Rebuild Our City: The Power behind Oral History and Collaborative Ethnography in the Reconstruction of the Jersey Shore

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ABSTRACT

Hurricane Sandy proved once again the need for longitudinal, community-focused research in regards to disaster response and management. Locally referred to as Superstorm Sandy, this event impacted the lives of millions of Jersey Shore residents when it made landfall on October 29th, 2012. The rebuilding efforts have now entered their second year and many residents better understand the need to characterize disasters as processes beginning years prior to identifiable events and extending for months or years following them. Anthropological approaches to studying disaster foregrounds the processual nature of such events while simultaneously embedding them within a multiscalar analysis. This paper and the research supporting it combines and situates oral history alongside collaborative ethnography to assist communities (re)build a new, more resilient Jersey Shore.

Introduction

This paper intersects the ongoing dialogue which calls for community-focused disaster research extending beyond both regional and disciplinary boundaries. Our research focuses on the devastation which struck the Jersey Shore following Hurricane Sandy on October 29, 2012. The goal centers on identifying underlying inefficiencies within the local multiscalar system of disaster management, while integrating a decentralized approach to disaster mitigation inspired by a separate ethnographic research project. This paper provides a summary of our results, specifically the combined methodological benefits oral history and collaborative ethnography offer to (re)building a more resilient Jersey Shore. We also describe a model for disaster research for use in other post-disaster communities.

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Methodological Benefits

During nearly twelve months of fieldwork, the principal author discovered many challenges plaguing disaster research, including the absence of a clear, concise definition of disaster. The inability to singularly define this term stems from the misconception that disasters are single, isolated incidents [1-4]. Anthropologists are not dependent upon a single definition to effectively contextualize these events. By not prescribing to a universal definition, we are not forced into the confines of a single research paradigm or solution. Anthropologists consequently recognize the processual nature of disasters and offer theoretical approaches, which properly frame events like Hurricane Sandy, as well as methodologies to combat the potential devastation that may result due to incomplete planning [5-6]. Our presentation focuses on two methods: oral history and collaborative ethnography.

The second author created the Hurricane Sandy Oral History Project (HSOHP) as a pedagogical response to better contextualize the storm within local settings. The project grew from a graduate oral history seminar at Monmouth University (MU) in the fall of 2012. Although the timing of the course was coincidental to the storm, the university’s proximity to the coastline position this seminar at the nexus of the theoretical basis and practical usage of oral history. Students were asked to collect personalized testimonies of Jersey Shore residents as part of an assignment. Many of the students utilized their own social networks within surrounding communities, which allowed for demographical diversity within the project. The collection grew the following spring when the second author organized an anthropology of disaster course. These two courses resulted in the creation of the largest collection of Hurricane Sandy oral testimonies in New Jersey. We continue to organize and collect oral histories to document different time periods and reflect the rebuilding process at personal, communal, and regional scales.

These histories provide benefits to researchers and participants. Many participants describe their involvement in the HSOHP as “therapeutic.” One resident stated that sharing her experience focused her thoughts into words, which helped bring clarity to her situation. For the researcher, each oral history provides a data set that places the storm within social, cultural, and historical contexts of the survivor’s life [7]. As researchers we begin to identify underlying patterns highlighting the manner in which individuals and communities comprehend the disaster process and the methods in which they prepare and mitigate events. These testimonies also return subjectivity to the disaster process and re-humanize events that are too often viewed through an objective lens.

These benefits were recognized in the public policy arena during December 2013 when the Van Alen Institute (VAI), an independent non-profit architecture and design team, reached out to us regarding the HSOHP. After learning about the project, VAI invited us to participate in Rebuild by Design. This competition, funded by President Obama’s Hurricane Sandy Task force, promotes resiliency in areas devastated by the storm. One aspect of the competition was a series of public workshops called Scale It Up!, in which teams, such as VAI, organized community-specific events engaging residents in the promotion of resiliency. The collaboration between Van Alen Institute and the HSOHP begin in January [2014] when the first author joined a team of stakeholders, including architects, urban planners, town and county officials, environmentalists, and non-profit groups, in Asbury Park, New Jersey.

During the planning stages, organizers quickly realized the need for community buy-in to move forward with the event. In order for Rebuild by Design to be successful, we could not simply plan an event for the residents of Asbury Park; we needed to plan an event with them.
Local support was essential to the success of this project. Anthropologists have long recognized the importance of developing a rapport within their respective research communities. More recently, anthropologists acknowledge the mutual benefit their ethnographic work offers to both researcher and participant. Lassiter defines this type of methodological arrangement as collaborative ethnography and describes it as “a complex and ever-shifting negotiation between ethnographer and consultants” [8, p97]. Asbury Park residents were not just participating in a research project; they were helping to design one. The stakeholders knew there would be certain political, cultural, and historical obstacles to overcome in order for the event to be positively received by the community. With help from local residents, we were able to identify and properly mitigate these challenges.

After four months of teamwork, Asbury Park, NJ, hosted our public event, Rebuild One City. The day was a huge success, due to our ability as a team to bridge the gap between professional and layman, researcher and resident, and members of federal, state, and local governments. Rebuild One City highlighted the ability of oral history to communicate personal experience and remind communities of the additional work required to properly prepare for future events in disaster-prone areas. It also demonstrating the methodological success collaborative ethnography could offer to research planning. Rebuild One City engaged a community by celebrating their resiliency, while still promoting the need for a continuous disaster-related dialogue.

The Nevis Disaster Management Department (NDMD) and Decentralized Disaster Management

Rebuild Our City is not the only case-study demonstrating the success of community engaged redevelopment planning. The effectiveness of community-based disaster planning was also emphasized during ethnographic fieldwork occurring between May and June 2013 in Nevis, West Indies. Although this Caribbean island is relatively small (36 square miles) and has a low population (12,000 residents), we gained important insights from this trip [9]. While in the field, the first author partnered with agents from the Nevis Disaster Management Department (NDMD), the governmental agency responsible for disaster management and education throughout the country.

During our time in Nevis, we learned that the Caribbean is the most disaster-prone area in the world. Even though the island is comparatively small, the NDMD is conscious of their limited ability to protect every Nevisian from hurricanes, earthquakes, or possible volcanic eruptions. Unlike the United States, where local governments are highly dependent on the federal government for disaster assistance [10], the NDMD promotes a decentralized approach to disaster management. The agency’s primary responsibility is to train local officials, such as pastors and representatives, the necessary skills and concepts to mitigate potential disasters within their respective communities—not to directly handle each and every crisis. The mission of the NDMD is founded in the philosophy that residents have a more holistic understanding of the social, cultural, historical, and physical makeup of their communities, which are essential factors in successful disaster management.

Conclusion

The inefficiencies within the current system of disaster management in the United States were
exposed twice during the last decade alone: first, during Hurricane Katrina and again during Hurricane Sandy. These disasters reveal how many federal agents remain inexperienced with working with local level personnel [11]. Our paper does not look to discredit the work the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), but to illuminate the fact that many Americans remain unaware of both the allowances and limitations of the agency. Many Americans think of FEMA as a federal checkbook, but the agency is also tasked with creating “contingency policies, training crisis managers, and forming and conducting classes for in-house training or employees in disaster training” [12, p220].

Integrating the successes produced by Rebuild by Design and the Nevis Disaster Management Department may offer solutions to combat these misconception and engender trust between federal and local levels. One proposal is for FEMA to provide localized pre-disaster assistance, in terms of training and courses. Allowing federal and local level agencies to interact on a more regular, low-stress basis will provide opportunities to generate the mutual respect and cooperation necessary to successfully manage high-pressure events, such as hurricanes. The philosophy of the NDMD emphasizes that the federal government should not be solely responsible for disaster management. By shifting the role of FEMA in the United States from fiscal supporter to educator, the image of the agency will shifts as well. Decentralizing responsibility away FEMA will also empower local governments to stand up and fight for their communities.

Effective leadership is necessary to implement disaster planning and successfully manage recovery efforts. Residents and leaders alike must begin to recognize their community’s unique assets, as well as become educated on the utilization of these resources [13]. Regardless of the monetary and temporal dedication from the federal level, FEMA and other agencies will never be able to duplicate localized attention communities can produce themselves.

As disaster researchers and planners, we must educate individuals to understand that they possess the agency to affect results during disastrous events, instead of assuming an “attitude of passive resignation” [14, p36]. Many residents do not recognize their individual power—a power that grows exponentially through collective organization [15-16]. Anthropologists, such as Margaret Mead, have always championed individual agency as the driving force of change [17]. We argue for the adoption of this belief by individuals outside our discipline. While state and federal involvement will remain necessary, we must move away from being solely reliant on higher levels of government during times of crisis.

Recognizing the significant role residents have in disaster reconstruction, Ersing and Kost outline a plan to capitalize on community-based action:

- **Recognize** local assets and resources and document for use in a disaster plan [by using]
- **social capital** to develop and strengthen social networks and community ties; **organize** information and resources to develop disaster preparedness and recovery strategies [by using]
- **social awareness** to increase knowledge of hazards and educate others; and, **mobilize** and activate resources in order to build capacity and reduce risk of disasters [by using] **social action** to engage the community in cooperative assistance to problem-solve and advocate effectively [18].

Channeling the energy of local residents will remove the dependency on the federal government and help produce primarily self-sufficient communities.

Collaborative events, such as Rebuild One City, demonstrate that engaging communities with research and development planning has the potential to be successful. Community engagement is essential to the successful implementation of new planning. Our case-study
highlights the cooperation potentials connecting local, regional, and federal agencies. By familiarizing the public with research methodology and allowing them to participate in disaster planning, scholars fulfill a central role in preparing residents to properly plan and protect themselves from future disasters. Rebuild One City has proved that residents of Asbury Park are not only willing, but yearning to engage with professionals regarding the rebuilding of their community. As one attendee shared at the event, “we’re not just rebuilding any one city today, we are rebuilding our city.”

References

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