados* (lower case). In contrast to the 2003 victims (for whom I spell with a capital letter, los Inundados), these were the "every-time-flood-victims." Los inundados were in the public discourse either remembered as "noble savages" of river life accustomed to coping with floods, or as astute beneficiaries of disaster assistance. This lack of recognition of los inundados as vulnerable flood victims constitutes a kind of "forgetful remembering" (Fabian 2007).

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failures that drowned residents and transport—fraudulent construction and Congressional refusal to fund their completion as well as maintenance (Seed et al 2007).

The photo upends paradigms about disaster expertise. Evidence given by the US Coast Guard attests that local residents performed extraordinarily, aiding rescue of thousands during and after the storm. As one Louisiana National Guardsman said, "They are being cheated out of being thought of as these tough people who looked out for each other" (The Katrina Report 2006). The Superdome in the backdrop was publicized as a "special needs" shelter. Yet a 2006 National Council on Disability Impact report noted, "Later inquiries confirmed that American Red Cross implemented a policy to refuse shelter access for people with obvious disabilities." Despite this, after Katrina, the Red Cross received millions of dollars in public monies to provide special needs disaster preparedness materials.

Unequal Remembering

Translocal fieldwork in the city would reveal to me, however, that the "forgotten" disastrous floods that had so many times afflicted these lowland districts were in fact vividly remembered by the people actually living there, los inundados. They had not built any memorials and did not perform any commemorative rituals but, rather, their flood memories of were embodied in everyday living and extraordinary flood coping practices embedded in local places and landscapes. Their memories were about coping as a fact of life and about loss and social suffering (Kleinman et al 1997). Yet their memories dwelled in the shadows of the broader Santafesinian flood memoryscape.

Although disasters can be thought of as memorable events, my ethnography of the flood memoryscape in Santa Fe shows that not all disasters are equally remembered in a community. Memoryscapes are heterogeneous and shaped by social relations through different memory practices. Some memories become more dominant than

others. Such unequal remembering seems to add to conditions of social vulnerability more than enhancing resilience. Recurrent disasters are remembered as normal events that naturalize certain people as victims. The case of Santa Fe suggest that the effect of unequal remembering is that political efforts to reduce social vulnerability to disasters are diminished or at best reduced to mere technological solutions (such as building embankments, that produce a sense of false security). Rather than adapting to a hazardous environment, people are thereby trapped in a vicious circle of recurrently coping with disasters (Segnestam 2009).

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Unmaking Vulnerability

A groundswell of resistance challenges fear-based disaster preparedness campaigns paid for by taxpayers that inform people of grave dangers without sharing material resources to protect them. No evidence suggests that solely informing people of hazards or placement on lists of "vulnerable persons" motivates individual preparedness. Growing consensus supports alternative approaches to the prevention of harm from disasters by making inroads everyday in the conditions that render people vulnerable.

Community based organizations such as Partners in Health, CARD (with Executive Director Ana-Marie Jones), Catholic Charities and others quietly shape a revolution in disaster mitigation paradigms by *not* using resources solely to prepare for disasters, but rather to promote resilient communities every day. The effectiveness of supporting established local organizations with volunteer professionals and public giving after disasters gave rise to bridging organizations such as the Medical Reserve Corps after 9/11, which can mobilize 885 units of 207,692

verifiable medical assets in public health emergencies and disasters.

Vulnerability is a key concept used to explain why certain people experience greater harm in disaster contexts and systemically in everyday social environments. But evidence suggests that its mobilization as "vulnerable persons" must be carefully examined for connections with the more frequently interrogated concepts of disability, race and gender. What anthropology brings to the study of disasters is a long tradition of denaturalizing these categories of personhood and their ramifications in social inequalities of all kinds.

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