

Critical Qualitative Research
R E A D E R

EDITED BY
Shirley R. Steinberg and
Gaile S. Cannella



PETER LANG

New York • Washington, D.C./Baltimore • Bern
Frankfurt • Berlin • Brussels • Vienna • Oxford

Choosing Agency in the Midst of Vulnerability: Using Critical Disability Theory to Examine a Disaster Narrative

*Elizabeth McAdams Ducey, Laura M. Stough,
and M. Carolyn Clark*

Critical Disability Theory examines the ways in which individuals with disabilities have historically, socially, and politically been marginalized and disenfranchised in society, and challenges traditionally held assumptions and presumptions. Critical Disability theorists see the status of individuals with disabilities as embedded in the political structure of societies, which can lead to “dis-citizenship,” and that the struggle for equality by individuals with disabilities is an issue of power (Devlin & Pothier, 2006). Disability in this view can be seen as socially constructed in societies that privilege the “normal” over the “abnormal.” Recent literature on disability was heavily influenced by the civil rights movement of the 1960s, and the field continues to be dominated by discussions of policy matters (Gleeson, 1997). This orientation has made disability theories compatible with critical research in that it holds injustice and inequality towards individuals with disabilities as central concerns.

Our work in critical disability studies is concerned with the role of disability in disasters, with both how disasters impact individuals with disabilities and how societal factors predispose individuals with disabilities to disaster risk. As such, our work aligns most closely with the social vulnerability perspective of disaster, which was primarily developed by researchers from the field of sociology (see Cutter, Boruff, & Shirley, 2003; Peacock & Ragsdale, 1997; Philips & Morrow, 2007). While disasters are usually perceived as random events, the social vulnerability perspective argues that some groups are placed disproportionately at risk to disaster due to a combination of societal, economic, and political factors (Cutter et al., 2003; Fothergill & Peek, 2004). The social vulnerability perspective thus argues that societies collectively determine who lives in disaster-prone areas and who subsequently will have limited defenses against disasters (Hewitt, 1997). From this perspective, disasters not only affect some groups differentially, but expose pre-existing inequalities leading to disproportionate damage, loss of property, or even death (Wisner et al., 2004). Children, the elderly, women, racial minorities, the poor, persons with physical or mental disabilities, and immigrants have been identified as especially vulnerable to the harmful impacts of disaster (Cutter et al., 2003). For example, the cheap prices of land in

flood plain areas make it more likely that people living in poverty rent or buy residences in these areas. When flooding occurs, those that are poor are more likely to be affected by the disaster, while those of more affluent means living in less affected areas nearby are less likely to experience personal or material harm. Researchers using a social vulnerability perspective not only are interested in the effects of disaster on marginalized populations but also examine the social factors that mitigate the effects of disaster on these groups. As a result, vulnerability to disasters is not seen as situated within individuals; rather it is presented as the result of choices that societies make about what populations have access to protection from disasters and their aftermath.

Research on disasters and individuals with disabilities has been limited, and most of this work consists of studies and commentaries that were completed post-Katrina. Hurricane Katrina was one of the most destructive storms in United States history in terms of strength, damage, and loss of life (Blake, Rappaport, & Landsea, 2007). At the time Hurricane Katrina made landfall, it was estimated that 23 percent of the population in New Orleans were individuals with disabilities (National Council on Disability, 2006). This reflects a higher incidence of disability than the reported 19 percent of the population for the United States (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008). The increased vulnerability of people with disabilities was documented by reports of individuals with disabilities who faced life-threatening situations. For example, many people with physical disabilities were found to be unable to evacuate during Hurricane Katrina due to inaccessible transportation (National Council on Disability, 2006). Other studies (see White, Fox, Rooney, & Cahill, 2007; White, B., 2006) found that systems of emergency notification, for example television and radio broadcasts, were inaccessible to many individuals and that emergency management organizations were unprepared for the needs of people with disabilities. As a whole, the literature in disaster and disaster recovery suggests that individuals with disabilities are disproportionately affected by disaster (Fox, White, Rooney, & Rowland, 2007; Hemingway & Priestley, 2006; McGuire, Ford, & Okoro, 2007; Peek & Stough, 2010).

The purpose of these studies has been to illustrate the unequal impact that disasters have on individuals with disabilities, primarily those with physical disabilities. This emphasis has been, in part, a response to the previously described negative outcomes following Hurricane Katrina, and a push for social and legislative safeguards against the reoccurrence of such events. However, the activist stance simultaneously has inadvertently portrayed people with disabilities as victims in that they are portrayed as being more vulnerable to disaster, as encountering more societal discrimination, and as experiencing more negative outcomes. In our own work we have also highlighted discrepancies in the supports and services made available to individuals with disabilities during disasters. As a result, these reports do not provide examples of people with disabilities taking action; rather they are stories of how individuals with disabilities have been acted upon. The inadvertent message that may be construed from this work is that people with disabilities have less agency and are always highly dependent on others when disasters occur.

Long-term Recovery Study

In 2005, the second author began studying the recovery of individuals with disabilities following Hurricane Katrina, and was later joined by the first and, for the purposes of this project, the third author. Some of this research consisted of evaluating the services that people with disabilities were receiving post-disaster, some included interviews or surveys of disaster case managers, some used focus groups or interviews with people with disabilities. Much of what was learned was gathered from governmental white papers, disability advocacy groups, and from press reports.

Our stance in conducting the research described in this manuscript admittedly aligned with that of the predominant discourse in which researchers highlight the disadvantages and difficulties that people with disabilities encountered in response to the storm. As part of this study, we conducted in-depth, face-to-face interviews with individuals with disabilities who had been living in southern Louisiana

during the storm and who had relocated to Texas. We were interested in the changes that had taken place in their lives and their current long-term recovery status. The interview questions addressed issues pertaining to their daily functioning, such as their income, employment, leisure activities, place of residence, and medical needs both before and after the storm. These interviews generated significant information on the changes in the participants' daily functioning after the storm and difficulties encountered in their long-term recovery. The interviews also provided an opportunity for many of the participants to share their narratives on their experience with Hurricane Katrina. It was in this context that we met Mark, an African American male with a mild intellectual disability. His narrative challenged us to rethink our assumptions about how those with disabilities deal with natural disasters. In this chapter we examine one story in his narrative that was especially salient because it shaped his sense of identity and gave us insight into how the disabled can claim agency in the midst of disaster.

Mark's Introduction and Story: "Drowning Excerpt"

Mark was 47 years old at the time Hurricane Katrina hit. He was part of a close-knit family, he was living at his brother George's apartment, and he had constant interaction with his other two brothers and four sisters who lived in the New Orleans area. One of his sisters was diabetic, and Mark visited her daily to assist her with any needed tasks. Mark worked full time at the New Orleans Superdome. His work duties included setting up for sporting events, and he often put in long hours. Despite the hard work, Mark enjoyed the job and felt that he was making good money. Mark did not have a lot of free time because of his work commitments, but in his time off he shot pool or visited with friends and family. He was also a lead singer in a New Orleans church choir. Mark did not have his own transportation and would usually walk, catch a ride with someone, or take the bus to get around town. Mark did not finish high school but did receive his GED from a local education center. He spoke English, as well as some Creole.

Mark relocated to San Antonio, Texas, after the storm and was living with his brother George in a large apartment complex. His remaining six siblings all relocated to different cities. The geographical separation meant that Mark no longer communicated daily with his siblings. In the new city, Mark spent his time walking around, talking to neighbors, or watching television. Mark did not have steady employment and completed odd jobs to get income. He also received initial financial assistance from FEMA and partial assistance from employees of the apartment complex. Mark did not have any involvement with church activities in San Antonio. After the storm, Mark developed knee problems and walked with a limp. His life in Texas was radically different from his life in New Orleans.

During his interview, Mark told a dramatic story about his experience as the flooding of the city began to reach dangerous levels.

So anyway, when we came downstairs it was flooded downstairs inside the apartment building, right. That is where my oldest brother stay at. Okay, so we out there and you don't, you forget where your bearings at, you know what I am saying, and the next thing I know my other older brother, not Freddie, but George, dipped off, so I had go out there and jump out there and get him, oh man, and bring him back; the water was over our head. And my younger brother, all he was doin was stood back and the water was up to his neck. And he was just hollerin "Get him, get him!" and I said, "I got him, I got him." And both of us went under water and some kind of way, man, both of us came out of the water, and I brought him back, back to where he can stand level where the water was level up to his chest. Man, that was weird. My brother was crying, he had me crying, everybody was crying. There was all kinds of things happening, man.

Mark told this story in response to a question about where he was living in New Orleans. His response, which varied from what we sought to elicit with our research question, alerted us that this chosen narrative was pivotal in Mark's lived experience with Hurricane Katrina. Mark revisited this event two additional times during the interview, with each narrative recounting made in response to a fixed

question. In telling his varied narrative, Mark was determined to claim an identity that differed from what we had anticipated. Narrative is a fundamental mode of meaning-making, one that is distinctly human; Fisher (1984) goes so far as to characterize human beings as *homo narrans*. Telling stories is how we make sense of our experience. It is in times of chaos and uncertainty that the importance of narrative is most evident, as Riessman (2008) notes: "Telling stories about difficult times in our lives creates order and contains emotions, allowing a search for meaning and enabling connection with others" (p. 10). Mark clearly creates meaning through his story of saving his brother from drowning. From our perspective as researchers, it offered us a point of entry into his experience and the meaning he gives to it.

The purpose of our chapter is to critically examine the experience of one man against the backdrop of the social vulnerability of individuals with disabilities following Hurricane Katrina. We analyze Mark's story in depth to provide a detailed understanding of how one man with a disability responded to the dangers and challenges of a natural disaster and to understand how that experience impacted him and shaped his identity. Riessman (2008) underscores the power of narrative in this regard by referencing Jerome Bruner: "Individuals, he argues, *become* the autobiographical narratives by which they tell about their lives" (p. 10).

Method

Any story contains both what is said (content) and how it is said (structure), and these elements provide two ways to analyze a narrative. We chose both a thematic approach and a structural approach to analyze Mark's interview. A thematic approach was selected in order to examine the themes present throughout Mark's interview, which was appropriate as it enabled us to understand his experience as a whole. To understand the story Mark told about saving his brother from drowning, we used a structural approach; this approach enabled us to see how he constructed his identity as a hero.

To analyze the entire interview we used holistic content analysis, an approach developed by Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, and Zilber (1998). This method involves several steps. First we read the interview multiple times in order to discern overarching patterns in the content. Then we wrote our global impression of the interview and further developed our sense of the whole narrative. With that in mind, we then identified specific themes that we considered salient; these could be marked by the amount of space taken up by a theme, repetition of certain thoughts or ideas, and the amount of detail given to a particular event. We also looked for omissions, the absence of a topic that would be expected to be included. Once themes were identified, we reread the transcript for each theme, noting things like when it appeared and disappeared, the context surrounding the elaboration of that theme, and how the speaker evaluated or made sense of the theme. This provided a nuanced understanding of the content of the interview.

To analyze the details of the story of how Mark rescued his brother from the flood waters, which was embedded within the interview, we used a structural approach developed by Gee (1991) and adapted by Riessman (2008). Gee's method is built on the assumption that speech is poetic in structure; in using it, the researcher must first listen closely to the audio recording of the interview and attend to how the respondent speaks. Things like pitch, intonation, rate of speech, hesitations, emphases, and other linguistic markers are carefully noted so that speech units can be revealed. Gee identifies various levels of units, including lines, stanzas, strophes, and parts, but for analytic purposes the stanzas are particularly important:

A stanza is a group of lines about a single topic, each stanza captures a single "vignette." Each stanza is a particular "take" on a character, action, event, claim or piece of information; each involves a shift of focal participants, focal events, or a change in the time or framing of events from the preceding stanza. (Gee, 1991, p. 23)

In our analysis of Mark's story, after noting the various linguistic markers present, we retranscribed that portion of the interview to uncover its inner structure. In that process we saw that the story had six stanzas, and we titled each one in order to highlight the topic or main idea of the stanza. We also visually noted what words or phrases were said with emphasis, and we arranged the text on the page in a way that made repetition and parallel structure more obvious. The order in which the words were spoken remains unchanged; what Gee's method reveals is the internal structure of the telling. Riessman (2008) explains this with a musical analogy: "Gee slows down the [informant's] stream of talk to examine how each part fits into the whole, and what each topic shift contributes to the overall effect" (p. 94). We used Gee's structural analysis on Mark's story of rescuing his brother from the flood waters because it was a story he chose to tell three different times during the interview. The version we chose for analysis was the version he told first as it was the most detailed account of the event, and it served to lay claim to his identity as a hero, thus shaping the character of the interview as a whole.

Findings

We present our findings in two parts: those derived through thematic analysis and those uncovered through structural analysis.

Thematic Analysis

In using the holistic content approach of Lieblich et al. (1998), we first developed a global impression of the interview. Mark's narrative was one of a man who continued to struggle with recovery from an extreme catastrophe. His life post-Hurricane Katrina contrasted sharply with his life before the storm. He was forced to confront profoundly challenging situations that resulted in major dislocations, such as from his home and from most of his close-knit family. Despite the challenges discussed in the interview, Mark communicated a strong voice of power when recalling a heroic act in the midst of extreme chaos.

There were three predominant themes that emerged from Mark's interview and were present throughout his narrative. The themes were identified as disruption, the unknown, and chaos.

Disruption. A theme of disruption is not necessarily surprising given the context of a natural disaster. In Mark's narrative, however, disruption permeated different aspects of his life and was present three years after the storm. The theme of disruption was evident in his relationship with his family, his mental functioning, and his source of income. The passage below demonstrated how the disruption often stretched across different areas of his life. Mark commented,

...It all depends. When you have a really depressed stage you going to stay in at least like a semi-depressed stage 'cause everyone trying to talk to you, call you on the phone, which I have no more right now. And um, just wondering how your family doing, but you can't reach them, you can't reach out and touch them. Might can talk every couple of weeks or something. They might call a neighbor or they might even call the office upfront.

The passage revealed Mark's disruption within his family. Before Hurricane Katrina made land-fall, Mark had close interaction with all of his brothers and sisters and saw four of them daily. Mark's relationship with his siblings was one filled with reciprocated support. Mark's brother allowed Mark to stay at their apartment while Mark assisted his sister with her daily chores. The effects of Hurricane Katrina caused Mark's close-knit family to be ripped apart initially at the evacuation phase of the disaster. Mark, when asked about the evacuation, explained: "They was trying to make sure everyone was together. All the family wasn't together. We worried about who, what, where, man, 'cause at the time, like I was saying, we didn't know where our sisters was." Even three years after the storm the family remained dispersed. Mark said, "We just split all over the place" and "Now everybody just spread all over." At the time of the interview Mark was living with two of his brothers but had little contact with

another brother and four sisters. The difficulty in communication was increased, as Mark did not have his own phone and communication with most of his siblings had to be through another source, such as a neighbor or the apartment office. Mark addressed his human need for face-to-face contact when he said, "you can't reach out and touch them." The shift from daily face-to-face interaction to infrequent phone conversations was especially difficult, for him as Mark lost daily supports and the opportunity for him to be a source of support to his family.

The theme of disruption also surfaced when Mark talked about his mental functioning. He talked about being in a "depressed and semi-depressed stage" at the time of the storm. Mark made reference to the drowning experience as being one of the causes for his disrupted state of mental functioning. He said, "After my brothers almost drown that just messed up my head, you know what I am saying?" There were other comments throughout the narrative that hinted at his compromised mental state, such as when he commented, "I can't even think straight, and "...I don't know...distracted from all that..." Mark communicated that he was depressed and having difficulty thinking clearly after the storm. If his depressed mood was indeed the result of the disaster, it placed Mark within the shared narrative of other disaster survivors that developed psychological changes such as depression or post-traumatic stress disorder. Mark's network of support was decreased when his family contact was disrupted, and this could have been detrimental in his ability to seek treatment for his self-disclosed depression.

Mark also experienced disruption of employment after the storm. Mark expressed early in the interview that he enjoyed his full-time job at the Superdome. He displayed pride when talking about his duties and relationships with co-workers. However, Mark was not employed at the time of the interview. He explained his sources of income post-disaster:

Well, you know FEMA was taking care of us. Every once in a while I might get a job with this man that do drywall or something, you know, to make a little money. And also the people here help me out 'cause they know my situation, the people up at the front office.

This disruption in employment caused Mark to go from being financially independent to relying on odd jobs and infrequent financial support from other sources. Mark reflected on the change of his income and expressed dissatisfaction with the situation when he commented: "That was good money and I miss it." The loss of employment and steady income contributed to Mark's dependence on others outside his family.

Mark reinforced the theme of disruption across different areas of his life when he reflected on the state of his life at the time of the interview. At the end of his narrative, he commented, "Things are just bad." This statement on his situation three years after the storm was in stark contrast to his attitudes expressed about his life before the storm.

The Unknown. The theme of the unknown first appeared in Mark's description of his brother almost drowning. Mark was exposed to unknown elements before he was able to successfully save his brother. He recalled, "You had to get underneath the water, dark water, you couldn't see nothing." His description similarly dragged us as readers beneath the murky, churning water with him, and for a brief moment we were unsure if we would surface with him. The unknown was again referenced during the description of the rescue when he said, "...some kind of way man, we came out of the water." Mark was not able to pinpoint exactly how he was able to pull his brother out from underneath the dark water, which left his source of strength in that defining moment unknown.

Mark's description of the evacuation also contained tones of the unknown. The evacuation caused separation from his family, and Mark was not aware of where all of his family members were being taken. He recalled,

Okay, let's see. Um, I got to think on this 'cause it's a trip. Okay, some people gone to Houston...it all depends on what car you in. Some was going here, some was going there, and some was coming to San Antonio. So it just so happens that we was on a military plane and our plane just so happened to come to San Antonio.

Mark did not have any control of the evacuation situation or of his final destination. Mark hinted at the unsteadiness of the situation when he first said, "...it's a trip." This statement was interpreted as him not solely referring to a trip in the sense of going somewhere but instead as an out-of-the-ordinary experience that had an unknown destination.

The theme of the unknown also appeared in Mark's life at the time of the interview and affected his long-term recovery. Mark's daily routine before the storm was established and included stopping at his sister's house before he went to work. Mark had clear expectations at his job, and he completed similar tasks daily. Mark acknowledged the predictability of his employment when he said, "I always stayed on the same job that had the same routine." He was also able to rely on his nearby family for support. After the storm, Mark described a situation that did not contain daily and structured routines, as well as one that lacked clear supports. The loss of steady employment, the sporadic income and decrease in family support led to Mark having days that were unpredictable and had no clear purpose. Mark, when asked about his daily routine after the storm, said, "I wander around a little bit and figure out what the world is going to do sometimes." Individuals with intellectual disabilities often benefit from predictable daily routines, and it can be stressful to the individual when these routines are disrupted. The uncertainty of Mark's day could have contributed to his self-disclosed depression.

Mark's specific use of language at times contributed further to the theme of the unknown. He used the words "go out there" or "out there" when he described the situation when his brother was being overwhelmed by the flood waters. His use of imprecise or vague language makes it impossible for the reader to visualize the chaotic scene, which, in turn, renders the scene more unknowable. Mark referred to Hurricane Katrina a number of times as a "thing" rather than a hurricane or storm. We interpreted this as meaning that Mark perceived the storm as an unidentifiable massive destructive force that was unknown.

Chaos. The theme of chaos emerged as Mark described his experience with the immediate aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Many individuals watched the chaotic scene unfold in New Orleans on television from the safety of their living rooms. Mark was forced to witness the disorder firsthand. He described the first time he saw the chaotic scene:

Next thing we know we wake up and my brother says, "Man, come look at this!" and I [Mark] said "Come look at what?" "The water!" [his brother responds]... like 'cause he was still on the second floor and the water is like almost up to the window to the second floor. I [Mark] say, "Whoa, they got people floating out here in little things." Oh man, that when you see people going into the Winn Dixie supermarkets, looting and all that kind of stuff.

Their frightening exposure to chaos continued during the evacuation phase. Mark described the chaotic scene:

When they came to the apartment building downstairs at the ground floor in a little boat, but first they tried to get us by helicopter, getting people out of the window. Oh man, we was waving our white sheets and everything.... They took us in a boat and we were riding over the cars, cars were underneath the water and then the boat would hit it.

Mark further described how the evacuation continued with him having to ride in a military truck, bus, helicopter, plane, and finally another bus that took him to his final destination. His retelling of his

experience swept us into the narrative drama of the situation, and we began to get some sense of the overall turmoil that the residents of New Orleans experienced.

The thematic analysis gives us an overall sense of what Mark experienced during and after Hurricane Katrina. Our structural analysis of his narrative gives us different insights.

Structural Analysis

We chose to use Gee's (1991) structural approach to analyze a key story within Mark's interview that presents how he acted decisively in the midst of chaos. Our purpose here is to explore how this incident shaped his identity. What follows is the story as it appeared when we applied Gee's approach.

- Stanza 1: Location
 01 When we came downstairs
 02 it was *flooded* downstairs
 03 inside the apartment building
 04 right.
 05 That is where
 06 my oldest brother stay at.
- Stanza 2: Lost at Sea
 07 Okay so we *out there*
 08 and you don't,
 09 you forget
 10 *where your bearings at,*
 11 you know what I am saying,
- Stanza 3: The Call to Heroism
 12 The next thing *I* know
 13 my other older brother,
 14 not Freddie, but George,
 15 dipped off
 16 so *I* had to go *out there*
 17 and jump *out there*
 18 and get *him*.
 19 Oh man,
 20 and bring *him* back,
- Stanza 4: It's Up to Me
 21 the water was over our head.
 22 And my younger brother
 23 *all he* was doin was stood back
 24 and the water was up to his neck.
 25 And *he* was *just*
 26 hollerin "Get him, get him!"
 27 and *I* said "*I* got him, *I* got him."
- Stanza 5: I Brought Him Back
 28 And *both of us* went under water
 29 and some kind of way,

some sense of the
 ng and after Hur-
 rk's interview that
 how this incident
 approach.

30 man,
 31 *both of us* came out of the water
 32 and *I brought him back*,
 33 back to where
 34 *he* can stand level
 35 where the water was level
 36 up to his chest.

Stanza 6: Emotional Release
 37 Man, that was weird.
 38 My brother was cryin,
 39 he had me cryin,
 40 everybody was cryin,
 41 There was *all kinds* of things
 42 happening man.

In Stanza 1, Mark sets up the scene of the narrative by paying particular attention to location. He included the physical location as well as the location of characters. His focus is on the rising water and the threat it presents. Not only is it flooded downstairs, it is his older brother's apartment that is filled with water, which makes the flooding a very personal, very imminent threat. The second stanza connects to the category of the unknown as evidenced in his choice of language. What is no longer known is where exactly he is—Mark has lost his bearings, and “out there” is a very frightening place. The third stanza signals the beginning of the dramatic event, with Mark's older brother being engulfed by the murky flood waters. We again are connected back to the unknown and the threatening flood waters because of Mark's choice of the words “out there” and bringing his brother back from “there.” The third stanza is when we first see Mark's identification of himself as a hero. He is the person that *had* to go get his brother; there was no one else who could do it. In Stanza 4, Mark emphasizes the increasing danger when he notes that the water was already over his head and, by inference, over his brother George's head. Significantly the water is not over the head of his younger brother, who stands back and hollers for Mark to rescue George. The contrast between Mark's actions and the inaction of his younger brother further defines Mark's identity as a hero. Stanza 5 describes the dramatic rescue, but without giving much detail on how exactly Mark saves his brother George; Mark himself is unsure how he did it (“some kind of way”), but he is unequivocal in claiming responsibility for the act (“*I brought him back*”). Mark clearly makes the claim that he is the hero in this story. In the final stanza, Mark shifts to the emotion of the event by describing how everyone, including himself, cried. Their tears also consist of water, but these emotional waters signal relief that Mark was able to rescue George from the threatening waters of the flood. While “there was all kinds of things happening,” the most important thing that happened in this narrative was Mark's heroic rescue of his brother.

Discussion

Mark was an individual multiply classified as intellectually disabled, a racial minority, of low income, a resident of an area prone to natural disasters, and without a car—all factors identified by researchers as contributing to physical and social vulnerability in disaster. Our thematic analysis revealed that Mark was indeed negatively affected by Hurricane Katrina. He was exposed to chaotic experiences that individuals with better evacuation resources did not have to confront. Post-disaster, Mark had difficulty gaining employment, establishing new social contacts, and accessing disaster-related supports—all of which influenced his recovery from the storm. Mark became reliant on others for financial assistance in contrast to before the storm when he had been the prideful source of his own income. The challenges

Mark experienced aligned with the dominant disaster narrative of individuals with disabilities as vulnerable in disaster and in need of others to act on their behalf.

However, Mark directly challenged the view of individuals with disabilities as socially vulnerable and changed the focus of the interview when he asserted his identity as a hero. No matter the interview question he was asked, Mark insisted on telling the near-drowning story in three different narratives, underscoring the importance that this heroic identity had for him. Narrative provides an arena for individuals to perform identities to their audience. Riessman (2008) remarked on the function of identity performance in narrative: "We are forever composing impressions of ourselves, protecting a definition of who we are, and making claims about ourselves and the world we test out and negotiate with others" (p. 106). We interpreted Mark's strong identity performance as serving two purposes: Mark used his identity portrayal to communicate his role in the natural disaster to the researcher as well as to lay claims on his current overwhelming circumstance in recovery.

Mark's performance as a hero demonstrated his agency in the disaster: He was the one in his family that acted during the near-drowning. Devlin and Pothier (2006) stress that individuals with disabilities often demonstrate agency:

For every moment and instance of "power over" there are moments of "power to"....persons with disabilities have engaged in empowering strategies—at the level of the self; in the family; at school; at work; in local, national, and international politics; in the social realm; and in the cultural realm. (p. 13)

Mark's narrative provides an example of "power to" in the realm of disaster. His presented identity as an active, powerful agent shaped a counter-narrative that conflicted with the dominant narrative of individuals with disabilities as "acted upon" during disaster. The power to act came from within Mark and contrasts sharply with previous work that presents the disaster vulnerability of individuals with disabilities as determined by external societal factors. Mark's narrative is one of immediate action. He rescued his brother from the flood waters as opposed to passive reliance on the emergency management system—which failed to meet the needs of many other individuals with disabilities in Hurricane Katrina. The repetition of his heroic story establishes Mark as someone with agency, and with a hero identity that suggests he will conquer his current challenges.

An important distinction must be made between our chosen label of Mark's performed identity as a hero and the concept of the "super crip." Critical disability scholars and members of the disability community have adapted the term "super crip" in reference to individuals with disabilities that have accomplished tremendous feats or have achieved extreme advancements in their professions, such as Helen Keller or Christopher Reeve (Smart, 2009). The concept of the "super crip" reflects societal tendencies to praise such heroic acts and can lead to an expectation that all individuals with disabilities should overcome their disability. We caution that this narrative of the "hero" is not meant to reinforce the stereotype of a "super crip" but instead reflects Mark's chosen narrative as an act of agency. Mark's story is not significant because he took extraordinary measures, rather it is significant because he narrates a heroic identity that directly challenges the narrative of individuals with disabilities in disasters as helpless victims. Mark's counter-narrative also challenged us as researchers who ascribe to the social vulnerability perspective to rethink our own assumptions about the role of individuals with disabilities during disaster.

Conclusion

Mark found a powerful voice, generated from his own heroic narrative, despite the inferior status typically assigned by society to individuals with disabilities. His decision to portray himself with agency assisted him in processing his experience of Hurricane Katrina. Mark was a disaster survivor who was

able to identify his own role in disaster as important. In Mark's narrative we discover an individual who chose an identity of agency instead of one of vulnerability.

References

- Blake, E., Rappaport, E., & Landsea, C. (2007). *The deadliest, costliest, and most intense United States tropical cyclones from 1851 to 2006 (and other frequently requested hurricane facts)*. Retrieved from National Weather Service, National Hurricane Center: <http://www.nhc.noaa.gov/pdf/NWS-TPC-5.pdf>
- Cutter, S. L., Boruff, B. J., & Shirley, W. L. (2003). Social vulnerability to environmental hazards. *Social Science Quarterly*, 84, 242–261.
- Devlin, R., & Pothier, D. (2006). Introduction: Toward a critical theory of dis-citizenship. In R. Devlin & D. Pothier (Eds.), *Critical disability theory: Essays in philosophy, politics and law* (pp. 1–22). Vancouver, BC, Canada: UBC Press.
- Fisher, W. R. (1984). Narration as a human communication paradigm: The case of public moral argument. *Communication Monographs*, 51(1), 1–22. doi:10.1080/03637758409390180
- Fothergill, A., & Peek, L. (2004). Poverty and disasters in the United States: A review of the sociological literature. *Natural Hazards*, 32, 89–110. doi:0.1023/B:NHAZ.0000026792.7681.d9
- Fox, M. H., White, G. W., Rooney, C., & Rowland, J. L. (2007). Disaster preparedness and response for persons with mobility impairments. *Journal of Disability Policy Studies*, 17(4), 196–205. doi:10.1177/10442073070170040201
- Gee, J. P. (1991). A linguistic approach to narrative. *Journal of Narrative and Life History*, 1(1), 15–39.
- Gleeson, B. J. (1997). Disability studies: A historical materialist view. *Disability & Society*, 12(2), 179–202. doi:10.1080/09687599727326
- Hemingway, L., & Priestley, M. (2006). Natural hazards, human vulnerability, and disabling societies: A disaster for disabled people? *The Review of Disability Studies*, 2(3), 57–67.
- Hewitt, K. (1997). *Regions of risk: A geographical introduction to disasters*. Boston, MA: Addison Wesley Longman.
- Lieblich, A., Tuval-Mashiach, R., & Zilber, T. (1998). *Narrative research: Reading, analysis, and interpretation*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- McGuire, L., Ford, E., & Okoro, C. (2007). Natural disasters and older US adults with disabilities: Implications for evacuation. *Disasters*, 31(1), 49–56. doi:0.1111/j.1467-7717.2007.00339
- National Council on Disability (NOD). (2006). *The impact of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita on people with disabilities: A look back and remaining challenges*. Washington, DC: Author.
- O'Keefe, P., Westgate, K., & Wisner, B. (1976). Taking the naturalness out of natural disasters. *Nature*, 260, 566–567. doi:10.1038/260566a0
- Peacock, W. G., and Ragsdale, A. K. (1997). Social systems, ecological networks and disasters. In W. G. Peacock, B. H. Morrow & J. Gladwin (Eds.), *Hurricane Andrew: Ethnicity, gender and the sociology of disasters*. (pp.20–35) New York: Routledge.
- Peek, L., & Stough, L. M. (2010). Children with disabilities in the context of disaster: A social vulnerability perspective. *Child Development*, 81(4), 1260–1270.
- Phillips, B. D., & Morrow, B. H. (2007). Social science research needs: Focus on vulnerable populations, forecasting, and warnings. *Natural Hazards Review*, 8(3), 61–68. doi:2048/10.1061/1527-69888:3
- Riessman, C. K. (2008). *Narrative methods for the human sciences*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Smart, J. (2009). *Disability, society, and the individual*. Austin, TX: Pro-Ed.
- U.S. Census Bureau. (2008). Current population reports: Americans with disabilities: 2005. Retrieved from <http://www.census.gov/prod/2008pubs/p70-117.pdf>
- White, B. (2006). Disaster relief for deaf persons: Lessons from Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. *The Review of Disability Studies*, 2(3), 49–56.
- White, G. W., Fox, M. H., Rooney, C., & Cahill, A. (2007). *Assessing the impact of Hurricane Katrina on persons with disabilities*. Retrieved from University of Kansas, Research and Training Center on Independent Living website: http://www.rtcil.org/products/NIDRR_FinalKatrinaReport.pdf
- Wisner, B., Blaikie, P., Cannon, T., & Davis, I. (2004). *At risk: Natural hazards, people's vulnerability, and disasters* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: Routledge.