



Why relationships matter post-disaster

Focus on queer-identified young women
and gender diverse people who 'grew up'
in Post Katrina New Orleans

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Summary

Little is known about the impact of disasters on queer people. Post-disaster research, even within the rich field of Gender and Disaster scholarship, has traditionally focused on adult, heterosexual women, usually with children (Bradshaw 2015; 2013). However, some research does discuss wider relationships such as women's relationships with other women (heteronormatively) (David 2017; Enarson 2000). This paper discusses the importance of relationships for queer-identified people post-disaster drawing on my own empirical research in Post-Hurricane Katrina New Orleans in 2012 where I did life history interviews with "young women" and "gender diverse" people who identified within a queer spectrum. Sexualities have been neglected in disaster research generally (Goldsmith, Raditz and Mendez 2021; Gaillard, Gorman-Murray and Fordham 2017; Overton 2014). Whilst this is changing and Disasters and Sexualities is growing as a sub-field, we still know very little about the wide range of relationships and how these are impacted post-disaster or how important they are in post-disaster recovery, particularly for queer women and gender diverse people. Relationships can be trickier to navigate for queer people, particularly family, and to a lesser extent, friendships, as well as the fact that queer relationships tend to be more invisibilised in popular culture. This paper demonstrates that post-disaster relationships are important to understand by examining how social spaces are a crucial provider of support for queer communities post-disaster; the importance of family and community relationships with sexual identity including the conflicts between family and sexuality such as worry and concern about family acceptance; finding likeminded people enabled a more positive outlook and contributed to a greater sense of assuredness around identity; physical distance from familiar surroundings became an important way to explore identities; and powerlessness for younger folks through lack of choice and lack of consultation. A particularly interesting finding from my research is linked to the post-disaster 'window of opportunity.' Whilst scholars have been sceptical of the so-called positive change that is said to come from a disaster, known as the post-disaster 'window of opportunity' (Byrne and Baden 1995), my research found that disaster through being an 'abnormal' time opened up new, yet temporary space to make big decisions, particularly around their sexualities that did not exist in times of 'normality.'

Gender, sexualities and disaster

This paper examines how queer relationships shape the disaster experience of young women and gender diverse people who grew up in Post-Katrina New Orleans, highlighting that social spaces are a crucial provider of support for queer communities post-disaster. Sexualities have been neglected in disaster research generally (Goldsmith, Raditz and Mendez 2021; Gaillard, Gorman-Murray and Fordham 2017; Overton 2014). Despite New Orleans being hailed as the 'gay capital of the South', little research emerged around queer communities and peoples post-Katrina. However, the small body of work that has come out of Katrina highlights that queer people face different issues and possess unique capacities (Overton 2014; D'Ooge 2008; INCITE 2007). Emerging research has suggested that LGBTQ+ or Sexual Minority peoples experience disasters differently (see for example: Goldsmith et al. 2021; Larkin 2019; Gaillard et al. 2017; Wisner, Berger and Gaillard 2017). But, we still know very little about LGBTQ+ peoples lives post-disaster.

Post-disaster research, even within the rich field of Gender and Disaster scholarship, has traditionally focused on adult, heterosexual women, usually with children (Bradshaw 2015; 2013). However, some research does discuss wider relationships such as women's relationships with other women (heteronormatively) (David 2017; Enarson 2000). Furthermore, one study by Rashid and Michaud (2000) examines gender and sexuality in the lives of young women in Bangladesh post-1998 floods and showed that a wide range of relationships are important when navigating both gender and sexuality but very little has gone further within this area. We still do not know much about the wide range of relationships and how these are impacted post-disaster or how important they are in post-disaster recovery, particularly for queer women and gender diverse people. As relationships can be trickier to navigate for queer people, particularly family, and to a lesser extent friendships as well as the fact that queer relationships tend to be more invisibilised in popular culture, I thought that post-disaster, relationships might be important to understand. This is important because disasters disrupt daily life, sometimes placing people in new and unfamiliar spaces, like evacuation centres, as well as amplify existing stresses or issues, like GBV for instance which means we need to consider a wider range of relationships to better understand capacities and vulnerabilities to provide appropriate support.

The paper is based on my qualitative fieldwork that took place in 2012 where I did life history interviews with self-identified "young women" that came to also include those who fall into a "gender diverse" category to find out about young people's experiences of "growing up" post-disaster. This is still a highly under-researched area, particularly when coupled with sexualities. A number of the participants identified along a "queer" sexualities spectrum and this forms the focus of the paper through exploring the importance of relationships in post-disaster New Orleans.

This paper explores disaster through a "queering" lens (Jagose 1997; Halperin 1995). I problematise the notion of normality and explore disaster as an 'abnormal' time in that disaster can open up new space, or what has become known as 'the window of opportunity' for positive change (Byrne and Baden 1995). I look at this new space through the stories of queer-identifying participants who negotiated their identities within pre-existing processes and relationships as well as new ones that did not exist in times of 'normality'. Queering enables attention to be drawn to ways of seeing and being in the world from another position. Through 'playing' with boundaries and crossing them, Queer Theory unmask cultural constructions of sexuality and gender (Jagose 1997; Halperin 1995). Linking Queer Theory to a disasters lens where disasters are also seen as processes that unmask cultural and social issues or boundaries outside what is seen to be 'normal life' provides a framework through which to see disasters as equally queer events.

Why relationships matter post-disaster

*"If you're not around the gay community you would be in a boat without a paddle."
(Betty)*

For queer-identified participants, getting away from family relationships especially in contexts where family environments were restricting in terms of expressing sexual and gender identities was particularly important. To illustrate, this section focuses on Betty's story as she reflects on the comparison between her experiences post-Katrina when she was thirteen and post-Isaac when she was nineteen, linking up to the challenges of having to hide her sexual and gender identities at home where she lived with her parents demonstrating the

importance of family and community relationships with sexual identity and how important it is to consider these more in the post-disaster context.

During Katrina, Betty highlights powerlessness – Two key issues for those that were in the care of their parents were the lack of choice and lack of consultation, “when you’re in a situation where you have no choice but to go where your parents take you, I’m not saying it would have made it better, maybe less stressful and I’d have been more aware and understand better what was going on. Being able to drink would have been nice”. Betty talks later about Hurricane Isaac (referred to simply as Isaac from now) being more freeing because she was in the city, with friends, older and drinking:

“I’ve been going to The Pub since I was 16, 17? The troupe really opened my eyes and try different things and see the reactions I get and I feel like now is the time that I’m getting to finally find my style...I’ve definitely grown a lot in the past 7 years and I’m really glad I joined the troupe cos I can be myself, I don’t have to keep secrets, I can be like this is me...At home, it’s very different from New Orleans I mean I live in the sticks, its country. So having to hide with my family and not being able to have my own style you know...me and my mum don’t really get along, we’re both stubborn arses, you can argue with us til you’re blue in the face but we will still fight you. And also she is a very judgemental person which is taught me like my mind is really open to whoever, I don’t really judge people til I have a reason to, I have no right to...”

The recognition that they share personality traits in positive and negative ways allows for an understanding as to why there is sometimes conflict. However also a need and desire to distance themselves from those traits they see as toxic and unappealing demonstrating a desire to become their own kind of person as well as share family traits:

“I’ve learned a lot from different people in the troupe. It’s how I came to the term pan sexual. It was Jessica who explained it to me, I was like am I? You know what you’re right.....it took a few years to settle into and anyone who really knows me they say I’m an old soul, cos I always act way older than my age...I like everybody. I tried to tell my sister and her friends that I thought I was bi.”

It wasn’t until she found The Kings and the community that came with the troupe, that she began to know herself and her sexual and gender identities within her. Finding likeminded people enabled a more positive outlook and contributed to a greater sense of assuredness around identity. Being able to talk openly to someone who understood her allowed Betty to gain new experiences and also to put a name to her feelings that she could feel comfortable with. During Isaac, Betty got a big taste of what her life could be like more of the time if she did not live with her parents and have to lead a double life. Leading a double life due to fear based on parents prejudices is very stressful:

“I’d much rather my life in New Orleans cos I’m more open and free but at home I’m still like in that box and I’m still like living under my parents roof so, like if my mum found out I did drag, she would, “Why do you want to go around dressed up as a boy, what is wrong with you? Dehdehdeeh! You’ll never find a man if you keep hanging out in gay bars.” (puts on a whispery southern accent).

The experience of “hiding” and feeling disconnected, fear and anxiety around family acceptance was amplified for Rita who had moved to New Orleans for college but had to swiftly move “back home” to her parent’s house only weeks later:

“My parents do not know. They might have some suspicions about me being bi. But they were like whatever you are we will love you and support you so thats ok...but with the poly/bi stuff I don't know I think it's too much for them to get their heads round.”

Rita opens up the question on “telling” linked loosely to “coming out” highlighting the who and the what to tell is quite complicated, emotional and confusing. Often decisions around what to tell and what not to tell parents is based on judgements about what they will be able to cope with. This can be seen as the children’s way of protecting their parents but at the expense of their own lives.

Jessica also experienced the conflicts between family and sexuality, finding the space to work through who she was with friends and through this, feeling like Hurricane Katrina led to her experiencing a “sexual awakening.” For Jessica,

“Katrina was a big eye opener, it made me realise how much I loved New Orleans, how much I love my life and my friends and they are still my friends to this day , the new friends, being involved in this community helps me cope. If Katrina hadn't happened I don't know where I would have been. I don't know if I'd have been able to come out. I'd probably be married right now with some random guy that I'd have met in college. It's the “what if?” factor. What if it had never happened? Would I still have met Harrie? I'm grateful that my life has taken the path that it has now. I've found myself and I've found a wonderful family, my friends as well, a wonderful community that I'm a part of.”

Physical distance from familiar surroundings became an important way to explore identities, particularly for some participants who moved out-of-state temporarily as a result of Katrina, as Phoebe explains:

“I didn't realise how I identified as a combination of male and female til I went away out of state and I really tried to figure it out.”

The sentiment about the need to “get away” is also echoed by Beaux:

“Escaping familiarity, family and friends included was seen as a good way to find their own identities. For Beaux, it was about negotiating her identity in her own way. “[Going away to college because of Katrina] i was also about to discover my gender identity. I became more comfortable with myself because I was discovering myself at my own pace.”

Within that, worry and concern about family acceptance for those who weren’t “out to all” or who were on a journey discovering their sexualities were often entwined with the need for space.

Spaces also included queer social space, such as entertainment venues. Kayla explains:

“I went down to the pub one night because we had nothing to do. We had nothing to do but drink [laughs] and the pub owner said they had people show up on Tuesdays, on weekends, asking when we would be back on so we were like alright, let's put this thing back together. Our first show back was on November 15th I believe and there were 5 drag kings and we did a full show so there were 12 acts and you can imagine it was total chaos with only 5 of us and there were a couple of group acts you know.”

A particularly interesting finding from this research about relationships is linked to what a number of scholars have questioned as an evidenced “thing” is the post-disaster ‘window of

opportunity.’ My research found that disaster through being an ‘abnormal’ time opened up new, yet temporary space to make big decisions, particularly around their sexualities that did not exist in times of ‘normality.’

Elizabeth explains this space and what it meant to her:

“I’m guessing that everybody had that moment in that silence. The silence right after the hurricane had hit and it stopped raining and the birds weren’t chirping, nothing was moving, everything was still I feel like everybody was like standing outside just taking it all in. It was awesome and it completely changed my town to become more accepting and more closer and everything like that. It was easier.”

Relationships with others were central to this post-Katrina space. negotiated their identities within pre-existing processes and relationships as well as new ones but it also involved developing a relationship with themselves to reflect on who they wanted to be. Sexualities are a part of our identities and our sexualities also shape our relationships but do not define them fully. Our relationships with others, particularly post-disaster, can become more important and strengthen our connections to our communities as well as ourselves.

Conclusion: Sexualities shape our relationships

here everyday life was turned upside down and for many in this study, this eventually led to new relationships through LGBTQ+ communities which improved how they felt about themselves and their sexualities. This demonstrates the resourcefulness of LGBTQ+ folk – even where limited or no resources are provided. It is therefore important to strengthen community spaces, especially non-traditional spaces like entertainment groups such as The Kings and include space for younger people.

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