

*“THAT WAS MY COMMUNITY”*: A QUALITATIVE INVESTIGATION OF  
RECOVERY COMMUNICATION AND THE CULTURE OF COMMUNITY WITHIN  
THE DIASPORA OF SURVIVORS FROM HURRICANE KATRINA

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A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department  
of the Valenti School of Communication  
University of Houston

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In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Master of Arts

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By

Robyn Lyn

December, 2015

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## **ABSTRACT**

In 2005, the *Surviving Katrina and Rita in Houston* (SKRH) project formed in response to the largest sudden diaspora in United States history, which drove residents of Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama into the Houston area. Within the SKRH framework, survivor-narrators and survivor-interviewers engaged as experts in collective learning and co-creation of new cultural knowledge by participating in social therapeutic communities (TCs) through survivor-to-survivor (S2S) unstructured interviews. Recorded, coded, and archived, these stories became a means to create new community and cultural understanding during recovery helping victims cope and heal through social connection. In this essay, I engage a qualitative culture-centered approach utilizing narrative inquiry of the SKRH interviews. I investigate what we, as individuals, families, neighborhoods, communities, grassroots organizations, non-profits, NGO's, corporations, government agencies, healthcare providers, social workers, therapists, et al., can understand about the unique culture of survivor community created by and for victims of natural disasters. In addition, I examine the magnitude of the survivors' losses, how to be culturally sensitive to their comprehensive needs, how to actively and culturally listen to shared narratives, how to engage in best practices for post-crisis recovery communication, and how to help survivors regain a sense of community and support during rebound, recovery, and rebuilding cycles.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

This thesis began over two years ago in a crisis communication graduate course taught by Dr. Jennifer Vardeman-Winter. She offered students the opportunity to participate in a semester-long research project that could result in a journal publication about recovery communication and the Surviving Katrina and Rita in Houston (SKRH) project. As a survivor of Hurricane Ike myself, this interested me immensely and I volunteered that evening. From there, Dr. Vardeman patiently walked me through the nuances of academic writing and introduced me to the academic scholar and folklorist who conceptualized and conducted the SKRH project, Dr. Carl Lindahl. The following year, I discovered qualitative research in Dr. Jill Yamasaki's graduate methods class, understood the nature of research as an investigator that was home to me, and melded my two passions. The rest, as is said, is history! I am beyond grateful to Dr. Lindahl for trusting me with the SKRH archives and allowing me the privilege of listening to survivors share their stories. I am very thankful to Dr. Yamasaki for her time, knowledge, and empathic responses to my writing and thoughts. I owe a debt of gratitude to Dr. Vardeman for introducing me to the opportunity that led to this experience and has given me invaluable understanding relating to my own survivor story. It is because of the encouragement, faith, and continued support of these three distinguished scholars that I am able to complete this journey.

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## Chapter 1

### Introduction

New Orleans was home. I was born in New Orleans, but I did spend several years in Illinois. My mother took the whole family, but we returned when I was about fourteen years old. And I had been in New Orleans ever since – I mean, that’s where family was: my sisters and brothers, my cousins, my children, nieces, nephews, everybody was in New Orleans. That was my community. – A SKRH Project participant

The 2005 hurricane season was documented as the most active Atlantic hurricane season in history since 1851 with two of the top seven most intense major hurricanes making landfall along the Gulf Coast; Hurricanes Rita and Katrina, fourth and seventh respectively (Blake & Gibney, 2011). Katrina made landfall on August 29, 2005 and Rita followed less than four weeks later on September 24, 2005. In addition, Hurricane Katrina holds two other distinctions.

First, it is the third deadliest storm in U.S. history accounting for approximately 1,833 recorded deaths (Graumann, et. al., 2005; National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration [NOAA], 2015). The accuracy of the fatalities count is disputed as being too low with estimates ranging from a high of 4,081 (Lindsay, 2009) down to 2,500 in 2015 from a previous 3,500 in 2006 by John Mutter, a geophysicist at Columbia University, whose KatrinaList project actively tracked deaths until funding ran out in 2010 (Bialik, 2015; Mutter, 2009; Olsen, 2010). Underreported death toll counts managed by mainstream media after disasters have been determined by financial “‘opportunity’ – the opportunity to economically report on a sensational story of proven interest to their target demographic –

before they look for ‘importance’” (Moeller, 2006, p. 192). This gives the appearance that the cost to survivors was less devastating than what was actually experienced.

Second, Katrina currently is the highest ranked storm in U.S. history in terms of cost amassing a record \$108 billion in property damages, primarily resulting from the storm surge and catastrophic flooding, (Blake & Gibney, 2011, p. 5). Adjusted for inflation using the Consumer Price Index (CPI), the dollar amount currency for damages would convert to \$148 billion in total costs (Smith & Katz, 2013).

The second costliest hurricane in U.S. history through the 2010 hurricane season was Hurricane Ike (Blake & Gibney, 2011), which hit Galveston Island on September 12, 2008. Hurricane Sandy hit the east coast four years later on October 29, 2012 with costs of approximately 71 billion dollars (Newman, 2012), subsequently placing as number two behind Katrina as the most costly. Seven years has been the tipping point for when most people begin to forget the worst effects of a hurricane (Blake and Gibney, 2011).

This year, 2015 marked the ten year anniversary of Hurricane’s Katrina landfall and researchers are finding the previous model does not apply. According to Jacob (2015), “As Hurricane Katrina recedes into the past, it is becoming increasingly difficult to accurately assess how many survivors are thriving, surviving, or struggling” (pp. 864-865) and funding has been cut for federal and other longitudinal studies.

### **The Katrina and Rita Diaspora**

The evacuation of entire communities and populations from Louisiana, Alabama, and Mississippi created the largest sudden diaspora in U.S. history. Hurricanes Katrina and Rita displaced over a million Gulf coast residents, including most of the city of New Orleans, and the largest forced migration in American history (Crocco & Lee, 2006, p. 63). Five hundred

thousand people relocated and eventually transitioned to alternative subsidized rental housing through KDHAP and other programs in other states and cities with another approximately 100,000 in temporary housing (Katz, Liu, Fellowes, & Mabanta, 2005). Of the total populations displaced and homeless, approximately 27,000 evacuees were bussed more than 350 miles from the city of New Orleans and taken to the Reliant Park Complex's mega shelter set up to house evacuees in the Astrodome and the George R. Brown Convention Center in Houston, Texas. It is estimated that of the 500,000 displaced persons from the hurricanes, more than 200,000 individuals migrated or were evacuated to the Houston metropolitan area from Louisiana, Alabama and Mississippi (Yee, et al., 2007).

### **The Surviving Katrina and Rita in Houston Project**

The SKRH protocol, created by Dr. Carl Lindahl, a University of Houston professor and folklorist, sought to document and archive the survivors' disaster and displacement experiences during the first few years after arriving in Houston encouraging survivors to recall in their own words what happened with minimal input from outside conjecture or interview bias. The project was a disaster response and utilized trained paid survivor-interviewers and volunteer survivor-narrators. Narratives of survivor experiences, both pre- and post-disaster, were recorded and documented along with demographic details. The interviewees recounted traumatic experiences during the event and gave testimony of subsequent heroic responses to life and death situations during the initial stages of recovery that countered media reports to the contrary. The survivors recalled coping modalities and support systems they utilized to adjust to their new environments once in Houston enabling them to begin the rebuilding phase of their lives.

Although studies regarding crisis communication address relief and assistance, most utilize a top-down organizational-level response to strategically plan and meet needs without participation of the actual victims of the disaster. There is a gap in recovery communication literature from the survivor's perspective and rarer yet are studies examining the culture of survivor-to-survivor recovery communication and community (Vardeman-Winter, Lyn, & Sharma, 2014). Additionally, with existing studies "overwhelmingly focused" on organizational approaches, "the social aspects of recovery" are neglected. (Nakagawa & Shaw, 2004; Vardeman-Winter et al., 2014, p. 3).

This qualitative analysis is a narrative inquiry of the SKRH archives. Utilizing a culture-centered approach, I will examine the unstructured interviews of the survivors as a valid source of knowledge. First, I will discuss the culture of natural disasters, survivors, and community. Next, I will examine the ways in which cultural sensitivity and culture-centered listening of survivor narratives express cultural values, norms, and expectations that ultimately shape the natural disaster survivor experience and identity. Finally, I will demonstrate how, through the creation of social survivor-to-survivor therapeutic communities, marginalized participants use their voice to enact agency by the telling of their stories, co-creating new knowledge and opportunities for building community and social capacity through recovery communication during the rebound, recovery, and rebuilding phases post-disaster.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Literature Review**

#### **Natural Disaster**

Natural disasters have enormous multi-faceted negative impact on individuals and communities. Natural disaster is defined as occurring when “an extreme geological, meteorological, or hydrological event exceeds the ability of a community to cope with that event” (Lindell & Prater, 2003) and “a product of the powerful physical environment” (McEntire, 2001, p. 190). Losses due to natural disasters may include personal belongings, cherished mementos, furnishings, homes, property, jobs, communities, and, for some, loss of their loved ones’ lives in which “disruptive and/or deadly and destructive outcomes” are “exacerbated by various forms of vulnerability” (McEntire, 2001, p. 189). Vulnerability is defined as “the dependent component of disaster that is determined by the degree of risk, susceptibility, resistance, and resilience” (McEntire, 2001, p. 190).

Post-disaster, displacement and devastating loss due to social impacts, including “psychosocial, sociodemographic, socioeconomic, and sociopolitical” and can result in “anxiety, depression, and grief, as well as behavioral effects such as sleep and appetite changes, ritualistic behavior, and substance abuse” (Lindell & Prater, 2003, p. 178), “especially if their normal social support networks of friends, relative, neighbors, and coworkers” do not remain intact (Lindell & Prater, p. 179). Surviving a natural disaster while experiencing traumatic loss may lead to a crisis in identity and purpose for some victims. The consequences and health implications of the loss of a person’s home and community are far reaching and “reduction of hazard vulnerability must be a community effort, not an individual one” (Lindell & Prater, p. 183).

When a person's "social and cultural needs" are not addressed, then victims have difficulty coping "with the trauma of the disaster and may increase vulnerability to social conflicts" (Ingram, Franco, Rumbaitis-del Rio & Khazai, 2006, p. 3). Connecting survivors through "activities" can mitigate trends of "increased vulnerabilities" (McEntire, 2001, p. 192) with post-disaster recovery offering "maintenance of desired social structures and livelihoods" which "can be implemented in both the transitional and long-term recovery phases, so that pre-disaster weaknesses are not perpetuated or amplified into the future" (Ingram, Franco, Rumbaitis-del Rio, & Khazai, 2006, p. 6). My research shows how knowledge regarding natural disasters and the social and cultural needs of survivors will help form connections within the survivor community, identity, and social capacity. These connections become the foundation for recovery communication.

### **Survivor**

The meaning of survivor has evolved over time to become inclusive of numerous accepted connotations, beginning in the 16<sup>th</sup> century with the first known association classifying "one who remains alive after another's or other's death" (Orgad, 2009, p. 133). The 19<sup>th</sup> century included, "those who have escaped physical catastrophes and perished after some disaster" (Orgad, p. 134). This meta-disaster phenomenon references those who survive a physical calamity, only to die at some point afterwards as referenced in the words of Hurricane Katrina survivor Larry Gabriel: "After the storm, they died of the pressures" (Lindahl, 2006, p.1529). In the 1960s, "those who have suffered, yet survived damage knowingly inflicted by and on people, disease, or addiction" and "people who have suffered a wide variety of traumatic experiences and extreme situations" (Orgad, p. 134) references were added. In the 1970s, the understanding extended to "one who has a knack for pulling



through adversity” and recognized that survivors were “persons who have experienced different kinds of suffering” (Orgad, p. 134).

The concept of survivor has become “a meaningful, visible, cultural notion, which refers to a wide range of experiences of suffering and struggle,” “is embedded within the contemporary cultural environment” (Orgad, p. 134), and, Mowett argued, is “a culture that invests traumatic experiences with moral value and authority” (as cited in Orgad, 2009, p. 135). Moreover, Hook argues that survivor culture encompasses “a complex of circumstances, sites, forces, and influences within which the survivor emerges and attains epistemological coherence” (as cited in Orgad, 2009, p. 136) through “an explanatory scheme” (Orgad, p. 135). Accepting the label of survivor becomes “an image for a way of being, which frames, informs, and underpins how individuals think, judge, and act in relation to themselves and others” (Orgad, p.149) and “promotes the survivor as a legitimate, desirable, and truthful mode of being” (Orgad, p.150) utilized to produce “meanings through which power is exercised” (Orgad, p.136).

Society, through “broader socio-political forces,” supports and encourages “victims, whether of atrocities, sexual abuse, chronic illness, or combat, to engage with their experience; to talk, and to transform their personal suffering into a validated recognized experience; to fight against its invisibility and silencing; to remember, but at the same time, move on and look to the future – to become survivors” (Orgad, p. 142). The expectation is that a victim’s private experience become public bringing “voices and experiences into the public realm” (Orgad, p. 147), which legitimizes their experience and constructs an identity of “survivor as a desirable role” (Orgad, p. 147). Contemporary endowed characteristics of a survivor are expressed militaristically with terminology of “fighter, warrior, or veteran”

which invokes “personal responsibility for their pain, suffering” (Orgad, p. 148) and shifts “accountability” away from institutions of authority and power towards the person devastated from the event.

Survivor narratives “make a strong claim for authenticity, i.e., the realness of suffering, struggle, and coping” (Orgad, p.150). The “telling” of their story “is the key to becoming a survivor” (Orgad, p. 150) after a natural disaster and during the rebound and rebuilding stages of the recovery cycle for victims). It is important to note in regards to the definition of the word ‘survivor’ that, at first, participants in the SKRH project internally established a dissimilarity between those who stayed in New Orleans and suffered through the storm surviving its aftermath and those who evacuated before landfall.

For purposes of this thesis, survivor is defined as “a person who lived through suffering, or continues to exist in spite of danger, accident or some other traumatic event” (Orgad, p. 149) and survivor narratives are considered “as therapeutic and essential to personal recovery” with “voice” being “central to empowerment” (Orgad, p. 154). Survivor-to-survivor communities give an opportunity for an individual’s lived experience to be heard, acknowledged, and honored during and after the co-construction of knowledge that encompasses the culture of natural disaster survivors. My research uses this knowledge of understanding survivor culture through shared narratives to build upon the foundation of recovery communication in understanding how best to create community.

## **Culture**

Culture is defined as “a way of life typical of a group, a particular way of doing things,” “as a container of symbols, meanings and cognitive schemata transmitted through symbolic order,” and as having “a set of adaptive strategies for survival related to the

ecological setting and its resources” (Boen & Jigyasu, 2005, p. 8; Rapoport, 1984, pp. 50-51). The “lack of cultural continuity and compatibility” post-disaster results in “increasing disaster vulnerability after post-disaster reconstruction” (Boen & Jigyasu, 2005, p. 7).

Community is more than brick and mortar physical structures and relocating disaster victims is actually “moving a way of life” (Boen & Jigyasu, 2005, p. 8). This acknowledges that place is located within “the ‘network’ of social life at the village or community level,” “is very complex,” and consists of “a number of highly interrelated physical and social elements,” implying, when survivors of natural disasters are forced to evacuate and leave their homes, neighborhoods, and communities, they are forced to relocate “a collective way of life” (Boen & Jigyasu, 2005, p. 8).

*Culture-centered approach.* Framing the culture-centered approach are the concepts of structure, culture, and agency. Structure refers to “aspects of social organization that constrain and enable the capacity of cultural participants” (Dutta & Basu, 2011, p. 330) post-disaster. Culture provides for a dynamic “communicative framework” where community engages in shared meaning of their lived survival experiences, “embedded within beliefs, values, and practices” (Dutta & Basu, 2011, p. 330). Shared meaning creates “points of social change” and facilitates creation of “greater awareness” and “opportunities” (Dutta & Basu, 2011, p. 330). Agency refers to “the capacity of cultural members to enact their choices and to actively participate in negotiating the structures within which they find themselves” (Dutta & Basu, 2011, p. 330). Disaster victims enact agency by engaging in communities where “participatory spaces are created and sustained” that allow for “new meanings” of survivor culture providing a path to build social capital and capacity while benefiting from

“transformative opportunities through the co-construction of narratives” (Dutta & Basu, 2011, p. 330).

The culture-centered approach begins with “noting the absence of cultural voices” then utilizes “the tools of dialogue, narrative co-construction, solidarity building, and participatory communication” in order to engage with and listen to “voices of cultural communities” in search of “spaces of change based on conversations with marginalized voices” (Basu & Dutta, 2008a, 2009; Dutta & Basu, 2011, p. 329; Villagran, Collins & Garcia, 2008; Wood, Hall, & Hasian, 2008). This bottom-up approach creates a safe space where individuals ignored or silenced by the “dominant narrative and structures” are introduced into “discursive space” (Dutta & Basu, 2011, p. 331), given agency to co-construct knowledge that challenges assumptions about their experiences and identity, and seek to be heard and understood. The goal is to receive, listen to, and understand messages from the marginalized within the survivor community.

The emphasis within the culture-centered approach is to hear the stories of the “local cultural communities” (Dutta & Basu, 2011, p. 331), to listen to what they have to share without input or leading the participant. At the core of this approach are the concepts of “cultural sensitivity and communication competence” (Hecht & Krieger, 2006; Palmer-Wackerly, et al., 2014, p. 2) where communication is adapted “for the purposes of enhancing communication with individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds, such as different norms, beliefs, values, expressions, and meanings” (Palmer-Wackerly, et al., 2014, p. 2). Cultural sensitivity recovery communication expands upon “obvious cultural features (e.g., people, food, language) and deeper cultural values and meanings (e.g., significance of beliefs and traditions)” (Palmer-Wackerly, et al., 2014, p. 2) by incorporating the intentional act of

listening to the experiences of community members, without an agenda or expectation of specific answers to research questions, enabling non-members to engage in a process of gaining “insight into cultural values” and linking sociocultural meanings, resulting in the “in-depth understanding of cultural practices” (Palmer-Wackerly, et al., 2014, p. 2) of survivor-to-survivor communities. It is important to note that gaining insight through communication into any specific culture, including survivor culture, does not mean membership into that cultural group is acquired or that empathic listening equates to complete understanding of the survivor’s experience. Even within survivor-to-survivor communities, each individual will have lived his or her own story of survival.

*Culture-centered listening.* Integral to culturally sensitive recovery communication is the construct that listening “takes into account the several layers of meaning that each participant in the communication encounter brings to her/his relationship and conversation” (Dutta & Basu, 2011, p. 326). There is no goal to describe, interpret, or develop the stories of survivors beyond their own narratives. The interaction is not top-down or structured but participatory, open-ended, and guided by sociality. Temporality is unique to each person and place is not physically bound. Participants co-construct “other worlds” and create “new possibilities through partnerships, collaborations, and grassroots participation” transforming “inequitable structures” through “the expressions of cultural agency in imaginations” (de souse Santos, 2008; Dutta, 2014).

Creating social spaces for culture-centered listening, where members of the cultural community can articulate experiences and their meanings without judgment or analysis, is emphasized within the culture-centered approach (Jamil & Dutta, 2012). People have to feel they are heard and that they matter (Lawther, 2009), whereas “mattering refers to our belief,

whether right or wrong, that we matter to someone else” (Schlossberg, 1989, p. 7). Additionally, “acceptance of the narrative as a valid and unquestioned account of the narrator’s lived experience” is the response hoped for by those who share their stories (Harter, Japp, & Beck, 2008, p.56). As we listen to the survivor communities’ “voices that may otherwise be marginalized, and completely silenced at times” and aggregate these “localized narratives,” “points of entry” (Jamil & Dutta, 2012, p. 378) develop for co-constructing new knowledge and possibilities.

A person considered marginalized by society has been defined as “a bicultural person,” where “marginality is a way of life;” the individual “feels permanently locked between two worlds” while identifying with “two cultures simultaneously,” though they “may not suffer from marginality when they are centrally involved in” their own designated group (Schlossberg, 1989, p. 2). Schlossberg suggests that those who feel marginalized also feel they do not matter. The process of culture-centered listening leads to empathetic comprehension of marginalized populations within survivor culture. My study uses a culture-centered approach to link survivors with community. Best practices for recovery communication can be informed by survivor stories through culture-centered listening.

### **Community**

Research has shown that “the meaning of community” is “widely defined” (Lawther, 2009, p. 155). The term has referenced “a neighborhood, a slum, a group of local NGOs, a group of militant leaders, the residents of a small town, a workers’ union, a group of women, etc.” (Davidson, et al., 2007, p. 3). Within a geographic locale, studies have shown physically bounded communities with “high poverty rates” were “associated with the failure to thrive”

post-disaster and “low-income and marginalized communities are likely to suffer a downward spiral of deterioration after disaster” (Pyles, 2007, p. 321).

Especially troubling in regard to geographic space and disasters is the “dispersal of community members, creating uncertainty about both the fate of the physical location and the well-being of those who lived there” (Shklovski, Palen, and Sutton, 2008, p. 2).

Displacement affects survivors’ “normal social networks” (Pyles, 2007, p. 327) as they become disengaged through proximity from their families, friends, neighbors, and colleagues. One of the most significant losses is the lost sense of belonging to a community.

Some who survived Hurricanes Katrina and Rita’s destruction, the initial trauma, losses, and displacement, died in the months following their relocation. Those who knew the ones who passed claim it was due to stress, heartache, and misery. “After the storm, they died of the pressures,” stated survivor Larry Gariel (Lindahl, 2006, p. 1529). Participatory actions connecting survivors socially leads to “community knowledge and capacity-building” while “addressing vulnerability and strengthening local capacities” (Pyles, 2007, pp. 324-325). During rebound, recovery, and rebuilding, engaging survivors socially and empowering them is key to successful post-disaster “reconstruction” (Davidson, et al., 2007, p. 13), survivor health and wellness, and community building.

Recently, community has been “defined socially rather than spatially” by many theorists and “information-seeking in a disaster context may start out as an individual pursuit” but “frequently transforms into a process of finding community” with “action towards recovery” (Shklovski, Palen, & Sutton, 2008, p. 8-9). Whether evacuated pre- or post-event, research demonstrates “individuals in transition often feel isolated and vulnerable” and need connection to “society” or “to the group” to keep them from feeling

lost” (Schlossberg, 1989, p. 14). Survivors, inevitably, will turn to each other to connect in an attempt to “re-arrange and re-explain their understanding of an altered world” (Brown & Perkins, 1992; Janoff-Bulman, 1992; Shklovski, Palen, & Sutton, 2008, p. 8) knowing that “people organize themselves” for many reasons post-disaster, including to “orient towards long-term recovery” (Shklovski et al., 2008, p. 2; Tierney, Lindell, & Perry, 2001).

The vast impact of personal trauma from experiencing a natural disaster is devastating to human beings of all ages, ethnic groups, and cultures as well as to their communities. Informal and formal groups within communities form in response to overwhelming physical, psychological, social, and medical needs caused by the disaster. Community groups are organizations “formed and maintained by community members for their mutual benefit” (Nakagawa & Shaw, 2004, p. 5). The possibility of long-lasting negative consequences over time influences every facet of a survivor’s life from where they live and work to when their circumstances will return to their pre-disaster normalcy.

From the social work perspective, person-in-environment would expand to encompass their community and their interactions within that group. These communities, as a resource for rebuilding, will formulate and propagate the building blocks creating a foothold to sustain resilience within communities (Hawkins & Maurer, 2010). TCs integrate sociology and anthropology noting that group social therapy of those with similar symptomatology “could alter their attitudes towards their symptoms” resulting in “fundamental change” that is then “effected in the patient’s attitude toward his symptoms” (Jones, 2013, p. 12). Social therapy’s key distinction from psychology is that it does not deconstruct the “self” by parsing out pieces separately or destroy community; it makes people whole, human, and social through group social therapy.



Communication within a supportive group in a safe environment after surviving a natural disaster is vital to recovery and healing of victims. Survivor-to-survivor collaborative recovery communication through shared narratives is a holistic social and health communication initiative for post-disaster rebirth, rehabilitation, and restorative growth. These social connections initiate the bonding, bridging, and linking phases of the rebound, recovery, and rebuilding cycles post-disaster as experienced within recovery communication through building survivor-to-survivor therapeutic communities by networking survivors of natural disasters.

*Survivor-to-Survivor Therapeutic Communities (S2STCs)*. Therapeutic communities (TCs) can be traced back as far as “early Christian communes and in the monastic life of various faiths” through the mid-forties in Great Britain “in the wake of the revolution in social psychiatry for the treatment of mental illness” (Perfas, 2004, p. xvii) when they became on-site residential treatment centers offering a community-based social structure for patients with issues, such as drug and alcohol addictions (Perfas, 2004). In the social sciences, therapeutic communities (TCs) have been primarily related to communities of chemically dependent individuals physically living together as a group receiving psychological and psychiatric treatment (De Leon, 1984) and incorporate social therapy as a means of treatment.

Social therapy was founded in the mid-1970s by Fred Newmann, a philosopher, psychotherapist, and playwright, as a postmodern, performatory, socially orientated and culturally based community group therapeutic approach (Holzman, 2004, p. 2). The concept develops through group activity of philosophizing which “allows us to experience our lives not only in the immediacy of society’s here and now, but at the same time as part of the

continuum of human history” which is a “critical human activity” that allows people to learn how to “think critically and discover how to continuously create our lives” (Holzman, 2004, p. 2). The Consortium for Therapeutic Communities considers TCs serve as safe networks where “the group relations and the community itself, rather than any single element, form the primary therapeutic agent” (The Consortium for Therapeutic Communities, 2013). They further define social therapy as a “range of activities carried out in informal groups, with the intention of producing social relationships which are supportive and may lead to beneficial change” (The Consortium for Therapeutic Communities, 2013, para. 1). Social therapy is a communicative group process facilitating recovery post-disaster by engaging participants to form community.

In contemporary society, TCs have adapted and developed into a “branch of organizational consultation” with the goal of understanding “problems that arise in businesses, schools, churches, governments, and ‘everything else’” (Eisold, 2009; Parish, 2012, p. 342). The concept of therapeutic community is “almost as generic a term as therapy or community, covering a wide range of efforts to harness the positive forces of human collectives” (Parish, 2012, p. 339). TCs “are often not psychoanalytic” and they “privilege group processes” (Parish, 2012, p. 331) where community “becomes a social field in which a person plays out the complex dynamics of object relational bits” (Parish, 2012, p. 332).

TCs facilitate communicative participatory social interactions that afford “the opportunity to examine what is happening at the level of the group” (Parish, 2012, p. 335) providing understanding of the culture of the group. They are not constrained by structure or institutions, may be residential or day programs, have numerous focuses to engage and empower individuals, and exist in countless places and spaces (Parish, 2012). The “essential

commonalities” centrally locate “the idea that ‘everything that happens... in the course of living and working together... is used as a learning opportunity’” (Parish, 2012, p. 339; Kennard, 2004). TCs are social communities that enable people to listen to each other, learn from each other’s shared narratives, and co-construct knowledge honoring each individual’s lived experience collectively.

TCs “embraced ‘a culture of enquiry’” (Grunberger and Main, 1989, p.141; Parish, 2011, p. 331) within the “truism” that “human beings are social beings, and can only be understood in social contexts” (Parish, 2012, p. 330). The culture of the TC is defined as “a set of shared meanings held by a specific group of people and their social systems, which serve as the foundation for their organized way of life” with a “subculture characterized by a distinctly positive set of norms and pro-social values” (Perfas, 2004, p. 14). Believing that “who we know ourselves to be is partly dependent on where we find ourselves socially” (Parish, 2012, p. 332), TCs “promote the self-awareness of its members, individually and collectively” (Parish, 2012, p. 331) within the ideology of creating “a culture that fosters self-knowledge at the collective as well as the individual level” (Parish, 2012, p. 330) through the sharing of narratives honoring the individuals’ lived experiences.

Community building through recovery communication excludes psychology, which is less “sensitive to the significance of social conditions” and more “oriented to “the individual in isolation,” and is orientated to social therapy, which embraces the “advocacy of community organizing,” creating “new kinds of tools” that “must be designed to create results; the tool and its result are part of the same process” (Holzman, 2004, p. 4). Social therapy is a relational communication activity that is non-descriptive, non-objectifying, and a non-assuming methodology for human growth and development (Holzman, 2004, p. 14).

The SKRH project incorporated social therapy into emotionally healing activities engaging people with shared narratives of trauma to participate in the formation of collaborative learning environments. This fostered cooperative relationships through inquiry during the survivor-interviewer training sessions. Social constructionist epistemology enables a postmodern collaborative approach where identities are re-created within a social and communal survivor-to-survivor therapeutic community.

Participants are joined by intersecting experiences with face-to-face discourse about the everyday life routine in the context of telling personal stories of surviving. These conversations allowed for painful emotions and memories to be expressed, which in turn, facilitated “the rebound, recovery, and rebuilding phases within the recovery communication model. In turn, survivor-interviewers went into the field and conducted mostly one-on-one interviews with additional volunteer survivor-narrators of Hurricane Katrina. For the purposes of this thesis, only the stories of the volunteer survivor-narrators were examined. This study uses the research on community to build a foundation for survivor-centered recovery communication while expanding on existing knowledge of social therapeutic communities to incorporate survivors of natural disasters.

### **Narrative**

Morris posits that “narrative in the modernist era was mostly a deluxe word for story” while “narrative in the postmodern era has turned into a far more comprehensive concept that embraces the story-like qualities that novels share with other genres and modes, including ballads, sitcoms, films, myths, dreams, and the unconscious” (Morris, 1998, p. 250). Narrative has been defined as a “strategy for sense-making that is counter to a rational-scientific model” and is framed within the key concept of polyvocality, meaning narratives

have “no objective truth, no single official version of a story, no preferred reading, but rather many voices to hear, many still untold stories within the told one, many angles to view the story from” (Littlejohn, 2009, p. 675). Narratives can both reveal, with dialogue, and conceal, through silence, and have the ability to empower survivors to shrink negative memories while “replacing them with alternative narratives that affirm their capacity to make choices” (Littlejohn, 2009, p. 675), frame a person’s “power and identity,” and legitimize the marginalized and their stories (Littlejohn, 2009, p. 676).

Human beings, in their quest for understanding throughout history, have tried to make sense of their own personal tragedy by using storytelling as a vehicle to express their experiences. Studies have explored the dynamics of social support networks, as well as, the recovery and resilience of lives permanently altered by catastrophic events and crises. One study in 1998, noted a shift towards adopting the telling of personal stories as inspiration for understanding shared narratives and how survivors used traumatic events to “get beyond pain and use adversity as a means to grow” (O’Leary, 1998, p. 426).

Survivors of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita realized that the media never told the real stories of strength and humanity, which inevitably marginalized them and silenced their voices, making it appear that there was a final loss of shared legitimate identity through the invisibility of their experiences (Chowdhury, 2011). Some of the stories told through the media were not theirs. Others had given accounts of survival that were not their own truth, simply stories deemed appropriate and necessary for distribution by the powers of those in control of the media (Berger, 2009; Sommers, Apfelbaum, Dukes, Toosi, & Wang, 2006). The Surviving Katrina and Rita in Houston (SKRH) project documented narratives through collaborative therapeutic communities centered around a social therapy framework for post-

disaster survivor-to-survivor intrapersonal communication interviews (Ancelet, Gaudet, & Lindahl, 2013) as a model for a “three-stage recovery program: telling one’s story, forming social networks, and building communities” (Ancelet et al., 2013, p. 263).

Within the SKRH project, the survivor-interviewer and the survivor-narrator collaborated to create a generative relational space, a therapeutic community, through conversation externalizing their personal stories enabling a robust sense of the difficulties encountered, losses endured, and strengths enacted simply to survive. Social communities are imperative to helping people recover a sense of identify after trauma. They will identify as either victims or survivors depending on if they receive “social acknowledgment” for their experiences or if there is a “self-perceived rejection by extended social environments (e.g., acquaintances, colleagues, local authorities).” It should be noted that acceptance into social communities “could be even more important than self-perceived rejection by family” (Maercker & Müller, 2004, p. 350).

A survivor-to-survivor therapeutic community (S2STC) communication model (Vardeman-Winter et al., 2014) could evolve pre-disaster within vulnerable neighborhoods and cities that proactively analyze their risk and crisis management plans prior to most residents suffering any physical losses. Careful scrutiny would be needed to address modifications for survivor interviews, social therapy, and the cyclic nature of the S2S TC communication model. Inevitably, S2S TCs will most likely result from a need for support post-crisis.

Replicating the SKRH project, community members would share narratives of similar experience utilizing social therapy without therapeutic tasks in a safe environment of trust, countenancing for a culture of inquiry. The S2STC would be a safe haven for those who have

suffered loss to speak openly over time, addressing temporality, with others who have already been there/done that, and have come out the other side with renewed focus, growth and resilience. It is with the knowledge, through studying the collective narratives from our past, that we can both understand the culture of survivors and strategize our future responses to reduce vulnerabilities in marginalized communities when crises occur.

Thomas Carlyle stated, “[History] may be called, more generally still, the Message, verbal or written, which all Mankind delivers to everyman and is foreshadowing of the very existence of the foregone conclusion that future catastrophes and subsequent recoveries will be realized” (Hawkins & Maurer, 2010, p. 1783). The cycle of life reifies history’s past in our present everyday lives. Shared narratives allow a glimpse of history for the benefit of the future. Narratives are less important to remember with detailed precision and more significant in demonstrating the process survivors use to recount for making sense of their own experiences of loss and devastation (Hawkins & Maurer, 2010).

Narratives from survivors of natural disasters initially communicate feelings ranging from disorientation and emotional exhaustion to post-disaster guilt, shame, abandonment, and embarrassment. Many display the need to try to “pay it back” by “paying it forward” while they are still in the recovery phase of rebuilding. Unable to communicate their critical need for continued support results in avoidance tactics of their original support systems further alienating them from the community (George, 2013).

George, a survivor of the Brisbane floods along with her participants, conducted survivor-to-survivor interviews post-disaster. She found when survivors shared their personal stories with other survivors the communication process allowed for messages to be received, understood, and reciprocated. This resulted in sense-making outcomes being realized through

the receipt of reciprocating supportive messages regarding the enormity of the survivors' losses from others.

Storytelling through shared narratives allows survivors to look for shared characteristics of the collective group, find the heroes of the story that we can identify with (Tonkin, 1992), and question how we would respond, given the same circumstances. Narratives create new knowledge of cultural understanding and acceptance while acknowledging that life will continue for survivors after devastation. Narratives can assist in the rebound, recovery, and rebuilding of lives and communities post-disaster through recovery communication. This study will use survivor narratives to discover shared characteristics of the natural disaster survivor community to bring about understanding of how recovery communication facilitates the building of community through stories.

**Research Question:**

The purpose of this study was to investigate community through survivor-to-survivor recovery communication as a means to create connection and cultural understanding for victims of natural disasters. This study will contribute to individual, organizational, and healthcare initiatives creating best practices for post-crisis recovery communication while assisting survivors in their need to regain a sense of community and support during rebound, recovery, and rebuilding cycles. The following research question guided my inquiry:

RQ1: How is “community” characterized collectively by natural disaster victims during survivor-to-survivor recovery communication?



## **Chapter 3**

### **Methods**

#### **Beginnings of the SKRH Project**

A year after the devastating hurricanes, more than 100,000 evacuees continued to live in the Houston area (Lindahl, 2006). During the initial time of sheltering them in the Dome and Convention Center, volunteers worked to gather and disseminate clothing, shoes, food, and other crucial items to the displaced communities. Lindahl explained:

The material needs of the survivors were undeniably great, and they in turn expressed great gratitude for our gifts. Yet, in listening to these men and women, I discovered immediately that they needed something far less tangible and far more valuable than their third second-hand shirt or their second tube of toothpaste. They needed to tell us their stories. And we needed to hear them.

Listening intently to the survival story of “one man in his fifties, six-foot-five, bone thin,” Lindahl realized he “had come to the convention center prepared to find victims, but in their places I found instead the most remarkable heroes” (p. 1,528). It was an extraordinary experience “having received the gift of his story,” said Lindahl, and he “felt the need for others to hear him, and to hear the other stranger-neighbors whose words so affected all of us who worked at the shelters” (p.1528). From this experience, the 3-year SKRH project was conceptualized, created, and subsequently conducted.

Dr. Lindahl is a world renowned expert within the survivor-centered disaster recovery community. He is an expert in the field of folklore studies as well as a distinguished scholar within the Department of English at the University of Houston. His knowledge both within and outside the halls of academia has resulted in the creation of the global collaborative

nonprofit organization, the International Commission on Survivor-Centered Disaster Recovery. He has created, participated, and funded activity in subsequent responses modeled after the SKRH project in numerous other countries, including the disaster-weary country of Haiti. His contributions to this field of study are invaluable.

### **Data Collection Method**

*Secondary analysis of extant data.* The entire archive of the Surviving Katrina and Rita in Houston Project consists of four hundred and thirty-three interviews. For the purposes of this thesis, as well as because of the limitations of time and scope, I did not listen to the entire archive but chose a sample of twenty-nine narratives to analyze. I obtained access to the dataset through Dr. Lindahl. The archive encompasses a comprehensive Filemaker database hosted online by the University of Houston and accessible in Dr. Lindahl's office and at home.

In addition, I had access to audio files and additional documents on a portable hard drive to access from home. Although there have been numerous informative publications from this dataset by Dr. Lindahl within academia and folklore addressing disaster studies from the survivor perspective, a secondary analysis of extant data enables examination of the narratives for communication theory and applicable discipline specific research.

The original project was a response, not a study. As such, this thesis is one of the first to conduct a social science investigation on the dataset with the hopes of keeping intact the original intent of the creator of the project; to not silence survivor voices but instead listen to their stories and learn from their expertise as participants in the retelling of their own disaster experiences and life histories. Revisiting the narratives through a communication lens will

allow for insight to be gained by shifting from the participatory survivor-to-survivor framework to an observer of the documented response.

*Unit of Analysis.* Each individual narrative I retrieved from the SKRH project was a unit of analysis, which made “the object of investigation the story itself” (Riessman, 1993, p. 1). I received no instructions on which interviews to include or exclude. Furthermore, individual narrators’ stories were not revealed or discussed with me prior to my listening to the audios files. The audios included in this study were arbitrarily selected with the exception that if an interviewer had successfully engaged a narrator, allowing the survivor-narrator to tell their own story, I searched for addition files coded to that interviewer’s ID. The audio and document files were on a portable hard drive accessed at home. The audio and transcript files were de-identified using only letters and numbers and I did not obtain additional information about any narrator until after I had listened to the entire interview.

## **Participants**

The SKRH interviews were conducted over the course of approximately two years and included both paid survivor-interviewers and volunteer survivor-narrators. My sample of twenty-nine interviews is drawn exclusively from the survivor-narrator dataset. Survivor-to-survivor interviews, mostly-one-on-one, were held at various locations in Houston and surrounding areas in homes, apartments, churches, and universities. The recordings varied in length. Demographic and identification information is below (see Table 1) indicating some participants had undefined records. This information may have been withheld by the narrator or not requested by the interviewer.

The sample of twenty-nine interviews resulted in the following demographic information:

Gender – seventeen female and twelve male.

Ages – ranged from seventeen to eighty-two years-of-age with four undefined.

Cultural identity – eighteen participants identified as African American; one as White; one as Cajun; and nine were undefined.

The pre-storm neighborhood linked to the highest percentage of survivors was New Orleans.

East accounting ten participants, almost for a third of the total narratives studied.

The majority (24) of the participants were born in New Orleans.

All of the participants were displaced by Hurricane Katrina.

#	Hurricane	City Born	Age	Gender	Cultural Identity	Pre-storm Neighborhood
1	Katrina	New Orleans	53	F	African American	Frenchman's Warf
2	Katrina	New Orleans	Undefined	M	Undefined	Mid-City New Orleans
3	Katrina	Bogalusa, LA	24	M	Undefined	Varnado
4	Katrina	New Orleans	40	M	Undefined	New Orleans
5	Katrina	New Orleans	17	M	African American	New Orleans East
6	Katrina	New Orleans	68	M	Cajun	Waveland, MS/French Quarter
7	Katrina	New Orleans	68	M	Undefined	Lower Ninth Ward
8	Katrina	Atlanta, GA	Undefined	M	Undefined	Bay Saint Louis
9	Katrina	New Orleans	35	F	African American	New Orleans East
10	Katrina	New Orleans	22	M	African American	New Orleans East
11	Katrina	New Orleans	21	M	African American	Metairie
12	Katrina	New Orleans	52	F	Undefined	New Orleans East
13	Katrina	New Orleans	59	M	Undefined	New Orleans East
14	Katrina	New Orleans	56	F	African American	Mid-City
15	Katrina	New Orleans	28	F	African American	Westwego
16	Katrina	New Orleans	21	F	African American	New Orleans
17	Katrina	New Orleans	21	F	African American	New Orleans East
18	Katrina	Houston, TX	27	F	African American	Algiers
19	Katrina	New Orleans	23	F	African American	Upper Ninth Ward
20	Katrina	New Orleans	38	F	Undefined	New Orleans East
21	Katrina	New Orleans	42	F	African American	Seventh Ward
22	Katrina	New Orleans	59	M	African American	Metairie
23	Katrina	New Orleans	82	F	African American	Metairie
24	Katrina	Eunice, LA	31	F	White	Lakeview
25	Katrina	New Orleans	Undefined	F	Undefined	New Orleans East
26	Katrina	New Orleans	60	F	African American	Lower Ninth Ward
27	Katrina	New Orleans	20	M	African American	New Orleans East
28	Katrina	New Orleans	Undefined	F	African American	Broadview
29	Katrina	Bogalusa, LA	37	F	African American	New Orleans East

**Table 1 Participant Demographic Information**

The great majority of participants with the SKRH project wanted their stories shared and their comments attributed to them. The release forms on file meet the legal and disciplinary requirements for de-identification of participants but the project requires permission before publishing their words. Length of time and scope force me to treat just certain aspects of the survivor experience. Future publication arising from this thesis will mention their names with their express consent. In the meantime, the fairest thing in this case is to identify the speakers by first name only. I identified the participants in this essay by first name only, except where there are multiple short quotes supporting a general theme or characteristic within a single sentence, in which case, no names were noted within the paragraph.

### **Procedure**

*Obtaining and accessing the sample.* I took sporadic notes while listening to the audios about key phrases and emerging themes but I did not transcribe any audios verbatim the first time I listened to them so that I could hear the voices and stories without worrying about missing any part of the stories. After listening to the audio file, I accessed the online Filemaker archive for demographic and other survivor information. I also reviewed the corresponding word document of the same name if it was available. I did not check to see which audios had already been transcribed before listening. If an existing transcript was not complete or documented for an audio I wanted to include in my study, I immediately went back and transcribed the portions that were relevant to this investigation. Some audios had poor sound quality and, if I could not hear the interviews with my headphones on, then those narratives were excluded entirely. I listened to the audios for approximately three to four

minutes to determine which to exclude and to ensure the criteria for inclusion had not been met adequately.

If sound was not an issue, then interviews were included or excluded by the following process of elimination: I listened to the first few minutes of randomly selected audio files while adhering to the following criteria as a guide for final collection: Are survivor-interviewers eliciting emotions or interpretations; and did survivor-narrators tell their story. This criteria analyzes the behavior of the interviewer, helps determine whether or not they yielded “the storyteller the floor,” highlights who had narrative control during the interview, and reveals if “solicitous listening,” defined as, when “the model survivor interviewer never interrupts,” was engaged with the survivor-narrator so the storyteller can “go their own way” (Lindahl, 2012, p. 157).

Permitting narrators to tell their stories without leading questions or interruptions from the interviewer validates survivors, gives them agency to enact their own truth, and allows them the room to make their own meaning from their lived experiences (Lindahl, 2012). After determining the survivor-narrator was telling their own story in their own words with minimal interpretation or additional comments or questions from the survivor-interviewer, I marked that record for inclusion in this study and began transcription and coding of the narrative.

### **Data Analysis**

*Narrative analysis.* This research is framed through the lens of narrative analysis constructing a shared survivor schema of community through a thematic narrative method of coding survivor stories. Although there is not a “consensual definition” among scholars of “narrative” (Saldaña, 2013, p. 131), for the purposes of this thesis, narrative analysis will be

defined as “exploring the nature of narratives” (Littlejohn, 2009, p. 674) and “a strategy for sense-making” (p. 675). Additionally, it will be informed by the understanding that “stories express a kind of knowledge that uniquely describes human experience in which actions and happenings contribute positively and negatively to attaining goals and fulfilling purposes” (Polkinghorne, 1995, p.8, as cited in Saldaña, 2013, p. 131). Power and identity are elements “within the framework” of narrative inquiry and “individuals who have traditionally been marginalized” and silenced are encouraged to participate and share their own experiences as “each person has his or her story” to tell (p. 676). Narrative analysis complements investigative disciplines such as “identity development; psychological, social, and cultural meanings and values; critical/feminist studies; and documentation of the life course – for example, through oral histories” (Saldaña, 2013, p. 132).

I applied narrative analysis through an interpretative paradigm, which is defined as “a way of seeing both reality and knowledge as constructed and reproduced through communication, interactions, and practice” (Tracy, 2013, p. 62). This interpretive paradigm is “designed to examine phenomena, issues, and people’s lives holistically” (Daiute & Lightfoot, 2004, p. xi; Saldaña, 2013, p. 131) while revealing “truths about human experience” (Riessman, 2008, p. 10). I used inductive reasoning while analyzing the data. Inductive reasoning has been defined as “a ‘bottom-up’ type of reasoning that begins with specific observations and particular circumstances and then moves on to broader generalizations and theories” (Tracey, 2013, p. 36). This reasoning was applied when examining open-ended interviews in the archives, focusing on survivors’ cultural descriptions of community as related to their “particular circumstances” (Tracy, 2013, p. 36). Co-constructed cultural meaning and values build a collective, culturally sensitive, shared

narrative of survivor-to-survivor recovery communication centrally located within a social therapeutic community structure.

I analyzed the unstructured interviews from an emic perspective, which is defined as “a perspective in which behavior is described from the actor’s point of view and is context-specific” (Tracey, 2013, p. 35). This perspective validates the survivor-narrator’s first-person point of view, or “verstehen,” a verb in German “meaning to understand” and “used in English as a noun describing participants’ first-person perspective on their personal experience as well as on their society, culture, and history” (Tracey, 2013, p. 63). Verstehen gives narrators both power and identity within narrative inquiry and honors the narrators’ lived experience. Incorporating active listening and an interpretive paradigm, I investigated behaviors, intentions and emotions as told in “first person perspective that participants have on their experience” acknowledging that co-created “knowledge” is “socially constructed through language and interaction, and reality is connected and known through societies’ cultural and ideological categories” (Tracy, 2013, p.41).

*Schemas.* I examined patterns as revealed through the displacement narratives to uncover predominant themes within the schema of community that addressed loss, resiliency, spirituality, looking back, moving forward, and the healing effects of creating survivor communities. These communities encouraged participation in the sharing of stories and rebuilding of a sociocultural identity that was, for many, lost in the relocation after the hurricanes. Survivors lost everything, including their sense of self and identity, in the place and space that included their family, friends, neighbors, co-workers, and communities.

Schemas, or cultural understandings, “are built up from experience” (Quinn, 2005, p. 45) and can be reconstructed with “patterns across the interviews and passages, that would be



evidence of shared stable understandings” (Quinn, 2005, p. 43). According to Quinn, these cultural understandings incorporate keywords, metaphors, and reasoning to reconstruct reality with metaphor “mappings” representing “some source domain” (Quinn, 2005, p. 48). Metaphors are the clues behind cultural understandings because of “what they do” when they “clarify the speaker’s meaning for the ordinary listener” and “the cultural understanding behind it, for the analysis” (Strauss & Quinn, 1997, pp. 156-157). Littlejohn (2009) defines schemas as “mental representations” of “shared social reality” (p. 167). I identified the overarching schema of community by listening for displacement narratives with consistent patterns across multiple interviews and passages enabling keyword coding of frequent themes.

*Themes.* I chose to employ thematic narrative coding within narrative analysis to uncover overarching themes within the schema of community. A theme has been defined as “an *extended phrase or sentence* that identifies what a unit of data is *about* and/or what it *means*” (Boyatzis, 1998, as cited by Saldaña, 2013, p. 175). Additionally, a theme is further defined as “an abstract entity that brings meaning and identity to a recurrent [patterned] experience and its variant manifestations. As such, a theme captures and unifies the nature or basis of the experience into a meaningful whole” (Boyatzis, 1998, p. 362, as cited by Saldaña, 2013, p. 175-716).

Thematic narrative analysis is one of several diverse methods within narrative analysis for coding and analyzing data. Riessman recognizes it alongside other narrative methods including “structural, dialogic, and performative” (as cited in Saldaña, 2013, p. 132). Narrative coding explores “participant experiences and actions to understand the human condition through story” (Saldaña, 2013, p. 132). Thematic methods frame “primary

attention on ‘what’ is said rather than ‘how’, ‘to whom’, or ‘for what purposes’” (Riessman, 2008, p. 53-54). Thematic narrative coding has been identified as “akin to what scholars in folklore and history use with archival data.” This method examines survivor stories holistically, keeping it “intact” (p. 53) for interpretive purposes.

Thematic methods concentrate on events and experiences and not on how a story is told, what words are used to tell it, or to whom it is being told. Generally, “language, form, or interaction” (p. 59) are not of concern with this approach while analyzing personal stories in this way is beneficial to reconstructing the past. Moreover, time and space are considered during analysis in addition to the narrative. Finally, thematic analysis lends itself to identifying shared characteristics by inductively generating “a set of stable concepts that can be used to theorize across cases” (p. 74).

*Codebook.* I examined certain portions of the survivor-narratives and discovered shared characteristics within the overarching schema of community (see Appendix A). Allowing the content of the interviews scripts to lead the research, I studied distinct attributes aligned with the culture of survivors; investigated survivors’ engagement in communication recovery and community; and explored lived experiences that resonate as collective shared narratives. While listening to the audio interviews, I documented words and phrases that might relate to community which resulted in the attached codebook. As the codebook details, the process of thematic narrative coding generated numerous subcategories that flowed into nine major themes that then framed the three main categories under the overarching schema of community.

I examined twenty-nine interviews using saturation as the point for discontinuing coding. Saturation is defined as “when no new information seems to emerge during coding,

that is, when no new properties, dimensions, conditions, actions/interactions, or consequences are seen in the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 136, as cited in Saldaña, 2013, p. 222). Once it was discovered that the subsequent narratives did not contribute any new themes or subcategories within the schema of community, I stopped listening of the interviews and coding.

I expected my thesis to aid in the co-creation of knowledge through assembling of shared characteristics from the survivor-narrators that can help numerous organizations, corporations, government agencies, nonprofits, first-responders, and individuals while bringing meaning and understanding to post-disaster developments. I uncovered how survivor-to-survivor recovery communication can lead to successful rebound, recovery, and rebuilding for victims of natural disasters. I drew upon the concept of story (survivor narrative), an overarching schema, and themes and subcategories that created coherence within survivor culture. Coherence is defined as when a story “hangs together as a consistent frame of meaning” (Littlejohn, 2009, p. 676) and illuminates a collective way of life. I employed thematic narrative coding identifying *in vivo* terms. *In vivo* is defined as sentences or phrasing directly quoted from the narrators’ experiences (Tracy, 2013, p. 119). These terms then led to the examination culture within survivor-to-survivor therapeutic communities that developed during the disaster and after relocating to Houston. These communities validated the participants and gave them agency to share their own lived experiences as knowledgeable experts in their own lived experiences.

*Validity.* With the understanding that thematic narrative coding allows “categories to emerge from the data” (Saldaña, 2013, p. 177), which could lend itself to subjectivity, I documented subcategories that fed into broader themes describing “behavior within a culture,

iconic statements, and morals from participant stories” (Saldaña, 2013, p. 176). My results supported Dr. Lindahl’s previously published survivor-centered response literature, which also addresses reliability. While my bias is reflective of various comparable themes and categories similar to that of the many of the narrators, I did not search for parallels nor favor one kind of information over another.

I noted stories where the narrators’ experiences did not line up with my own personal experiences and continued to listen for common elements shared collectively with previous and successive survivor stories. I did question whether the label of survivor was appropriate for me in relation to those who had suffered exponentially more trauma in comparison to my Hurricane Ike evacuation story. Though I identified with those who had less to begin with, I did not diminish those stories where recovery was easier due to financial means. Countless losses were irreplaceable, whether they were treasured family photographs or one-of-a-kind antiques.

My analysis was focused on the narrators’ truths being told separate from my story, how they survived their storm experience, and how community played a role in their recovery, if at all. I did not have a supportive survivor community and wanted to know what influencers make people get up and move forward, or give up, after devastating loss. I wanted to understand the role of community and how it could help facilitate rebound, recovery, and rebuilding for those who have given up on life. It should be noted, I did not measure how community might harm people during recovery.

In telling your story you own the experience. Otherwise, the experience owns you.

Carl Lindahl (Lindahl, UH Moment: 'Survivor to Survivor', 2013)

*Subjective and Reflexive.* This essay is reflexive with the knowledge and understanding that I am a survivor of Hurricane Ike who experienced devastating loss and trauma in 2008. Reflexivity works within a declarative mode framework by which the survivor-observer systematically explores their individual methods underlying their own subjective interpretative processes within the text of produced knowledge conveyed to the readers (Visweswaran, 1994, p. 79). This exercise of self-analysis brings about an understanding of how the whole contributes to the comprehension of identification in relation to the partial with the acknowledgment that “how we think we know what we know is neither transparent nor innocent” (Visweswaran, 1994, p. 80). This section includes reflexivity, as “how I know what I know” and is reflected in the understanding that my perspective has been informed through my own survival and subsequent personal loss. Transparency results in the telling as it relates to how I know what I know (Visweswaran, 1994, p. 84). Below, I address my own reflexivity behind how I know what I know in accordance with the research I conducted.

Reflexively listening to the survivor stories was challenging. My survivor story shared many characteristics with the narrators’ stories. I had to take many breaks, stand up often, and walk away from my computer. I cried. My stomach became upset. My heart hurt and my head ached. I felt anxiety and, a few times overwhelming panic, while listening to survivor stories that were similar to my own. I was unable to continue at times during a few of the more graphic scenes. I felt as though I would throw up. I relived my past, my story, with every survivor story I listened to.

I lost everything to Hurricane Ike. For years, my own family didn’t understand the magnitude of what ‘everything’ meant. They would remind me of things they had given me

over the course of our lives and I would continually have to remind them, “I don’t have that anymore. Remember, I lost everything.” My family didn’t experience the hurricane the same way as I did. Although they were sympathetic, they still didn’t understand the magnitude of what it means to be homeless, possession-less, jobless, and hopeless. They couldn’t comprehend what happened to me or my reality.

Unfortunately for most of the narrators, multiple family members experienced losing all of their material possessions and homes. It was a devastating shared experience. There were a few who were “blessed” and did not lose much and some of them donated to causes, like the Red Cross, to help others in need. Only one of the stories went into depth about insurance. That survivor had been born into status and privilege according to his story of his family name and upbringing. I had a difficult time feeling kinship as he recounted his valuables and the fight with adjusters over replacement values. He spoke with entitlement and sounded ungrateful, unlike the others who were more like me. Like most of the survivors in my sample, I had no insurance to help with rebuilding. In spite of this feeling, I could still recognize and validate his experience and losses.

I wasn’t going to evacuate for Hurricane Ike. My sister called me at three o’clock in the morning the day of the hurricane and pleaded with me to leave. Many of the Katrina survivor stories mention similar scenes. She said the Strand, which was less than a mile from my home, was already under water and to please turn on the Weather Channel. That shocked me as there was no rain yet. The storm surge had begun and the water was rising on the back side of the island near me. The seawall would not protect my home from flooding. Like others, I did not take the hurricane seriously. I had evacuated for Rita a few years earlier and had experienced the 13-hour traffic jam shown on national news. I wasn’t going there again.

I didn't pack much when I finally decided to evacuate, only a few days of summer clothes, my dogs, and their supplies. Account after account of people leaving with only a few pairs of shorts, a pair of jeans, and a few t-shirts reminded me of doing the same. Just as they thought, I also thought, "I'll be back in a few days." I wasn't worried. I prepared for Hurricane Ike by not preparing, the same way many of Hurricane Katrina survivors had done.

Every time someone recounted how they lost "everything", I remembered the totality of that statement. The most painful moments for me were seeing the full plastic bins of water-logged and moldy photographs, slides and videos; my family history. I had been the family photographer. Like others who lost pictures and precious mementos, I understood their feelings when they spoke of priceless and irreplaceable things. When someone spoke of the first time they went home to find the height of water lines marking the levels, I remembered my first time being allowed back on the island two weeks after the storm made landfall and coming home to an eight-foot water line on my home.

When I heard one survivor comment, "I have a bad lung and the breathing for me is out," my persistent lung issues and respiratory disease from being exposed to black mold during the cleanup on the island came to mind. I lost my health to the hurricane, but I am still alive, unlike many of the people described in the survivors' stories. I sobbed hearing the stories of children falling into the water and the bodies floating, or laying over chairs, or by the dumpster; dead. My sister, who was one year younger, fell down the stairs in the dark when she had no electricity after the hurricane. She died at 45-years of age in the hospital three weeks later. I went between the hospital, taking care of her, and cleaning out my home every day until she died.

When a survivor said, “My oldest sister, she passed away at age 35, from a form of cancer that they weren’t familiar with,” it reminded me of when my mother was diagnosed with breast cancer a few weeks after my sister’s death. In a short period of time, I lost all of my possessions, my sister, my health, and then my mother was faced with a life-threatening illness. All of the stories of the elderly having medical issues also reminded me of my mother, who has many medical issues, including diabetes. When I heard, “I lost my livelihood,” I remembered the day that my boss told me I would be fired if I didn’t come back to work, even though I had no way to commute to the island and I had no work clothes. I lost all of my clothing except for what I had put in my car when evacuating.

One of the most poignant responses I identified with from the audio recordings was when a survivor was asked if they had anything to add to their story by the interviewer. This open-ended question allows for the interviewees to add what is still on their heart without any leading. The response was: “No. Just – any solutions, any guidance, any directions? What’s your opinion?” I know that lost feeling. I had cried out, “What’s the point? What’s the point, God?” What was the point of rebuilding when it can all be taken away again? What was the point of living; I didn’t know. Conducting this research and listening to the survivor stories, was gut-wrenching but I would not have chosen another topic to research. Even though many days I could not breathe and it took me months to finish listening, it was a labor of love and brought validation. What others experienced, how they felt, and what they thought were things that I also experienced, felt, and believed. I wanted to honor their experiences while helping other survivors on the road to recovery with this investigation.



## Chapter 4

### Results

I investigated survivor-narrator stories from the SKRH project response to determine how the schema of community is characterized collectively by natural disaster victims during survivor-to-survivor recovery communication. I examined certain portions of the survivor-narrator stories to discover shared characteristics that identify the themes most important to the storytellers in creating a schema of community; a “mental” representation of “shared social reality” (Littlejohn, 2009, p. 167). My results identifying the schema of community are divided into three main categories: geographic, relationships, and roles or identities (see Table 2).

Community	Themes	Subcategories
Geographic	Neighborhoods	Areas, blocks, streets, apartments
	Cities, states	In Louisiana, outside of Louisiana
	Landmarks as shelters	In Louisiana, outside of Louisiana
Relationships	Family	Immediate, extended
	Friends	Neighbors, coworkers, classmates, acquaintances
	Spiritual	God, pastors, congregations
Roles or Identities	Survivors	Self, others
	Positions of Power or Authority	Politicians, bosses, military, police, nonprofits, Government agencies, community first responders, TV news, reporters on the ground
	Media	

**Table 2: Major themes and subcategories influencing the schema of community.**

Additionally, I have narrowed my effort to examine areas relating to specific physical spaces, familial and other relational connectedness, and positions of power corresponding to survivor populations within the overarching dynamic of society’s hierarchical structure. Due

to the nature of storytelling, the narratives were neither told chronologically nor singular in focus but contained multiple characteristics within each experience creating an overlap of coding within themes and subcategories. This overlap is a natural occurrence when sharing stories depicting various actors and actions over time, and the quotes contained in this thesis represent the commonalities of community for survivors within recovery communication.

### **Geographic**

I had a book. I was the one who had everybody's numbers. I called them specially during the storms and afterwards, I mean, during the whole situation. And we, as friends, ah, if something would happen, you know, down there or with paperwork, we would call each other and say, 'Did you know such-and-such was?' 'No!' And I'd say, 'Here, well take this here'. There were times when I would be on the phone talking to individuals and, after a while, I really recognized that I was a counselor [laughs] 'cause everybody thought I had it going on. I knew everything. Jesus, no I didn't, but it was fortunate for me that we were in the hotel with a lot of adjusters, for especially during the insurance part and ah, we befriended them and we had other people that were from New Orleans and you just had all walks of life in the jobs and things like that. We knew if somebody found something out then you told the other ones and then, of course, I was on the phone telling my extended family as to what to do and what to expect and there were some of them that called in the middle of the night. It didn't matter, 'cause I mean, what you, you couldn't sleep, or lay. You had to walk 'em through. I have a lot of friends now that um, who are not quite ready to jump over the line here to move on because they're trying, they're in hoping that they will, can go back. And our city is just, our neighborhood, our community is just not

back. And it's not, it doesn't look like it's gonna be back. The way that they're telling us that you're not gonna be safe, the main thing that I think everybody wants to hear – and it's no 'think', I know – is that: 'Can you get the levees, not at a three, when it comes up as a three, 'cause as you know, the storms are throwing fives at us; can you raise it up?'

Carolyn, a Hurricane Katrina survivor born in New Orleans who had lived in New Orleans East pre-storm with her husband of thirty-nine years, shared the above story of loss, devastation, and uncertainty after the storm. She had evacuated before Katrina made landfall. Her narrative speaks to how geographic locations were central to the core of community and gave individuals a sense of identity, support, and belonging before the storm. Loss of community led many to feel out-of-place after relocating. The corporeal anchor that tied them to their daily existence was gone from their everyday lives. Whether it was a state, city, neighborhood, the street they lived on, or one of the many places they found themselves during and after the storm, the survivors' linkages to community were represented by physical places. Many of the survivors associated geographic spaces where connections were born and built, support was given and received, and community was created.

*Neighborhoods.* Pre- and post-storm, survivors came from and arrived at a multitude of geographic locations that included descriptions varying from a macro view of regional areas within larger boundaries (e.g. "New Orleans East," "West Bank," "Downtown," "North Houston," "Uptown"), to specific borders (e.g. the "Seventh Ward," "Lower Ninth Ward," "Jefferson Parish," "Garden District," "Frenchman's Warf," "east of Wesley Village," "Prince Polk"), to areas near landmarks or well-known entities (e.g. "Dillard University," "Charity Hospital," "Mount Zion," "Rosenwald Park"), to specific streets (e.g. "Williams

Boulevard,” “Erato Street,” “Crowder”). The micro view included specific apartments or complexes (e.g. “Claiborne”), some of which were labeled “Project” within the descriptions or names (e.g. “The Projects,” “Calliope Project,” “St. Bernard Project”).

Joan is a fifty-three-year old woman who spent her entire life in New Orleans. She did not evacuate and was one of the survivors who was rescued by a boat and taken to a bridge for safety from the flooding. She details her many different group memberships by geographic location when she speaks of assorted communities she has lived including her childhood neighborhood, her neighborhood before the storm, as well as her other family members’ places of residence pre-Katrina, when she explains in various vignettes during the telling of her story:

I was born in the Ninth Ward. Not the Lower Ninth Ward, but the Ninth Ward. I lived there in Desire Project for eight years. I lived in Florida Project for eight years, a family of five girls, and my mother.

My other sisters— the second oldest was, is a resident of Reserve, Louisiana, and that’s where she still lives. And my twin sister was my landlord and next-door neighbor for years. My younger sister, she lived in, in the Seventh Ward, of New Orleans. I lived in Frenchman’s Wharf. And I did not intend on evacuating, for, for Katrina.

They lived in an apartment building right off of Schiffman-Touro, near Dillard University. [Daughter’s family]

At the time of the hurricane, as I say, my twin sister and I were – she was my landlady. So, we lived next door to each other for years. We were a very close-knit family of sisters. I had only recently moved to New Orleans East four months before

the hurricane. I lived in New Orleans East and, the Frenchman's Wharf, which was by a very large body of water, right in the center of the apartment complex.

Like Joan, many characterized their past and current neighborhoods as embodying a "close-knit" community and most felt safe and connected. Henry is a fifty-nine year old man who was born in New Orleans. He lived with and was taking care of his elderly mother Dorothy in Metairie, the first suburb of New Orleans, before the storm. Henry reminisced:

I had a beautiful childhood. I grew up in the area called Sixth Ward, which is downtown, about eight blocks off Canal Street and we lived on Dumaine Street. It was a close-knitted neighborhood, everybody knew everybody; everybody looked out for everybody else's kids, you know, when we were running around it was like we were always under the eye of some parent, so that if, if we did anything wrong, anything bad happened, it didn't take long for the news to get home.

Carolyn spoke about how everyone "looked out for each other," and her neighborhood "didn't have people coming in that we didn't know." Ultimately, she connected her neighborhood community emotionally as the place she called "home": "It was my home. We had some good. We had some bad, but it was home and it was the only home I've ever known. I was born there, raised, all the nine yards. Our community was a very tight community. We knew everybody in our block, our subdivision."

While most felt safe in their own homes as adults, some, including Joan, felt they had lived in "pretty rough" neighborhoods at some point in their lives. A common characteristic of those who experienced negative situations in their neighborhood communities was to positively attribute their resilience to those traumatic experiences. Joan shared a story about her adolescence:

Joan: Once we came outside the apartment, there was a lot of fighting, because, as I say, we lived in the project. And, on the way to school and on the way from school, for some reason, it was always, fights. We had to fight to get in, in the apartment. We had to fight in school. And so, I guess they kind of made me a fighter. And I think that, I, I subject that to my reasoning for, for, surviving all of this. Surviving life.

Interviewer: 'Cause you're a fighter?

Joan: A fighter.

Joan sees her lived experiences in her childhood neighborhood as life lessons. "It was school, prayers, and, and learning what was best to survive in life." She shared that she misses the "familiarity" of her community the most post-Katrina and "neighbors that I know. Even if I didn't know someone name, then I knew they face, I knew – I either went to school with they child, or their children went to school with my children. So it was comfortable." Growing up tough, she survived her neighborhood and it became her community. Rodreca, a twenty-one year old woman born in New Orleans who moved around much of her childhood, ending up back in New Orleans agrees:

It's a black neighborhood. Basically, not low class but middle class black people. It's a lot of older people that stayed there, you know, they'd been there for years and back in the day, it used to be kind of a rough neighborhood but it's grown to be, be much better Quiet, you know, you rarely heard anything. My next door, you know, he was a young guy. I know the guy across the street was a young guy, you know. They may have got into some trouble every now and then but, you know, for the most part, it was quiet. It was quiet.

Many survivors felt safe, comfortable, and familiar in their neighborhoods. The storm, as Carolyn notes, changed everything. People lost those ties to their geographic communities:

We had everything so comfortable for my friends to come and enjoy. It was just, it was just, I would say, maybe perfect. But everything has to change. And we had this storm come through and it has just tore all of us apart.

*Cities – Outside of Texas.* While survivors identified a sense of community with their neighborhoods, they also felt part of a larger community due to their affiliation with the city of New Orleans and the surrounding areas. Numerous narratives recounted, “I was born in New Orleans,” “I am a native New Orelanian,” and “I grew up in New Orleans.” Many proudly addressed their longevity, “I’ve been there all my life. I’ve never lived anyplace else.” The city fostered a sense of belonging and acceptance. Henry outlined how the “People were friendly and, you know, they shared and they cared about one another, you know. And everybody was – just to get together and be nice to one another, and stuff like that.” Tammie, who lived in Westwego, shared she liked, “the togetherness and the quietness” and everyone knew their “neighbors; it was very family oriented.” Characteristics enjoyed included: “I liked the parks in the area, I loved the schools. There's a lot of things I liked. I especially liked that it was a very quiet neighborhood.”

Some survivors relocated to other cities during the course of their lives pre-Katrina, including Lafayette, Baton Rouge, and Waveland, Mississippi, only to return to New Orleans. Reasons for leaving included school, marriage, and jobs to name a few but the motivations for returning were a love for the city of New Orleans, to be near family, and a desire to live near their childhood communities. Similarly, survivors characterized their

fellow New Orleanians as “my people” when talking about their relationship with their city. New Orleans was considered “a blessed city; most hurricanes come and don’t hit us,” and it was “the place to be.”

*Cities – In Texas.* The city community of New Orleans, Louisiana contrasted sharply with Houston, Texas for the evacuees. Geographically, Houston was different and frightening for some older adults due to its massive size, the inconvenience of having to commute for daily needs, and not being conducive for walking. Henry explains:

My mother still talks like you can go across the street to the store. Baby, in Texas, y’all got a lot of room here. They say ‘right up the street’ but they talking about a mile away. You know, when we say right up the street, we in the same block or the next block. So, it took me a while to get used to that vernacular, and when they tell me ‘right up’, now I point ‘Where? How much? Let me know’, you know, and then, then I’ll tackle it.

The size of the city, lack of local neighborhood events, and difficult public and private transportation needs are the major causes for the inability of survivors to create community. Henry illuminates further about the limitations and ability to meet people and create community:

Life in Houston for me, and you got to remember you’re speaking about a native New Orleanian, and I just got through telling about how I owe them a debt of gratitude – it’s boring. It’s boring because, number one, here I have no transportation; it’s boring because it’s too far, everything is too far. Okay, I mean, even when I, even when I was working, the Metro system is beautiful but to get from here to the Metro system is, is about eleven blocks, so by the time I get to work I’ve already done a day’s work,



you know, which is I guess has nothing to do with, you know, the things that have transpired and the people who have helped us out along the way. But, you know, when if you, if you know; you, you're from New Orleans. And you know New Orleans is a eight-day-a-week, 25-hour-a-day town; things shut down here at two o'clock. We never close, so this is where the boring part comes in, and I would imagine that probably if I had transportation – you know, because, I mean, there's a lot of things that you used to do that you can't do no more – like the old song say bout, 'It's hard for me to be me and be here.'

Lindzy speaks of geographic areas in Houston as being far apart, the traffic congested, and the time it takes to get places, as compared to New Orleans, lengthy and dangerous:

In Houston, you got the south side, you got the north side, the east, the west. In New Orleans, where I stayed at to downtown, it was like 10 minutes. Down here, it's like 20 minutes, 25, 30 minutes. You've got traffic all times of the day. People die in car accidents more than anything.

Evacuees collectively acknowledged the lack of access to a vehicle as a representative hindrance to creating community and rebuilding their lives in Houston: “material-wise, that I lost, was my car,” “in Texas, I’m devastated without a car,” and “in New Orleans, you can get about on the bus most any place, but here transportation is, you know, kind of poor.” Sharon relocated to Alvin, a city outside of Houston, and reiterated the difficulty to navigate large geographic spaces: “Well it’s strange because it’s like in the woods and they don’t really have nothing and you have to go so far to the stores, to get to where you have to go at.” Dorothy, an eighty-two year old female and mother to Henry, noted her inability to create

community as she once did in New Orleans when she said, “like they say, things are very far, that’s why I can’t get to go, you know, too many places.” Those fortunate enough to have transportation noted that, “people drive like crazy” in Houston.

Likewise, public transportation was either unavailable in areas where the evacuees found homes or they had “to be out there maybe wait two or three hours” for a bus, making it not only inconvenient but impossible to be timely for any type of meetings, activities, or gatherings. Additionally, survivors spoke to the reality that some “live in fear,” and describe Houston as “just completely strange” while Joan acknowledges that she’s “terrified if I get caught outside when it’s getting dark.” Individuals did not want to travel on public transportation after dark. Some inadvertently took the wrong bus and others did not get off at their correct stops. Bus routes were confusing, inefficient, and evacuees found they would rather stay home than be out after dark in Houston in an unfamiliar neighborhood lost and afraid. Joan sums living in the Houston area by saying:

Living in Houston is just completely different from living in New Orleans. One of the main reasons is that everything is so spread out. There’s no such thing as making a quick trip. There’s no place you can go and get back in thirty minutes. There’s so much that you can’t, that I’m used to, that I cannot even find here in Houston. I mean, from small things like going to the corner store and getting cold cuts. I – just this morning I tried to find some place where you could slice – where you can get freshly sliced, cheese or cold cuts. Everything you have to, onliest place you can get things like that, you have to run to a Wal-Mart, or Fiesta, places I’m not familiar with. So everything without transportation takes a very, very long time. Anytime I leave

out my door, it's not till – I don't get back till midnight. I mean, seemingly midnight, I know it's not that long.

*Cities – New Community.* In spite of the inconvenience, confusion, and underlying fear, many survivors stated that they would not be returning to the city of New Orleans post-Katrina. Some survivors expressed conflicting and contradictory emotions about returning to their geographic communities. Sharon said her life before had been, “better than what it is now, since Katrina come” in one breath then immediately followed up with “I have a life and I am happy now and I am more comfortable now,” when talking about living in Alvin. She expressed the underlying concern most survivors voiced about returning to New Orleans:

New Orleans is my home. And if I could go back there I would, but I prefer to stay right here for right now and try to work things out right here. And whenever New Orleans do pick up, or grow back like it used to, I might go back home, but right now I don't really want to go back home. I want to stay here and try to make this my home. I feel like Alvin, right now, is my home. It's my home right now and I got to accept being where I'm at right now and I hope other people else accept us too because this is us.

Survivors voiced concerns about rebuilding community in Houston. Ann said, “I feel there is a definite stigma to anyone that's moved here from Louisiana, especially due to the hurricane.” Survivors also voiced concerns about the city of New Orleans not allowing them to return home. Many feared not being welcome and accepted into communities in the cities where they evacuated to and had begun to rebuilding their lives. They were people without a place to call home or a community in which to find support and comfort.

Many felt that “New Orleans, it’s going to be a strange place to me.” Their families were gone. Their friends and neighbors were either evacuated to other cities or dead. Their jobs were gone. Their homes and belongings were destroyed. Their churches were empty. Their communities no longer existed. Rebuilding in Houston would be easier materialistically but finding a way to create community, when the one they lost has been scattered over numerous states, was a major concern for the survivor’s future recovery. Joan acknowledged her need to “build my life” and, despite all of the obstacles in front of her, she reiterated, “this is where I intend on doing it.” Most of the survivors voiced similar concerns, options, and choices.

*Landmarks as shelters – No safe places.* Landmarks were utilized as spaces where survivors congregated trying to survive during and after Hurricane Katrina made landfall. Survivors sought out places of safety, such as Charity Hospital, as the water began to rise and the levees were breaking. People heard that they should leave their homes and go to bridges for safety where rescue buses would be waiting. Individuals who evacuated before the storm went to hotels, relatives or family homes, and shelters across multiple states, including Louisiana, Mississippi, and Texas. Those that did not evacuate but survived the storm found themselves in deplorable living conditions. Most buildings had flood water. There was no electricity, drinking water, or food.

Robert, a forty-year old man who was born in New Orleans and grew up in the Calliope Housing Project, had teased people in the past for evacuating when hurricanes were in the gulf. During the storm he saved his neighbor who ceiling had collapsed. He describes those first hours:

I went home and went to sleep, the storm occurred, you know. It was an impact on my life because I thought my life was about to end, cause I was in the midst of things, and it was a scary, it was scary and water rising and water coming, raining, water rising and water just keep raining and, you know, I thought I wasn't going to make it. And the impact: it was, it was a, it was a tremendous impact. I mean.

People who evacuated to shelters near the Gulf found the buildings began to flood. Sam is one of the survivors who was not born in New Orleans or living there at the time of the hurricane. He shared the difficulty of trying to evacuate members from his gulf coast community after Katrina made landfall: "about between 6:30 and 7, that's when the water start climbing up the highway, over the highway and up to the shelter we were staying in." Survivors depended on each other to get to higher ground and safety. Others parked their "cars on the neutral ground" and were shocked to find "that didn't matter because, I mean, three hours later, we didn't even see our cars." People who did not leave found themselves in flooded homes or above flooded apartments. There was no safe place.

Robert shared how his neighbors "came by me. And I think it was some kind of surrendering, or some kind of, of – I'll just say it like this: it was a blessing that I was there, you know, to help out." He rescued "a lady next door", when "the roof came down on her." People knocked at his door and he told them, "No, you don't have to ask, come on in." He describes how a man told him "his refrigerator was floating" and Robert responded, "You don't have to tell me anymore. Just come on in." Robert, who wasn't rescued until three days after the storm, and the others from his neighborhood created community to survive the storm: "Me and the people in my house, the neighbors, we all stayed there together until we departed, you know." Robert adds, "That was the last time I saw those people."

*Landmarks as shelters – Outdoor public spaces.* Henry and his mother, Dorothy, stayed in their home as the flood waters rose. Eventually they were told to make their way to a bridge for rescue and found the conditions dehumanizing:

We were on the bridge for two nights, three days. That's a, and that was miserable, for me, to see my mother having to go through this, because she's a proud woman; she didn't want to go to the bathroom and she didn't want this, that and the other. But the best thing we could find was for her to sit on were the sides of the concrete where you would walk, if you were walking on the bridge. Well, this is where they had to congregate, right there and to use the rails and all this for their back support. Life on the bridge was – it wasn't nothing nice.

On the bridge – the “Claiborne overpass, this is the part that, that, that sits across from the Dome” – undergoing unimaginable circumstances, people began to help one another: “You got up on that bridge and you talked to people from downtown, you talked to people from other areas of town and how they got there.” Henry shared how “a guy that I knew, who was a good friend of mine before Katrina, it seemed like we just bonded right then and there.” They decided “we got to do something” for all of the elderly and other people on the bridge. “Over in the Superdome there were helicopters coming in and they were depositing water and food, but all this was going in the Dome. The people on that bridge, which was thousands, who were coming from downtown and uptown, the people sent, they sent us nothing, no food, no water.”

Henry, with his friend's help, left and waded through water to the Superdome returning with “food and water and these MRI [MRE, Meals Ready to Eat] packages.” They made multiple trips and “would disperse it amongst the people on the bridge; it wasn't just

for my mother or just for him and I. We were just taking care of everybody that we could.” He told of how they would “run into another family who happened to have food that they were cooking and they in turn got along with us.” In a time of need, those on the bridge who could gather food and water, shared with those who had nothing and could not physically help themselves. Dorothy recalled how “sitting out in the open air all night by the overpass, and all that. And, well everybody was half-fed but you made it because people come along and shared what they had with you.” A survivor community was created on that bridge as people shared their food, stories of survival, and support acknowledging that good was coming from something bad:

Henry: So, this particular day, we found out through walking around, you know, when you got nothing to do and you’re just looking to see who else has made it, if you know anyone that, that has made it. We just got together, walking up and down the bridge, you meet this person you hear a story, you meet that person you hear a story. And you sit there and you’re watching the people trickle into the Superdome. So they were trickling into the Superdome and I mean; I’ve seen Katrina brought the best out of even the worst of us.

*Landmarks as shelters – High-occupancy buildings.* Other landmarks mentioned as shelters were the Superdome in New Orleans and the Astrodome, Reliant Center, and the George R. Brown Convention Center in Houston. Although many narratives of creating supportive communities exist, there were also tragic stories of people experiencing horrific trauma in what should have been spaces of safety. Lindzy’s Superdome experience described “life in the convention center” as “hard. Probably the most hardest four days of my life, well, five days because um, we had to, we had no food, no water, nothing.” The situations they

encountered were unfathomable: “As we were walking up and down by the convention center one day we saw another dude dead by the dumpster. Looked like garbage, you know. And that’s how the people, the government treated us, just like garbage.” Linda remembered the traumatic events at the Superdome: “I saw things in there that I would of never dreamed in my life. One gentleman jumped off the bridge close to the Superdome. He couldn't take it anymore. He just said, ‘I can't take it anymore.’”

Stories of death and devastation at the Superdome were a common characteristic.

Dorothy remembered:

I saw at least five of them dead on that chair – you know, they had them laying on the chairs. People just brought them back there. But it was a rough ordeal, you know, there – the Superdome – being over there, because it was really filthy. She adds, I never would have made it if it hadn’t been for my son, and my grandson. I guess I’d have been on a chair somewhere.

Dorothy believes she was saved from death by her family; her community. Her son remembered “the heat” at the landmark:

The pressure from being with, being within the crowd – people were falling out, you know. I’m glad that, that did happen, but it didn’t happen while we were there, that panic and chaos and stuff. People were just trampling one another.

Other stories told how “it was a mob of people at the Superdome – it wasn’t a line – a mob,” how “someone began shooting at the crowd,” and “it was hectic.” Henry recalled the stench was nauseating “inside that Dome from toilets being inoperative, and whatever else was out of whack over in there” and how he “could not take it, it was just making me sick.” Families were being split up and women and children were being torn apart from husbands



and fathers as buses and helicopters began evacuating. Hundreds of people in the same circumstances were, according to Henry, “faced with a situation which I hope never happens again – where I got to decide, am I going to go with my mamma or am I going to leave my children and grandchildren behind – am I going to stay with them or go with her.”

Many people with physical ailments and medical conditions were having complications, swelling, and fainting in the excessive heat while shortages of food and water left individuals dehydrated and starving. “There was like a thousand people in one line.” Survivors went to the Superdome because they were told that is where help would be waiting. Linda recalled:

We got word that buses were going to the Superdome so we had to go down off a ramp into this water, floating these children again on this air mattress and these buckets and crates to the Superdome and it must have taken four hours, at least, to get to the door; to get in the Superdome. It took me another hour to get in the door because of the amount of people.

The survivors’ Superdome experiences were of extreme endurance that brought out the worst in a few of the people and others reacted by accepting they “had to do what we had to do.” Once evacuees arrived in Houston however, their experiences within the shelters gave most people some relief. Although there were negative accounts recalling how, “all of us wind up meeting at the Dome in Houston” but “that dome wasn’t that nice for us either because they wasn’t really treating us right either,” others recalled positive interactions of assistance and kindness in Houston. Dorothy remembered how the volunteers at the George R. Brown Convention Center helped her with her most basic needs upon arrival:

I appreciate the assistance that I did get, you know. And the volunteers, they were wholly nice, day and night, they really worked. Someone said, ‘I’m going to be your volunteer for the day, I’m going to stay with you all day.’ And they did till it was time for them to leave. Bring you to dinner, and bring you to where you had to go. Pushing the chairs.

Her son, Henry, agreed: “The George Brown Center, those people, I must say, those volunteers there, they’d really, really gave a lot of assistance and help to me with my mother.” He described how they were given a wheelchair and how he felt his mother was safe to leave alone in the building while he completed double the government paperwork “as far as trying to get our, our benefits.” She ate, rested, and he didn’t have to worry about safety while taking care of business. “That was how we – that was the thing that helped us where we’ve gotten this far.” The volunteers at the convention center created community.

### **Relationships**

Dorothy: I miss, I miss being able to go in and out my house. I miss being—I miss my grandchildren, I miss, I miss not being able to be around them. I miss how, how my work ethics have been, more or less, demolished, I mean, cause I had to stop working again on account of my mother, when she went in the hospital, and I had to be there, I had went back and, you know, and so much on my mind I probably didn’t stop working the way that I should, should have. I miss that and I miss, I miss working. I miss getting a check every week. I just—there’s a list of things I can tell you I miss; oh boy, my lifestyle. I’m, I’m existing.

*Family.* Family was an overarching theme throughout every story and was a pivotal determinant for decisions made by survivors before, during and after the storm in regards to

community. Every survivor spoke of their love and concern for different family members: parents, spouses, fiancés, siblings, children, grandparents, aunts, uncles, nieces, and nephews. Common characteristics of family included: “happily married,” “we were a very close-knit family,” “we didn’t fight among ourselves,” “my family always stuck together,” “we were a very close-knit family of sisters,” “they all love and respect me and I love and respect them,” mother “taught us to love one another,” and “my people.” Some survivors included their pets as family.

Birth order among siblings was detailed along with relationship details: “I’m the middle child. I’m a twin, and I fall directly in the middle,” “I have an older sister; we’re six years apart. I don’t really talk to her that much,” and “we have a good relationship.” Relationship splits were also addressed in some narratives, “we divorced,” but appeared to have minimal impact on their stories as Rodreca explains, “My mom and my dad divorced when I was nine, or eight, or something like that. So, I think I took that pretty hard but, otherwise, I can’t really see anything dramatic that happened in my childhood. I had a real good childhood. I was raised well.” Family size was addressed from “we had a small family, just the four of us, and we got a long well together, no problems. Had nice friends and everything,” to “there were ten of us” in the family.

Family creates community through communication, care for each other, and collective events. Allen is a seventeen-year old survivor from New Orleans East. He spoke of his family’s activities before the storm: “My family, we were all around before Hurricane Katrina. Very close, you know, we used to go by each other’s houses, but now since Katrina happened, we’re in Houston; everything has changed.” Carolyn’s extended family “had a family club. It was thirteen couples and, ah, we had that since the kids were little, you know.

And we had our barbeques and seafood burls and just be friends, you know. Just enjoy each other companies.” Barbeques were a consistent element when people spoke about spending time with their family. Food appeared to be both a comfort and a building block for people to come together for support and fellowship. Some continued to barbeque as the water was rising from Katrina using barrels floating in the water and attached roped to poles.

Post-Katrina, families struggle to keep continuity for their community. Henry shared:

As for my kids, well we all – we, we share in activities; we hang out when we’re together, when I get a chance to go home, especially. My oldest son, he’s in New Orleans working and now my third son, Kevin, he’s down there also. And so when I get to go down there it’s like déjà vu; it’s – I get to be daddy. I get to find out what it was like coming up under me and so far they all seem to think I did a real – pretty decent job. But coming up to Katrina anyway.

Henry has “grandkids spread all up and down Texas” because of the hurricane.

Individuals communicated with family members as to whether or not they would evacuate pre-Katrina. Many argued with each other, some left without each other, and others stayed behind because of each other. Joan told of how her daughter and son-in-law “constantly called, and because I wouldn’t evacuate, then they refused to leave New Orleans also.” She reasoned why she had a “set mind, thinking of staying” because “I had \$300, or maybe \$400, cash and, I had no idea how far that would take me. But, I had no place to go. I had no relatives to go because all my family was here in.” Robert, like many survivors, didn’t believe the hurricane would hit New Orleans, so he invited his community to stay:

I was told to leave and I didn’t leave, and – because, you know, we usually have them and they don’t actually do what they’re supposed to do. And I usually make jokes on

the people who leave and they stuck in traffic or whatever, and I'm sitting at home waiting on them to come back. So this time it didn't happen like that. A couple of my neighbors and friends was telling me to leave: the water was going to be seven feet, seventeen feet high, nineteen feet high. But I just couldn't believe them and I stayed, me and a couple of my friends, we stayed. After work we played dominoes, pumped up – did some arm curls with some Bud Lights, and we just had the normal day.

Henry decided to leave work and go to his mother thinking, "I'm going to stay here with her." He took his mother to his son's home a few blocks away and they "gathered them, the grandchildren – all the grandchildren that we could get together, everybody we could get together and family and we had them there and we were here." They stayed together as a community. Stories mirrored Allen's brother's insistence that he "didn't want to leave. My mom had to beg him to leave." Many people waited until the last minute or didn't have the means to leave. Joan waited for Katrina's arrival with her community while entertaining the kids:

As the storm approached, we, as I said, we were in my daughter's house, and trying to entertain the children. We, we put DVDs on the laptop to entertain the children, and – while we listened to the radio and watched the news. And around, I'd say about 6 o'clock in the evening, that Sunday evening, the electricity went off, and the children started getting frightening, and, so, we just said everything was going to be all right, we just buckled in and everybody went to bed early. So it was like 4 o'clock in the morning, somewhere around 2 or 4 – was when – the rains really started coming down, and coming hard, and so, there was very not – nothing much we could do, but every once in a while we'd, we'd, turn on the television to see what we could see, and

go back to sleep. That's when we heard that there was a breach in the canal, and that's where the water was coming from. So the street started getting flooded.

For some who evacuated pre-storm, they felt a great amount of responsibility for their community. Sharon recounted, "All that stress was on me because I was worried about my family that was left behind in New Orleans I didn't know if they were going to make it or if I going to ever see them again." For others, they left their family behind before the storm without guilt knowing that they couldn't save their homes, family, belongings, or themselves once the storm arrived. Thoughts varied from, "I have always been the family member who is more prepared" to "we didn't take the storm seriously" and "we didn't think it would be as devastating as it was."

For those who evacuated and had transportation to leave New Orleans before the storm, some went to a distant relative or extended family home where room space and provisions were limited and emotions highly charged. These situations, although family-related, were untenable. Even in the short term, the situation was "I didn't feel very welcome," "I was not related to them, and, space was limited. And food was limited," and "more of their relatives was coming in. So I really, really was in the way, and it started getting very nasty, 'cause I was not related. So I knew I had to—had to get out of there."

Similar to the situation of scarcity of resources for survivors at the Superdome, some people were not able to create community with non-immediate family members. Some survivors were offered a place to stay but those places were inhabitable, "infested with bugs" to the point "you couldn't walk out—outside at all. They would cover up your arms, your face. They would crawl all over you." Joan said, "everything was just so filthy there and nasty and awful, that my sister started crying." There was an emotional toll on everyone

affected by the storm and its devastating aftermath. Creating and building community was not possible in some situations, even when the family was distantly related.

*Friends.* Friends offered supplementary opportunities to create community in addition to family. For most survivors of Hurricane Katrina, stories about their family overshadowed stories about their friends. Neighbors, classmates, coworkers, and others played a supporting role to the family in the daily lives of survivors pre-Katrina. Dorothy belonged to “a little Christmas savings club” and “would go out socially, you know, visit with friends.” Carolyn was the treasurer for her son’s booster club at school, helped coordinate fundraisers, and “participated at the hospital with programs for people who have pulmonary problems, which I do. And, uh, that was one of my activities to go to three times a week with that and I enjoyed that.” Carolyn also was socially involved with friends who encouraged her “to ride in the Oshun, which is the first black carnival krewe that starts off the big parades on a Friday” during one Mardi Gras parade.

The mainstay of these relationships was “hanging out” and “communicating and going to each other’s homes, enjoying barbeques and parties, birthday parties – we just, we just did family things. You know, people coming over, friends coming over to our home. It was just a pleasure for everyone to, ah, interact.” As with family, friends events centered around cooking and food: “its love to gather people around the dinner table and cook. It's love. That's something we are expressing, you know, family and friends. Everybody gets together and we barbeque or there's a cookout, you know, it's a Sunday dinner.” Some friends are considered family within the community: “She’s my little matriarch I guess [laughs], whatever you call it. I love her.”

Rodreca enjoyed a wide and diverse social circle:

I pretty much hung around with everybody. Everybody liked me. Everybody knew me. It was beautiful. People didn't disrespect me because they knew what I stood for but, at the same time, I could hang around with a whole bunch, I wasn't in a specific clique. I able to hang around with everybody and that made it fun; made it interesting."

Rodreca created community with her classmates, peers, and coworkers stating "everybody was nice, you know" except, she says, for a coworker who felt threatened. "One person was like, 'I don't think I'm going to like her.' But everybody else was real cool." Linda missed her community at Southern University where she had great appreciation for her "professors, you know, I really want to thank them for teaching me lessons that saved my life." The lessons she learned in college taught her how to calculate the rising water during the storm when her family didn't believe the crisis was happening after the storm had passed. Many evacuees said what they miss the most was the atmosphere that existed in New Orleans where people were friendly and welcoming to one another, even if they didn't know each other; a culture not present in Houston.

Linda: Although a lot of Houstonians were helpful in the beginning, you know, its, I would say that social skills are a little bit lacking. What I mean by that is that I'm used to walking up and down the street and speaking to my neighbor. 'Oh, hey, how are you doing?' 'Good mornin', 'good evening', 'good afternoon'. And here, if you say, 'Good morning', they look at you like you spit on 'em. You know, and I just thought, I thought that everybody spoke, you know, that's manners. That's etiquette. But it's not like that, here in Houston.



Some evacuees feel the hospitality of the city has ended and many miss their community of friends where “there were a lot of cool people down with me,” and survivors “miss hanging out with my people.” Others though, have found new community in Houston. Allen shared:

I have so many friends, so many friends, you know. And that’s what I like about Houston too, because when I first came into the school everyone welcomed me with open arms. And I was invited to a party the day after – you know, the day after I came, and all of us just bonded close to each other. Some of them which are now my best friends.

Allen was part of a weekly school program for “Katrina kids” who had access to counselors and social workers where they would “talk about our problems that we were having with school and, you know, just get things off our chest.” Creating a supportive environment to help these students communicate their concerns and transition into their new lives “really has helped. You know, I’m not stressed anymore.” The school initiative created new community.

*Spiritual.* Religion, spirituality, and God were mentioned in multiple survivor narratives focusing on talking to and listening for the voice of God, the church community, and a corresponding biblical charge for believers to be grateful for blessings, even in the face of complete devastation and loss. After living in a single family home her entire life, Carolyn is having difficulty adjusting to apartment living. She doesn’t want to appear ungrateful stating “I am very thankful, ah, please don’t think I’m not, that God has spared my family for – because we could have been dead.” She waivers between guilt and grief: “We’re not dead but our lives as they used to be is gone.” Being thankful, no matter the circumstances, was

characteristic of many narratives: “I’d say my prayers out there and thank God for the blessings that I had.”

Prayer served as the communication channel with the survivors’ higher power before, during, and after the storm: “I had to do that in the morning, say my prayers and give thanks to God,” “so I prayed and I cried and I talked to my Father,” “I’m a believer in prayer. You know, prayer change everything,” and “that was my first place, being able to really be by myself and pray. You can’t imagine how it is when you can’t even find a corner to pray.” Prayer and religious education was seen as a parent’s responsibility where they taught their children “to love the Lord, and to go to church.” Those who mentioned spirituality in their stories believed they received divine responses from God to their prayers: “I knew that He always answered my prayers,” “God is so awesome, I just couldn’t believe it, I didn’t even have a broken window,” and “My source really is God.”

When evacuating, Joan felt her Bible was considered essential to living: “I decided to pack up three days of clothing, and some food, candles, search light, portable television, and, my Bible, and everything I think, I thought I needed for a three-day stay in their apartment.” Survivors spoke of the help they received after praying and credited God with saving them from injury, death, and destruction: “I had to pray to go up them steps, ‘Lord, please don’t make this collapse on me,’” “My auntie prayed over her house before she left and her house was the only house on the block that didn’t get damaged. The only house on the block,” and “so I push my way back off the bus, through all those people – I know it was nobody but God.” One pre-storm story describes a premonition received before the storm: “I had a vision in my mind, like a couple of weeks before the hurricane hit, before we even knew about the

hurricane.” She saw New Orleans underwater and subsequently believed that “God was revealing something” to her.

Sensemaking to reduce uncertainty created an explanatory theme about the storm and its aftermath and characteristically included the belief in divine intervention: “God needs me here in Houston and that’s where, ‘cause I do believe that my footsteps are ordered, you know. So, I’m in Houston for a reason. I just gotta find that purpose, you know. That reason,” and “God, I know there is a reason why I’m here.” Rodreca left some of her community behind when evacuating when she heard God’s voice:

A lot of the men, like my grandfather and my uncle, they didn’t want to leave. Well, two of my uncles and my grandfather, they didn’t want to leave. I was like, ‘I’m not going to leave my grandfather here’, you know, ‘I’m gonna stay here’. But then God said, ‘If you stay here, what you gonna protect?’ You know what I’m sayin’? ‘You can’t protect him. You can’t protect the house from falling down. You can’t protect water from coming into the house. You need to save yourself. You need to go ahead and go. I may have told him to stay here for a reason but I’m telling you to go.’ So, I said, ‘God, I heard you once. Auntie Rose, you, come on. Let’s go. I’m not worried about Uncle McKinley. We need to get up out of here.’

Dorothy made sense of the storm by believing it was a lesson from the divine:

I feel that, first of all a lot of it, it had to be God’s work because it taught us to be humble, it taught us to be kind to one another, it taught us to help one another any way we could, because we were all in the same boat, so to speak.

When they discovered the storm was going to be worse than they expected, survivors prayed and “made a pact with God” asking for help in surviving. Henry “was concerned and,

first and foremost, I talked to God and I tried to make a deal with him, and it seemed like the deal worked.” Sharon emotionally “went to screaming and hollering, like, ‘Lord, just let my daughter and my niece and her family be alright.’”

Individuals gave credit to their “faith in God” for their survival; it meant “everything is going to be all right,” “the Lord had blessed me with the strength; I have strength because I have faith in God,” and “by the strength of God, He made a way – and He made a way for us to get out of that dome.” Individuals gave God credit when their loved ones finally listened to them: “Then they began to listen to me, which was a blessing from God.” When survivors found members of their community after evacuating, they responded with thanks to God for answering their prayers: “Thank you, Jesus. I’m like, ‘Now I have my family with me.’” When asked about the future, survivors characteristically felt God was in control: “We just going to have to wait up on the Lord and see what he have in store for us and where he want us at. I say, ‘He may want us here or he may want us back home,’” and “I bend my knees and I talk to my Father. And I look for His tangible evidence everywhere.”

The church community was a source of information and comfort in many of the stories.

Joan: “When I got up to, to get ready for church, I, I got a phone call from some church members saying that there was no service, and they were advising everyone that you should – evacuate, if at all possible.”

The church community was also a source of sensemaking in the midst of grief:

Carolyn: Something my pastor said, my Bishop said, one time years ago, he said, ‘You know, when things die, we need to bury them. You cannot go through life holding on to something that’s dead. You must put it at rest.’

Finding a church community was paramount to some survivors: “I’ve been to a couple of churches,” and “I’m still trying to find” a church. When survivors found a church community, especially “a New Orleans congregation,” it meant “you go there with the anticipation that maybe I’ll see a friend” and “each time I go I meet someone new, I meet somebody special.” Joan found her past spiritual community members had organized and were going to have services: “I’ve been in my church for twenty-two years. Through other church members, I found out that the choir that we sing in, a lot of them were out here in Texas, and they were having our first fellowship.” Church linked community and built new connections.

### **Roles or Identities**

Linda: So, we survived.

*Survivors – Those who stayed.* The survivors of Hurricane Katrina thought they understood the dangers of staying home during the storm. Living on the Gulf coast lent itself to numerous warnings each hurricane season and there was a sense among survivors that New Orleans was untouchable. Many people “didn’t take the storm seriously,” and there was a false sense of security in the city’s ability to handle crisis, the storm’s possible path of destruction, and pre-storm preparation: “We didn’t leave home because we was around the corner from the municipal authority,” “I’m not going nowhere, I’m going to stay here,” “if we fought through the other hurricane, we could fight through Katrina, “we usually have no problems, and the storm goes another way,” and “I prepared to survive hurricane” were consistent comments throughout the shared narratives.

Some people did not consider the possibility of the levees breeching when they measured their options before the storm made landfall while others gave it serious thought: “I

wasn't close to the flooding per se. I was more on the east side" contrasting with "I think only maybe four people on my street really just stayed 'cause we were close to a levee" and "we was like two streets away from the levee. So, yeah, it was kind of scary." Stories showed how some survivors didn't worry until the storm was upgraded, "I wasn't really worried about this hurricane" until "they say category four," and those who did leave before the storm were not worried about coming home: "You know, we thought we'd be back in a couple of days." Story after story told of how people asked each other: "Are we going to evacuate? What we going to do? Let's do something" and how the severity of what could happen "just did not click in" for most people.

After the storm passed over New Orleans, those who stayed in their homes continued to take care of their community while waiting for the water to go down. Henry "had a friend who was working the pumping station and they couldn't go anywhere," so he would "bring him [food] and he would keep me posted on the conditions." Joan describes this time of waiting:

As soon as the day break, I – I jump to the window and I say, 'I know the water's going down, now.' The water was not going down, it was higher. It was higher. And I looked from window to window. Now the water was covering people's cars. All you could see was the top of the cars. All you could see was the tip of the stop sign on the corner. And people were standing on the porch, and – and – and it was just water everywhere. The whole bottom floor was just submerged. And – and – and, we were all just in shock, and actually, I really got mad. I got mad at that time. And other people in the complex started coming over and saying, 'Do ya'll have water?' 'Do you have chips?' 'Well, somebody went to the store, and they have this,

and they have that.’ So everybody in the complex just put everything they had together edible, and hung out on the porch, where there was a real big cooler. And – some people had barbeque grills on the porch, and they were letting everybody who had some kind of meat or something take turns. And barbequing and the children were – not really understanding – they were enjoying their selves, they had chips and cookies and they had their little toys, and they had food going, and they had—cold drinks. And we were sitting out there, still thinking the next morning it was going to be better. And as we sit on the porch around the whole complex, and – on the third floor, the whole bottom of the floor was just, it was just a big lake of water.

Many survivors thought the worst was over at this point, did not realize the levees had failed, and were adamant in their disbelief: “My family said, ‘No, we’re on the second floor; we’re fine; the water is not coming up here,’” “I’m like, ‘Come on, you all, don’t tell me that,’” “I just was not believing that the hurricane was going to – come in as powerful as it did.” Linda tells how she ended up “physically fighting with my husband and my sister and my brother-in-law” trying to convince them that the water was rising and they needed to evacuate the family. “To them, I had went crazy but to me, I knew I was trying to save their life.”

Many from the neighborhood community had stayed. Joan remembered, “A whole lot of the other tenants were there also, in their apartments. And, we, just, watched the storm, riding it out.” When the realization that the water was continuing to rise finally sank in, disbelief was replaced with fear and people began leaving their homes looking for safety: “I ran through, me and my sister-in-law ran through waking everybody up telling them we need to go,” “they were getting scared because by then the water was, about then, up to our

knees,” “we left, I wanna say, four hours before the water actually went to the roof of the building,” and “she was so afraid because – and I could understand why, because it was pitch dark. You couldn’t see anything but water.”

Sam: Well that evening after it was all over we went outside, first we went tried to go back down and get the rest of our belongings but like I told you before we evacuated the kitchen and went up to the second story and they ushered us own up to the third story. Well on our way back down we found out there was no second story. All of that had been washed away. So right then you knew things were bad. And as we kept trying to crawl through all the, the debris to get to the kitchen we found out the kitchen was no longer there.

*Survivors – Evacuation.* Together, people left their destroyed homes and went into the flooded streets trying to find safety. Though some people were rescued by “water boats” and rescue trucks,” survivor narratives recounted desperate situations mattresses were used to transport the young and elderly who couldn’t walk in the deep water. At this point, shock began setting in for many survivors. Sharon remembered being:

So shoooken up, didn’t know which way to turn, walking down the street with nothing, we didn’t have nothing. I had a pair of shoes, the jeans that I had on, the shirt that’s the only thing that we had, we didn’t had nothing else.

Lindzy “just zoned out and disappeared.” Traumatized people were “walking around, like nothin’ was going on,” Sam recalled, attributing the behavior to instinct: “I guess that’s what you call survival. You have to go back to your essence.”

Stories of shock over the rising water where told over and over: “we saw people walking in waist deep water,” “Oh my God. Look at all this water” and “I remember leaving



in waist-deep water and coming back in about chest deep.” The subsequent loss of life was recounted in many narratives: “We lost one of our family members, my girlfriend’s older cousin, because she wouldn’t get on the truck with us,” “I remember floating in the water and bodies passing by,” “they had people that was dead, they had them laying on chairs over there at the foot of the overpass behind the posts in the back,” “there was reports of, you know, people we knew who bodies was washed up in trees,” “you hear about that lady whose baby fell off that boat when they were trying to get them out. I wonder too if they ever found that baby,” and “Yes. People were floating on top of dead bodies.”

During the telling of their stories, some survivors relived their own storm experiences. Henry admitted “it’s kind of hard to just sit down and in an hour or so and put down everything that you went through,” as he recounted “one lady was hollering ‘Oh, my baby!’ She had her children on a mattress and one fell off.” He goes on, “But we got there, I got to the little baby” as he tells of saving a child from drowning. Henry and his son saved others:

We went got maybe [mumbles] maybe four more people, elderly people, and we brought them over and then I couldn’t – I told my son he could take the mattresses if he wanted to go and help someone else it was okay, but I couldn’t, I was, I was spent. But by this time my son, it had become obvious to him what he had to do now, so he went back and he helped some of his friends and some more people.

Survivors formed community, worked together, and saved others. People tried to help themselves and “kept SOS’ing to the – planes and helicopters that we could hear passing over. We could see them with – like – searchlights on their helicopters.” Confused as to why help wasn’t coming they wondered if they couldn’t be seen: “Maybe they don’t know we’re

sitting here, 'cause it's so dark. So we kept SOS'ing and SOS'ing, but nobody never came back our way." People did "what we have to do" to survive: "We had to help them, the older, the elderly was left with us." The ultimate tragedy is that some who survived Katrina never fully recovered: "Even those that survived the storm paid a price."

*Survivors – Loss and uncertainty.* Hurricane Katrina survivors lost their homes, their possessions, and some, their loved ones. During evacuation, many families were torn apart by authorities, separated from their support systems. Lindzy recalled, "I was wondering how my mama and my daddy and my little brother was doing." Once people made it to shelters in Houston, some were told inaccurate information about the whereabouts of their community members. Sharon shared:

We found my brother, the one that they say he drowned, but he didn't drown, but he is okay. My uncle, they say he drowned and we found him. So we, we found half our family and we, we're okay right now because we got our family with us. But — not with us but we know where each other at and we see each other every now and then. Just like for carnival, we went back down for carnival and we went back down for spring break and I did see some more of my people down there. But the people that I want to see is my uncle. I haven't seen him yet but I know he is alright, I know he is alright. I don't want no more, for there to be no more.

Hurricane Katrina survivors shared characteristics of resilience, determination, and empathy both pre- and post-Katrina. Their stories demonstrated examples of humanity that embraced the philosophy that "more people should love than hate," "no matter how bad things get there's always something worse going on somewhere in the world," and, in "New Orleans, we are basically unified, but in different ways." The survivors cared and many

shared the hope that, “another human being never has to go through what the people of New Orleans had to go through.” They exemplify strength, courage, and humility with hopes that by sharing their stories perhaps. Dorothy shares:

If it helps somebody any way I’m glad that I was able to. And if, if it lets somebody know that no matter – one thing I can say: no matter how bad off you are, there’s always a worse situation somewhere.

Anne, a fifty-six year old woman from New Orleans who did not evacuate and subsequently, was rescued from a neighbor’s roof, echoed those sentiments when she said, “Who am I to complain whenever I’m so fortunate to have family and friends and strangers that have been so generous.”

Finally, survivors believe that though “Katrina took us from, from New Orleans, but you can’t take New Orleans out of us, and that’s the truth because that’s our home, that’s, that’s where we from.” People who evacuated before and after the storm identified with the title: “Survivor, yes, I am a survivor. And it was hard on us, but we made it, we made it.”

*Positions of Power or Authority.* As many survivors began to congregate and banded together to help each other after the levees broke in New Orleans, they felt an extreme lack of assistance and empathy from those in positions of power and authority who had the ability to help them.

Linda: People are screaming, ‘Help! Help!’ You know; they wrote a big sign, ‘Help us,’ you know – didn’t drop a bag of ice. You know, I understand you were in a helicopter, but you could have dropped a couple of bags of ice.” From the lack of food, drinking water, and safe shelter, it wasn’t simply that their needs were not met;

many survivors tell stories of outright denial and mistreatment by those in control during the evacuation process from streets, bridges, and shelters.

*Positions of Power or Authority – Political.* Although few of the stories addressed politicians specifically in relation to creating community before, during, and after the evacuation, survivors were aware of the issues: “I’m not happy with my president, I’m not happy with my mayor, or the governor of Louisiana; they could have acted faster,” and “the president, he ain’t on his job with us either; [laughs] he ain’t on his job with us either, because if he was on his job we would have been out ahead of time before it even happened.” Glen is a 68-year old Katrina survivor who owned and then lost two homes to the storm; one in the French Quarter and the other in Waveland, Mississippi. Identifying as Cajun and as a royal decedent of Henry the Eighth, Glen recalled the television announcements:

I’ll never forget it. I was sitting there watching TV and the mayor of New Orleans came on the TV and said, ‘I can’t order you to leave. I don’t have that power. All I can do is tell you that the storm is coming right our way.’” Likewise, appreciation for local politicians after evacuation was given: “I guess I’ll forever be indebted to the city of Texas, or Bill White or whoever responsible, was responsible for what all, you know, transpired once we got here.

*Positions of Power or Authority – Employers.* Employment was not found to be linked to creating community either. It was mentioned sporadically in terms of past job roles: “professional waiter;” “school bus drivers;” “airport shuttle driver;” or the effect of loss of income: “I lost my livelihood;” or the difficulties survivors encountered navigating job opportunities after relocating: “out of 70 applications I filled out of New Orleans, that was the only job that called me back,” “we did get hired in St. Rose as school bus drivers and we

only worked that one day, because we couldn't find no place to live," "every place I go to apply, to apply for a job, I am a dinosaur," "I can't even fill out the application! You want me to go on-line to fill out?" There was minimal information regarding bosses, supervisors, and working relationships that created community within the survivor narratives.

*Positions of Power or Authority – Government.* The role of government was linked with both local institutions and the federal government, specifically the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). Government entities were not shown to have an impact on creating community and, in fact, negatively impacted many people in their recovery, re-victimizing survivors. Survivors felt they are not allowed to go home to New Orleans and stay. Narratives shared stories of greed at the local level: "I have to go on business like trying to pay house taxes cause you know that politics and government is going to be back in it," inefficiency," and "they're not doing a hell of a lot for the people." Alvin, a sixty-eight year old musician, nicknamed "Carnival Time," had owned a home in the Ninth Ward. He shares his experiences when "FEMA said they weren't going to help anymore":

I found out because FEMA said well, 'That's it.' See, after so and so, you're – you know, 'we aren't going to pay for you all no more.' And I said, 'Now, what is supposed to happen?' You know -- my house was bulldozed. They, they bulldozed it down. And, and I was just wondering what in the world was supposed to happen -- you know, wouldn't you think the same thing?

Others stories echoed the same theme: "FEMA kept saying I didn't qualify for housing," "we didn't get it," and "they say I didn't lose anything." There were issues with assistance with the government wanting them to fill out loan paperwork instead of receiving

disaster relief. The situation created stress instead of allowing community for many, including Joan:

I live under a cloud, looking at the news, and listening, that FEMA's about to pull the rug out from everybody, so – And my stress, I'm completely stressed out, trying to figure out exactly where it is I'm going to live.

In addition to housing, survivors were denied food: "I was getting some food stamps, but they cut them off." Basic needs for shelter and food were being denied while "the government treated us, just like garbage." Sam shared:

The government are still treating the evacuees – the government didn't do nothing then and they're not doing nothing, anything now. They're taking people off their vouchers after they told them they was gone have them for 18 months. They're not even giving people a whole year on their vouchers. They're not paying people for their property they lost and the things they lost that were damaged, so my feelings towards the government are not good.

There were survivors that had positive experiences: "When FEMA finally came through, that was a little bit of a relief," "FEMA gave us some furnitures," and "they gave me vouchers; that was so nice." In most stories, the government was more of a hindrance than an aid to recovery. They did not help survivors rebuild or create community. Lindzy stated it succinctly: "FEMA was just some b.s. to me."

*Positions of Power or Authority – Nonprofits and other assistance.* Other assistance, such as Harris County's Gold Card, and other nonprofits, like the Red Cross, "I did not get Red Cross," were mentioned minimally and did not contribute to creating community for the survivors. The red tape involved with receiving medications through the Gold Card meant

going to “a specific hospital” and waiting in lines that could last 12-24 hours long. The one nonprofit exception was churches. Joan speaks of her experience:

The ROCK, they really – they really – I love them; I love them from the bottom of my heart. Because they really helped us, they really did and when they helped us they really helped – they helped us to get a house, they helped us to get food, food stamps. Anything that we needed to get, they was there for us. They had transportation for us. They did, and they used to feed us breakfast, lunch, dinner. Anything we wanted, they gave it to us and, and I really appreciate what they did for us.

As with the volunteers at the George R. Brown Convention Center did for Dorothy, the ROCK met Joan’s most basic needs, found her a home, and surrounded her with community.

*Positions of Power or Authority – Individuals.* Many first responders were not police, military, or government employees. Many were ordinary people as Joan shared, “actually fishermen from other parts of the city that just came in to help evacuate people; they weren’t even – Civil Service men.” Their presence was welcome and beneficial and the stories of their heroic efforts show an extraordinary empathy.

*Positions of Power or Authority – Police.* Empathy and consideration from many uniformed personnel was lacking or non-existent. Linda tells the story of a harrowing encounter with police:

Everybody together, we started walking (to Gretna). We started walking towards that exit and the police lined up, I never in my life seen anything like that. The police just lined up in a row with dogs and shotguns and semi-automatic rifles and guns and they told us to turn back around. I remember begging and pleading, ‘Please, you know,

we're trying to live!' and them cursing at us and telling us if we don't turn around that ah... (silence) they was going to shoot us. So we had no choice but to turn around and wage right back through that water again.

In another encounter, the military displayed their brute force and lack of empathy but Linda intervened to help protect a desperate mother and her starving baby:

I remember being on the bridge and a lady standing next to me and the army coming through with these trucks. And the lady holding her newborn baby up and she said, 'My baby!' She said, 'Help us. Please!' The baby had to be no more than 8-weeks old. She said, 'My baby needs milk.' And I remember... (long pause) the soldier looking at her and saying, 'Well what the ffff... what the fuck do you want me to do about it?' And she started cursing him back, you know, she say, 'Ya'll supposed to help!' And I grabbed the lady and I said, 'Miss,' I said, 'we're under martial law,' I said, 'which means they can, you can be shot without even a second thought. Just leave it alone. You will survive. Move on,' I said, 'Breast feed the baby.' You know, she said, 'I never done it before.' I said, 'Don't worry about it. The milk will come. Just breast feed the baby.' So she did that and that's how that baby survived. That and along with her chewing a lot of the food she was eating real real fine to feed to the baby.

Where armed guards created fear and desperation, Linda's ability to communicate with the mother during crisis helped save both mother and child.

Story after story recounted mistreatment and cruelty by the military and police: "they just looked at us and turned their backs," "the policemen looked at me and walked off," "we was being treated like little dogs," they just left all of us sitting on I-10 in the dark; nobody



never came back,” “they had a blow horn, and say, ‘you have to start walking,’” “you know, we thought the people – the aircraft people – was passing us up and overlooking us,” and “some of those National Guardsmen talked to you like you were a convicted criminal. And I don’t think that was right. We’d been through too much.” There is no space for creating a supportive community when people are dehumanized, degraded, and forced to live as starved animals without relief.

*Media.* Media messages had different levels of effect on the survivors: Sharon felt the media had downplayed the risk: “I didn’t really hear about the hurricane, I heard about a crisis coming and that the crisis was going to come. They didn’t say, they didn’t say a hurricane, they say a crisis.” Those who had evacuated early watched stations like CNN in horror. Carolyn remembered: “I was actually seeing my people trapped on roofs and, oh God, everywhere. It was – it was unreal.” Some survivors felt the media was negatively biased reporting stories of sensationalism and not the balancing them with stories of the good of humanity: “What happened at the Superdome was bad and that story needed to be told, but another story that needed to be told were all of the good things.” Whether people evacuated before or after the storm hit, they had one thought in common: “I don’t believe it. But it happened.”

The media was intrusive to survivors not yet evacuated. Joan remembered, “When they open the door for us to get off the bus, there were television cameras in our faces, as we unloaded. They unloaded us right back into the water.” She counted the negative with a positive when she followed up with, “I wind up getting on the news when they came around with the cameras and stuff. So that’s how they get to – some of my people will get to see me

and see where I'm at." In Houston, the media reified negative stereotypes in their reporting preventing the welcoming and acceptance of the survivors within the Houston community.

Joan: I look at the news and I see and I hear all of the devasta- I mean, I hear all of the shooting and the crime that's going on. I also see the police constantly pulling people up against cars, and slamming them against cars. I also hear all of the accusations that it's the evacuees. So, Houston is very good to me but they're not very friendly, individually, you know, to us individually. And we're being accused of, of causing all of the crime and everything.

The media constantly reported the increase in crime and attributed the increase to the evacuees. This influenced how locals perceived and treated people. Sharon retells a racist encounter:

Me and my granddaughter we riding a bike and some white guys passed in a car and they blowed, they honked their horn at us and they pointed their middle finger at us. And I got kind of upset because my granddaughter were with me and I don't want them to see nothing like that. But that's the only problem that I have here in Houston

The media and its messages were shown to be both beneficial and derogatory, helping survivors find their families after being evacuated but preventing some from rebuilding and creating a new community in parts of Texas where they were not welcome.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Discussion**

The goal of this thesis was to discover shared cultural characteristics in regards to creating community among the survivors of Hurricane Katrina who participated in the SKRH project. In doing so, I found collective experiences that affirm previous research as well as new linkages for establishing the co-creation of knowledge associated with recovery communication in social survivor-to-survivor therapeutic communities. The three most consistent themes in recovery communication for disaster survivors are giving voice to survivor stories, establishing a safe environment for building community, and providing advocacy through networking for building social capital and support systems post-disaster recovery. These three themes substantiate the SKRH response model of a “three-stage recovery program: telling one’s story, forming social networks, and building communities” (Ancelet et al., 2013).

Consistent with Hawkins & Maurer’s (2010) findings that the process of recounting experiences allows for sensemaking and significantly impacts recovery, my analysis shows participants in the SKRP in Houston were appreciative of the opportunity to tell their own story. They hoped their experiences would eventually help future generations and were grateful to be able to share messages that the media did not broadcast. They also saw their input as important information for surviving the “rollercoaster,” as one survivor labeled the evacuation and recovery process, and thus helped co-create knowledge about the culture of disaster survivors. This reifies earlier findings regarding storytelling through shared narratives and allows for individuals to identify with the collective group by searching for

and finding shared characteristics thus making listeners question how they might respond, given similar circumstances (Tonkin, 1992).

While participants told stories of tremendous courage, humility, and fortitude in the face of unfathomable circumstances, they were left powerless by those in authority and silenced by those who controlled the media and disproportionately distorted the message (Berger, 2009; Sommers et al., 2006). The participation in the SKRH project allowed the survivors the ability to vocalize their own lived experience with hopes of helping counter the media accounts and, as Littlejohn (2009) explains, recognize that there is “no objective truth” or “single official version of a story” but that there are “many voices to hear, many still untold stories within the told one, many angles to view the story from” (p. 675).

Connecting the co-creation of knowledge through shared narratives with the formation of social survivor-to-survivor therapeutic communities, it is clear that individuals had both positive and negative experiences that either fortified or inhibited their ability to create community. In all of the stories, survivors recounted how one or more of the aspects of geographic location, relationships, or authority figures impacted their decisions, especially whether or not to ride out the storm or evacuate. These elements played an enormous role in the shared narratives which detailed rampant accounts of receiving mostly negative, authoritarian, and militaristic communication in a top-down approach by those in control.

Alternatively, the survivors received and sent mostly reassuring and positive communication messages amongst themselves, creating grassroots supportive social communities in the face of adversity, where stories and scarce resources were shared while trying to survive brutal living conditions pre-evacuation. The influence of these shared

characteristics continued to impact survivors after they were evacuated and relocated, once again hindering their ability to create community.

First, survivors were challenged geographically as the size of the city is massive, spread out, and inconvenient for walking. For those that have a car, the roads are confusing, congested, and dangerous. For those without a vehicle, public transportation is either too far from home or not even on a Metro line.

Second, relationships with established communities were destroyed after evacuating. Family and friends that used to live within a few doors from each other were now separated by miles. Friends and neighbors were scattered. Jobs were lost. Social clubs and church congregations were decimated and finding one that felt like “home” was impossible for some survivors. Most disheartening to the survivors was the feeling that people are generally less friendly in their new neighborhoods and communities than the people of New Orleans, to the point that saying “Good morning” to someone on the street was equivalent to spitting on somebody.

Finally, the unwelcoming and contentious environment for the survivors was exacerbated by media accounts of rising crime rates attributed to the evacuees. Those in positions of power or authority, such as the police, appeared to harass some evacuees. The only account of a positive authority figure was one survivor’s praise for the mayor of the city of Houston during the initial evacuation phase post-Katrina.

### **Theoretical Implications**

These findings have important theoretical implications. Building on the conclusions of Vardeman-Winter et al. (2014) that argue for the benefits of a grassroots survivor-to-survivor response in crisis communication, this thesis further defines how survivors of

natural disasters can contribute expert knowledge through shared narratives of their experiences. This investigation contributes to the field of survivor-centered recovery communication theory, a field emerging and connected to the larger schema of community. The impact of studying how survivors connect through shared narratives and create community are multi-disciplinary, far-reaching, and inform individuals, organizations, healthcare and governmental agencies, and academia of the culture of natural disaster survivors. My study informs best practices for collaboratively creating community among survivors of natural disasters to facilitate and support rebound, recovery, and rebuilding.

### **Limitations**

Limitations of this study include the sample population characteristics. Participants were from a single disaster event, a single subsequent response project, evacuated to the Houston area, and are predominately categorized as a vulnerable and marginalized population according to income, race, and class in the United States. In addition, a decade has passed since the disaster and origination of the SKRH project with no follow-up studies of the survivors to investigate subsequent outcomes since the project concluded.

Equally important, discovery of the participants' current status, whether the community they created in Houston after the storm experienced longevity and maintained support, and how the experience of participating in the SKRH project influenced long term, sustained recovery are needed. Moreover, additional research examining the commonalities and contrasts of benefits of both survivor-interviewers and survivor-narrators in regards to recovery communication, shared characteristics, and analysis of similarities and differences through participation in creating survivor-to-survivor communities need to be explored.

### **Suggestions for Future Research**

Despite the limitations, this study provides the groundwork for future recovery communication research relating to engagement between survivors and many facets of society including individuals, the media, politicians, private businesses, public corporations, governmental agencies, and nonprofits. Through the dissemination of information, these entities can be better equipped to formulate and institute supportive recovery communication plans and co-create responses with those affected that facilitate the rebuilding and reestablishment of people's lives and livelihoods post-disaster. Because social survivor-to-survivor therapeutic communities construct a safe and compassionate environment for empathic listening, it would be advantageous to focus future research on grassroots initiatives created by survivors of additional disasters where narratives provided opportunity to assist in rebound, recovery, and rebuilding.

### **Practical Implications**

The practical implications of this investigation can provide the foundation for a more fitting approach to mitigating risk factors for vulnerable populations by contributing a survivor-centered epistemological base. While top-down approaches appear to inhibit voice and agency while creating fear and uncertainty in the midst of crisis for those experiencing a natural disaster, it would be valuable for government agencies, nonprofits, and other entities involved in corporate social responsibility programs to focus further research on the benefits of survivor recovery communication through storytelling with an understanding of how creating community initiates, supports, and maintains recovery. This would enable those with substantial social capital to better understand how their roles and responsibilities when advocating for victims in times of crisis and recovery can be modified and expanded for the benefit of society. Based on this thesis, it is clear that the top-down responses in New Orleans

lacked proper planning, appropriate implementation, and empathy from those in positions of power or authority.

Though additional research is necessary, this knowledge is significant because it would refocus communication on the survivors and their experiences before, during and after a crisis. Consequently, it would be essential for survivors to have membership, input, and ownership in development of procedures for assisting survivors of future disasters during the rebound, recovery, and building phases helping to co-create new systems of support and communities.

## **Conclusion**

A significant number of participants shared common characteristics linking the creating of community in recovery communication to geographic places, relationships, and people in positions of power or authority. Although the stories were uniquely individual in precise circumstances encompassing their life stories and storm experiences, the overarching themes in this investigation identify channels, messages, and methods of communication that supported the evacuees while also revealing others that dehumanized survivors and hindered their ability to create community and rebuild their lives. These implications offer insight into the culture of survivors of natural disasters and how recovery communication plans can be informed, co-created, and applied by collaborating with those who have experienced an event and survived.



## Appendix A

### Codebook

#### Community

##### Geographic

New Orleans / New Orleans East / New Orleans, Louisiana / New Orleans east of Wesley Village

Native New Orleanian

Lived all over the city

Press Park (born and raised)

East Bank / West Bank

Recently homeless before the storm

Uptown to the Calliope Projects

Claiborne Bridge / Claiborne Street / Martin Luther King / Bartholomew Street

Corner of Claiborne and Martin Luther King

Uptown

The Projects

Hospital

Convention Center

Kingwood

The NE side (Houston)

South side (Houston)

North side (Houston)

East (Houston)

West (Houston)

Downtown

Baton Rouge / St. Charles

Lower 9 Ward

The Projects

New Orleans East

East shore

Prince Polk / Willow Apartments

3rd Ward / 9th Ward

I spent it all over, everywhere (life)

Charity Hospital / Memorial Hospital / Veteran's Hospital

Calliope Project

Rosenwald parks / Ponchatrain Park

Erato Street

Austin / Corpus Christi / Katy / San Antonio / Sacramento, California

Waveland, Mississippi / Atlanta / Gulfport / South Carolina / Jackson / Campickit, Virginia / San Francisco

My community in Waveland was- was like this really nice community and a joyful place to be in.

apartments off of Crowder

Williams Boulevard in Kenner  
Neighborhood

New Orleans, a blessed city

“New Orleans will always be New Orleans because it has that certain feel about it there’s no other place like it”

Austin Convention Center / Superdome / Reliant Arena

Home

“The only home I knew. I been there all my life.” “The community was good. Everybody pretty much knew everybody. It was safe and we really didn’t see any strangers around.”

### **Relationships**

My people

My family

My friends

Husband / Happily married / Wife

Girlfriend / Engaged / Fiancé

Parents

Mama / Mother / Mom / Grandmother / Auntie / Mother-in-law

Daddy / Dad / Father / Grandfather / Uncle

Children / Step Children / daughter / youngest daughter / son / my little boy / stepson / stepdaughter

Brother (older, younger, little) / Brother-in-law

Sister

Nephew / Nieces

Cousin

“All of my family members”

Three generations

Neighbors

“Different people in my house” (others trying to survive)

Co-workers

God / Minister

### **Survivors**

“Yeah everyone kind of watched out for each other.”

“Basically everybody knew each other. And the older people watched out. It was like one of the communities from back in the day.” (pre-storm)

“You just had the family atmosphere out there, everybody was out there drinking beer, eating” (pre-storm)

“We stayed.”

“I didn’t really take it to serious.”

“I was like this is gonna pass us by.”

“I didn’t think it would hit that hard.”

“We didn’t take the storm seriously.”

“I was told to leave and I didn’t leave.”

“I didn’t prepare at all.”

We didn’t think it would be as devastating as it was.”

“People walking around like nothin’ going on.”

“I could not feel at ease.”

“Looting is stealing for an unnecessary reason. We wasn’t looting; we were surviving.”

“While we were waiting we had to do more surviving.”

“I was gonna do whatever I had to at this point to keep us alive and keep us together.”

“My family, who I was with, we was separated”

Uncertainty

“They didn’t tell you where you was going at. They just said get on the plane, you going to get on the plane or you’re going to stay here.”

“Wondering how my mama and my daddy and my little brother was doing.”

Everybody was in a state of shock.

Everybody pitched in. Everybody lit barbeque pits, everybody cooked together before the food spoiled.

Help

“The community, I would, that was out in B.S.L. was huh, real good. Everybody knew each other, people tried to help each other, when they could.”

“Please, you know, we’re trying to live!”

“the government treated us, like garbage”

“We have to just stay strong. Hold your head up. Walk in faith.”

“come together stop dividing, stick together”

Know

“To them, I had went crazy. But to me, I knew I was trying to save their life.”

“I knew we had to get out of there.”

“The most stress not knowing where my mom was or any other family and friend.”

“some people can’t handle what just happened”

Group

Denial / Group think (minimized the storm in the beginning)

“Like for a lot of people, it really messed up their way of living and like, it made things different than what they were used to.”

Stay together / they tried to separate us / “Men over here, women over here.”

“It was like we were rescued at the same time we was being brutalized, you know?”

Unified, but in different ways

“Don’t worry” – comforting each other

Cooking / food

Gather people

“Everybody was hurt; nobody knew what to do because, you know, we didn’t really have nothing but one thing everybody pulled together. Everybody was barbequing all the food they had in the freezer that didn’t spoil so you know we can eat, and feed other people that didn’t have as much as we had. That was the great thing about it.”

Love / Expressing love

Sunday dinner is love

Chillin’ (before the storm - community)

Hanging out (before the storm – community)

Cool people

Fun

Great people

Wonderful people  
 Everybody was extremely nice to you.  
 Kids running around, having fun  
 “It was like an organization”  
 Working citizen  
 Blessing  
 People knocking on the door and – “No, you don’t have to ask, come on in.”  
 We camped out.  
 I’m out there to help.  
 We all stayed together.  
 Comfortable where I’m at.  
 Might not be happy, but comfortable.  
 A rollercoaster  
 Happy sometimes, then not.  
 So many lives lost, dreams lost, hope, careers, jobs, homes, families  
 We picked ourselves up  
 We started rebuilding our lives all over again.  
 “You’re going to know how to rebound from being sad to being happy.”  
 Thankful / That’s life.  
 “I was here.”  
 We just had to do what we had to do  
 Most people don’t know how to survive.  
 Zoned out and disappeared.  
 “You could not express any fear, any anxiety. You just had to survive.  
 Trying to protect  
 Didn’t want nothing to happen to nobody.  
 We still humans and we still have our rights.  
 I feel let down, betrayed by a city I stood on my life I worked down there.  
 I still have a lot of lessons to learn.  
 Everybody just can’t change overnight  
 “Well it’s hard to adjust from N.O. but my family we adjusting. It’s taking a slow process but  
 in the long, in the long run I think we gone get it together.”  
 “Because we can rebuild all these buildings, all these houses, but, if these people ain’t—ain’t  
 been rebuilt mentally it’s—it’s—it’s useless. Because they gone destroy anyway.”  
 “I’m a lot stronger person. And it really helps you realize that you can’t take every day for  
 granted.”  
 “It’s really a matter of perspectives“ “a horrific experience” “mirrored in beneath the  
 experience was something good” “it’s really about helping people explore the good in what  
 has occurred.”  
 “I think at the end of the day when people look at New Orleanians the word that has to come  
 is resolve because people have a great deal of resolve. And they’ve been able to survive.  
 We’re called survivors, but literally we were survivors before we were survivors, because the  
 city of NO had its own unique issues that people survived with every day.”

### **Others**

Mayor / Police / Police officer / Deputies / Fireman / Marines / Army / FEMA / Red Cross

“The police car, ramming it just to get in the store, holding their guns like, ‘You all can come up in here after we finish getting whatever we have to get’. They took the batteries, the cameras, the water.”

Lady / Gentleman

“There’s not a lot of love left out there.” (Houston)

People just calm down; you’re supposed to love. You’ll always have someone hatin’ on you.

A lot of white people helping us. I appreciated that.

They helped me get housing.

They treat us very nice. Very grateful to them.

“So know they gonna rebuild and it’s taken a slow process but they not focused on the community. They only focused on the business area.” (The City Business District in New Orleans)

“Three different area codes in down here, why?” (In Houston – in relation to “Unified in New Orleans”)

“I learned in this storm that there are two different kinds of human beings. One, I would like to say, looks human, but has – doesn’t – lacks the human capacity for love, kindness, mercy, and being helpful. They’re more takers and destroyers. The other kind are the lovers of life, and I consider those to be human beings, you know, for everyone that made it a point to help and sacrifice their time, their strength, and their abilities to help in whatever way, that’s human. And those that looked – those that looked at me and my family and my children and thought we are better off dead, we should die – they’re not.”

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