

## **The Aftermath of Hurricane Katrina: Stories of Loss, Resilience, and Returning Home**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This study explored the lived experiences of residents of the Gulf Coast in the USA during Hurricane Katrina, which made landfall in August 2005 and caused insurmountable destruction throughout the area. A heuristic process and thematic analysis were employed to draw observations and conclusions about the lived experiences of each participant and make meaning through similar thoughts, feelings, and themes that emerged in the analysis of the data. Six themes emerged: (1) fear, (2) loss, (3) anger, (4) support, (5) spirituality, and (6) resilience. The results of this study allude to the possible psychological outcomes as a result of experiencing a traumatic event and provide an outline of what the psychological experience of trauma might entail. The current research suggests that preparedness and expectation are key to resilience and that people who feel that they have power over their situation fare better than those who do not.*

**KEYWORDS:** mass trauma, resilience, loss, natural disaster, mental health.

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Research suggests that the long-term needs of victims of a traumatic experience are generally not addressed, and the mental health community should be utilized to assist in these mass traumas (Mao & Agyapong, 2021). Additionally, responses to trauma are multilayered and variable. More immediate stress and trauma can trigger bodily signs like a racing heart or increased blood pressure. Psychological, trauma, and stress are associated with lower capacities for coping and emotional regulation. Overall, persistent stress and trauma have been linked to poorer physical and psychological health outcomes (Jiang et al., 2019). The trauma of Katrina was considered more complex than most traumas, typically resulting in post-traumatic syndrome disease (PTSD), though it may have been experienced by victims as bereavement or complicated grief (Bryant et al., 2020; Ehrenreich, 2003; McLeish & Del Ben 2008). Examining a community's response to trauma, both constructive and negative, is important to understanding how to help individuals process their experiences and better cope or plan for life after the trauma.

Eighteen years have passed since Katrina, but the long-lasting impact on victims and the lessons learned that might aid the psychological community and survivors of mass trauma are understudied. In 2006, the American Psychological Association (APA) acknowledged no strategies or structure to adequately address the specific needs of a community after a traumatic experience such as a natural disaster, even though the scientific community understands that

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this type of large-scale disaster often leads to a host of mental illnesses and health problems for those who experience the trauma firsthand (APA, 2006). To date, researchers have explored the stories of motivations of Katrina survivors returning home (Calvo, et al., 2015; Klopfer, 2017; Weil et al., 2018), but the broader mental and public health implications have not been adequately captured in qualitative research (Fussell, 2015; Raker et al., 2019). Understanding mass trauma and, more specifically, how to address recovery needs, requires large-scale participation from many disciplines, not limited to medicine, psychology, and education. Above all, input from victims would aid the efforts of professionals.

The drama of a disaster can be highly sensationalized in today's culture of the 24-hour news cycle (Thompson et al., 2019). Hurricane Katrina, like many other disasters, began long before the rain and wind. Its failures began in the weak infrastructure and in the city, state, and federal government agencies that each played a vital role in the city's emergency preparedness for an immediate response to the storm (Brinkley, 2006). This disaster is a notable event in U.S. history and was widely criticized for ineptitude and ill preparedness as well as racialized media coverage adding to inequity and further misunderstanding (Brinkley, 2006; Buras, 2020; Colom & Pelot-Hobbs, 2022). Early interaction with disaster planning agencies could have helped establish first responders earlier and begun the healing process much faster (Gheyntanhi et al., 2007). Understanding how to address victims of trauma and assist them in healing comes from first knowing about their experiences and communities as the latter is said to improve coping and resiliency (Makwana, 2019; Manove et al., 2019)

What separates Katrina from other natural disasters faced by the United States before it is the fact that 27.5% of those displaced as a result of the hurricane and its harrowing aftermath did not return home (Groen & Polivka, 2008). One theory is community resilience, which stipulates that communities fare better in post-disaster rescue and recovery if they have a vested interest in the action and feel useful rather than weak and helpless. This mentally prepares them for the obstacles ahead and begins the process of recovery from trauma (Dennis et al., 2006; King et al., 2015). Research suggests that survivors of mass trauma and natural disasters go through stages of anxiety and apprehension resulting from having had to make difficult choices, fight for survival, and address the aftermath and consequences of choices made before, during, and after the event (Drury et al., 2019; Morganstein & Ursano, 2020). This could include establishing new or reinstating old rituals helps to move victims forward and address trauma-related grief and uncertainties, returning a bit of normalcy to daily habits and life as well as acknowledging past experiences and promoting rebirth and closure (Cherry, 2020; Stough et al., 2016; Williams & Spruill, 2005).

In view of this information regarding evacuees who did not return home and the prevalence of trauma that may have gone untreated or unresolved, it is important to understand factors that might have contributed to Katrina victims not returning home. Access to resources, financial security, and the depth of the experienced destruction undoubtedly played a role in decisions to return to pre-Katrina homes. However, there is a dearth of literature regarding the emotional experiences specific to the decision-making process of either returning and rebuilding or securing housing in a new area or state (Koslov et al., 2021). Although evacuated victims were able to receive assistance in relocation and recovery from FEMA's \$1.9 billion grant program (Garratt & Stark, 2009), many variables impact housing decisions and can include vocation, education, and loss of community or social support (Bui et al., 2021; Groen & Polivka, 2009).

Individuals unhoused due to Katrina are considered victims of a mass trauma. The first and most frequently diagnosed mental illness associated with mass trauma is PTSD, which generally occurs after exposure to a traumatic event and the emotional distress in the aftermath (Milanak et al., 2019) PTSD is considered a chronic diagnosis that can cause impairment to an individual's daily life and is marked by symptoms of hypervigilance, hyperarousal, avoidance, and re-experiencing (Maercker et al., 2022). In addition to PTSD, survivors may also

experience complicated grief and loss, mourning, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), acute stress disorder (ASD), depression, anxiety, suicidal ideation, among other symptoms and conditions; the added stress of securing housing and developing social supports can exasperate distress (Gesi et al., 2020; Jafari et al., 2020; Lee & Lee, 2019).

Research suggests that full understanding of past actions and experiences inform the aftermath of a disaster, specifically regarding a person's ability to move forward and make the appropriate decisions to aid in personal recovery (Bakic & Ajdukovic, 2021; Handayani & Nurdin, 2021; Silver & Grek-Martin, 2015). This considers the tenets of Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory, providing that the development of a person is based both on internal processes and external factors of their upbringing, including community, environment, and chosen relationships (Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000). Further research into resilience speaks to the ability of a society to embrace the idea of preparedness for catastrophic situations that can be maintained at a local level initially, with less dependence focused on external systems to provide the brunt of aid and support (Ardila-Sanchez et al., 2019; South et al., 2020). This suggests that emotional resilience can also be achieved not only in the ability to cope with change and the aftermath of a situation, but also in preparing for a disastrous situation's occurrence (Yabe et al., 2020).

## Method

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of individuals who lived through Hurricane Katrina on the Gulf Coast with respect to perceived recovery processes and their motivations or reservations to return home post-disaster. The Gulf Coast includes Florida, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, and Texas, which are the states that border the Gulf of Mexico. For the purpose of the study, the Gulf Coast will be considered the affected cities within Louisiana, Alabama, and Mississippi that received the brunt of Hurricane Katrina and will be mentioned together when applicable. Individual states and cities or states will be referenced as needed, but any reference to these three states in relation to Katrina will be called the Gulf Coast.

Convenience and snowball sampling were employed. To participate in the study, individuals must: (1) have been directly affected by Hurricane Katrina; (2) lived within the affected Gulf Coast area for a period of at least seven to 10 years prior to the storm date; (3) be over the age of 18; (4) speak and understand English. This study was approved by the IRB at The Chicago School of Professional Psychology in January 2013. Five participants met the criteria and were assigned codes for anonymity: (P1) 49-year-old African American female, (P2) 56-year-old African American male, (P3) 52-year-old Caucasian male, (P4) 61-year-old African American male, and (P5) 54-year-old Caucasian female.

Interviews were conducted face to face in the participant's towns of residence, in a neutral conference facility. Interviews lasted one to two hours. Demographic data was collected, and the interviews were guided by open-ended, semi-structured questions. Each interview was video recorded with a separate marked disk to identify each interview and interviewer. No additional items were requested from the participants, although some offered to provide information and news clips via email. During the research trip, materials were collected reflecting the history of the area, such as works and poems from native New Orleanians expounding on their personal experience and relationship to the city. The focus and unquestioned bias to the city identified in these materials appeared to be the way the culture wrote about their love, life, and way of being, which has not been conveyed for other areas in the Gulf Coast that were affected by Katrina.

The data was transcribed and analyzed with utilized ATLAS.ti software, which locates similar words and phrases, and then emergent themes can be clustered from each participant's story. A heuristic process and thematic analysis were employed to draw observations and

conclusions about the lived experiences of each participant and make meaning through similar thoughts, feelings, and themes that emerged in the analysis of the data. Upon completion of the transcriptions, the interviews were re-experienced to develop a sense of each participant and find similar experiences. The thoughts and underlying experiences of the researcher are also considered in this process, creating an understanding of the essence of the participant's experience as well as the researcher's experience in completing the dissertation process in this manner. These themes became apparent while I experienced immersion and incubation in reviewing the data. Putting the research aside allowed for the intuitive process to emerge (Douglass & Moustakas, 1985). As discussed by Boyatzis (1998), thematic analysis also reveals a pattern of thought and process developed in participants' experiences in the immediate and subsequent aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Six themes emerged and will follow: (1) fear, (2) loss, (3) anger, (4) support, (5) spirituality, and (6) resilience.

## Findings

### Theme 1: Fear

Participants experienced fear related to the storm and its immediate aftermath, especially when considering the lack of information, communications, and disconnection from loved ones in the aftermath. The participants had varying experiences in dealing with fear and uncertainty in the immediate aftermath; often, these emotions caused stress and anxiety as participants tried to find answers, solace, and comfort and restore order. P1, for example, had the following to say about the experience of the storm and its immediate aftermath:

*My parents never taught me coping skills, and alcohol did that for me... Today I have those, but it was a learning process and it was a growing process, 'cause it didn't happen overnight. It wasn't about being a victim then, it was just I had such a feeling of devastation and fear. I was full of fear and the unknown. What do I do now, you know, because, like I said, everything I knew went wrong. (P1)*

Participants had varying experiences regarding fear of what was to come and their ability to recover and regain their pre-storm lives. P5 provided a very poignant description of the experience in the immediate aftermath, stating:

*When we had went home right after Hurricane Katrina, it was like the day the earth stood still. We was out there, and me and (a friend) was sitting out and we didn't even see dogs. You didn't see no cats. You didn't see birds flying. Stuff was just dead, and as me and (a friend) was sitting out there this particular day in the truck, standing by the U-Haul, the National Guard kept passing by. So finally they stopped and they kept looking, and I'm scared. (P5)*

Participants experienced the ultimate fear of the unknown, uncertain of the outcome for family members, friends, and their belongings, and their very livelihoods threatened while things were sorted out. Much of the fear regarded what was to become of the post-Katrina environment and how things were going to right themselves if they ever would again. Many were lost in the storm as well as the aftermath, and each participant remembered horrible things that they associated with their fears and loss. P2 provided a good example of separation due to unknown factors that kept the family from knowing each other's whereabouts and outcome until each party fled their home:

*My wife [and] my daughter had just returned from California to New Orleans. And to celebrate that they were going on a cruise. And so my wife had went out on a cruise, and the cruise had left from New Orleans and the ship could not dock back in New Orleans because of Katrina... They didn't know where we were, and we had no communication with them. They were put off in Galveston, Texas, given \$200, and I guess literally told "Good luck." And so, but they were in touch with the daughter that had went to Dallas, and so they had hooked up. But they didn't still know what was happening with me and my mom. So yeah, you right, my family got stranded on a cruise. (P2)*

Finally, fear of racism was also commonly expressed. Consistent with other research (Smith Lee & Robinson, 2019), P5 illuminated feeling vulnerable to the National Guard for no other reason than skin color and the veiled accusation of looting. P4 referenced the possibility that the levees were blown to protect certain neighborhoods from the Hurricane and storm surge, which occurred in 1927, in an effort to protect more affluent neighborhoods. This suspicion of the repetition of racism was common among African American participants and was reflected in other areas of research as well (Bleich et al., 2019).

## **Theme 2: Loss.**

The losses they experienced ranged from home to basic needs to personal possessions to beloved family and friends. Each participant experienced a sense of loss that was hard to understand, even with past hurricane experiences. Many references were made specifically to Betsy and Camille, which had taken place in 1965 and 1969, respectively (Brinkley, 2006). These hurricanes devastated much of the same areas (Brinkley, 2006), but most of the participants were young then and did not have quite the sense of loss that they now experienced as adults. P4 speaks about his experience in detail and the thoughts that resonated with him in the aftermath:

*I was 54 years old, and when I went back there was something I had never saw in my life. You know I never saw this kinda [pause] devastation. The thing of it that I done lived in New Orleans and suffered through a hurricane, but not in that Category 4. We didn't even get to total full blunt of that, we only got the wind, the outside wind. So just think if the eye would've came in. Then there would've never would've been a New Orleans no more. It would've took back what it once was. (P4)*

Often the loss could not be fully understood even by those who went through it, and each participant who had been evacuated held out hope that things were not as bad as people had been saying. P3 spoke of hoping that his family church was okay after the storm, and he experienced a moment of emotion that still connects to the loss of the church for himself and his wife, who grew up going to the place of worship next to the beach:

*We hadn't heard anything from anybody about how the church fared... And when we finally got good pictures, we realized what happened. The water had washed—had completely knocked down all the brick and everything else. It was big steel structure church, but all the brick facade, all the insulation, everything inside—stuff was gone off of that south wall. It was all gone off of the north wall, and the south wall of*

*the chapel was gone as well. The balcony, there were scuffs. When you saw pictures, there were scuffs on the balcony where things that were floating in the water—it was that high, so things that had bumped into the balcony, and she just broke down. 'Cause that was home, yeah. That was home for her. She grew up there. So that was tough. (P3)*

Tretheway's (2010) meditation on the Katrina experience talked about the displacement of people and the loss of friends and social networks, with people leaving never to return home again. P2 captures this experience well, talking about the loss of community:

*I think that the greatest, one of the greatest damage, that Katrina ever did was to take and scatter people out of our community and caused them to refocus on surviving for themselves and their family, when all the years they had built up that support for their families and now they are scattered and they're dead or they're trying to salvage what part of life that's left for them. And I worry about that. [Lengthy pause] I worry. (P2)*

Getting others to understand the magnitude of a loss that they had never felt themselves was very difficult and daunting for some. P4 had this experience with a person he met who had no understanding of what people of the Gulf Coast were facing in the cleanup:

*When I did go back, I saw stuff that, you know, I never thought I would see. You would have to be there to see it. The news people, I don't think they did enough coverage on it. You see when you see it, with your eyes, then you can, yes, you can relate. Because I had a guy tell me out here, they said, "You can go back home." Katrina wasn't even six months old... I'll never forget it... [He] tells me, "You can go home. It's on the news." No, I can't. I just come from a house that's totally destroyed. Twenty-one days of three feet of water in it. Water can do some damage. (P4)*

P1 had just moved into an apartment on the beach from another side of town just 10 days before Katrina made landfall, making it impossible for her to obtain renter's insurance and securing her fate of losing everything she did not pack into her car when forced to evacuate:

*The things that I missed the most were my son's baby booties when he was born, and the first lock of hair that I saved, and my grandmother's china. Those are the things if I could have back I would want back. (P1)*

The desire for things held dear is not uncommon, as they represent something simple that was taken during the storm. Beyond the physical loss of items and personal history, people lost their sense of trust in their immediate communities, surrounding neighbors, and government and their faith that things could not get any worse or that help was forthcoming. Participants also felt helpless, alone, and angry.

### **Theme 3: Anger**

Anger was commonly expressed among participants. In analyzing the feelings and thoughts provided by each participant, there was a sense of anger from most of them, from being made to feel like a criminal while trying to get to safe ground to being called a "refugee"



in their own country to having to try to provide an explanation of repair costs to someone who was not present to see the damage firsthand. Each participant experienced anger and frustration over the events of the community in the aftermath of Katrina, especially related to those who hindered rescue and recovery efforts.

*The policy we had, if they would have done what they were supposed to, it could have put me back at my living status, but it wasn't like that. The insurance with all the people that was affected, I don't know whether they dumped the money or whatever. This is my thinking again—they just didn't have it to cover all these people that had insurance. So they did somewhat give me the flood insurance, but that wasn't enough to put me back to where I needed to be—back, per se, you know, completely. And I'd like to say it was done for a reason. And even though I got mad from the physical standpoint looking at this and stuff, but realizing and understanding and reassured and being taken care of since that, it's all, you know, it wasn't for me. (P4)*

Another example comes from P2, who was treated abhorrently while trying to bring his 80-year-old mother and developmentally disabled brother to safety after riding out the storm in the city:

*[A] Jefferson parish policeman came by and told us through the loudspeaker of his car to keep moving, and I'm saying to myself, and then I said to him, 'How can we keep moving?' You know, we come from the convention center. It took us two hours to go 20 blocks. I mean, you know, we're not moving. And so he belligerently kept saying, 'You gotta move! Go!' And he was walking to me with his hand on his gun—it was still holstered—and I'm walking to him, still trying to explain, 'Look, shouldn't you get us to a convention, another shelter or something?' And all the while I'm saying to myself, 'This ain't gonna work out right.' And just at that point, another black deputy drove up and told this guy that he would handle the situation, and we were brought to another shelter, where we stayed two days. (P2)*

Another difficulty was the judgment from others who looked upon the victims of Katrina as if they were vagrants. Some participants chose to look only at the good that came from people helping one another in crisis rather than the insensitivities that arose after the storm. Trethewey (2010) calls this purposeful forgetting, which implies a positive impression for both those impacted and those forming opinions but does not take into consideration assumptions, slurs, and microaggressions. P5 experienced this difficulty firsthand when she initially arrived in California. She had found it difficult to connect with new people. She stated:

*Oh, I didn't say I like it better. I mean, I still like it better at home. It's just that, here it was kinda hard for me because the people here is not as friendly as the people back home, so, you know, I was kinda torn because I was telling him, 'You know what? It made me not even want to go outside,' I said, 'cause the people is not friendly. They look at you like, you know, okay, and I had to ask him, 'Did we come to the right place?' because these people look at us like we don't belongs here. So, but, you know, like I said, it had to grow on me, you know. So I'm okay with it. I'm okay with it. (P5)*

P5 discussed how she felt displaced but would not be cast as the outsider and made to feel ashamed of her experience and situation. P1 also felt very strongly about the reaction she experienced from others regarding two very specific concerns. She felt a large disconnection because the national focus was directed to New Orleans, and she felt that no one cared about the plight of her city and situation. She makes it clear in these words:

*Those levies are what caused their disaster. Hurricane Katrina just supplied the water. They didn't have the same kind of devastation that we had in south Mississippi. I was real mad. I was real mad because everyone was talking about New Orleans and they weren't—you know, it was as if Mississippi wasn't on the map. I was real pissed off about that. (P1)*

She also had a decidedly frank reaction to being called a refugee: “And they started calling us refugees. I’m like, “What the fuck’s that?” Excuse my French, but you know, I’m not no goddamn refugee” (P1). The disproportionate coverage between New Orleans and the other states seems to be a point of contention for many who experienced Katrina. In this research, the experience of looking for materials related to states other than Louisiana was difficult and did not yield many results. With a lot of work ahead of them, the participants could not harbor their anger and other emotions long, as the arduous process of cleaning up and re-establishing themselves, their families and community was upon them. This post-Katrina environment was difficult to navigate and required support from every possible outlet, which leads to the next theme.

#### **Theme 4: Support**

From out of the ruins, they work to repair but not without a lending hand from fellow man. Each participant had their own experience and support, on both a local community and government level. As discussed with the theme of anger, the process of purposeful forgetting comes into play, with participants choosing to look favorably on the positive aspects of the aftermath and minimizing the negative aspects. P2 provided a few lovely examples of assistance, both at the height of the chaos and more recently, within the last few months, in trying to continue the repair of his home that was damaged by Katrina:

*There was really one notable event that always stays with me. There was a guy and his family who came out every day on the parking lot across from the convention center, and whatever he had to cook, be it chopped hamburgers and everything, he attempted to provide some food for the people. And while he couldn't service 20,000 people, whatever he could serve, and he faithfully came on his own to do that. (P2)*

He also depends on the kindness of others who helped him rebuild his home and the community:

*I'm trying to help rebuild, while I'm still struggling to build my own home... But we do have a core group of people in our community who are steadfast in seeing it come back. But we have a whole new—it's not a dilemma, it's a challenge. Let me put it like that. We have a whole new community, literally, because of the rebuilding of the homes where the old projects were, and they have not developed what I grew up*



*with—the sense of community, you know. They're basically everyday just trying to [pause] struggle and exist, go to work, and stuff like that.*  
(P2)

P2 experienced various levels of support, even from a family who struggled with their own feelings about returning to New Orleans but supported his efforts to continue his connection to his home and life before Katrina. P4 found support through religious affiliation, stating the following about initially leaving:

*I remember they invited us to they house out there in—what it was—Lacombe? I think it was Lacombe. Laplace, Laplace. And we stayed there, but it kinda like, as that window closed, and the reason why we left from there is because New Orleans is small. And they only got the I-10. They got other parts of the road you can head out, but the I-10 is your major getting away out of New Orleans or Louisiana if you had to, in which in this case we did.* (P4)

P4 escaped the storm with support from their Bible class. P3 also depended on his friends from his church and neighborhoods and was one of those who stepped in to help rebuild because his home was virtually untouched:

*We helped out in a lot of different areas. Some of our neighbors, they have bigger houses than we do, had plenty of insurance, and they hired contractors to come in and take care of some of the other folks in our neighborhoods that didn't have either that good of insurance or some of them didn't have any. A lot of us pitched in and did different things to help with those houses, and a lot of us—because we did not have that much damage and we wanted to help, so—we pitched in and helped. And it was very much a community effort. And you hear people talk about, you know, we're a resilient community, we're a tough community, or whatever. This community of folks that have been through this so many times—I guess it's like the folks that live in tornado alley, they get torn up, you know, so frequently. We've been hit by these hurricanes before, and we know it's just a matter of rebuilding.*  
(P3)

Mississippi's damage was concentrated in the area along the I-10, with many homes completely blown away (Trethewey, 2010). In those first days and weeks, the participants in Mississippi felt the loss acutely and turned to the government to assist with and begin the recovery process. P1 discussed her experience of initially returning to where her apartment once sat with the FEMA worker, who was to assist in the assessment of her personal damage:

*On the fifth day, I drove to Gulfport to meet my FEMA representative—I mean, that's how fast she got to me. And she didn't know her way around Gulfport, and I did. However, when I got there, there was nothing that resembled anything. I mean there [were] no street signs, there were no landmarks, there were no lights, there was no... there was no nothing. It was just piles of rubble everywhere. And I finally found her. I called her, and I told her to meet me on the side of a certain street, you know, if she could find it, and I think she just stayed on Highway 49 'cause that was a local. And I drove up, met her, and she says, 'Well,*

*I got to take pictures of your house.’ And I was like, ‘Well, okay.’ You know the problem was, I couldn’t find where I lived. There wasn’t nothing there. I mean, if you can imagine, [pause] well, I’m sure you can’t, I mean if you can imagine 15 and 20 feet of just rubble that you’re walking over trying to figure out where you used to live, it’s virtually impossible... Whenever you drove from Long Beach to Gulfport, did y’all see the Waffle House on the left-hand side?... I lived across the street from it. And what happened was, she and I were walking, and I saw the little black-and-yellow checked floor, and I knew that was the Waffle House, and I knew I lived across the street from the Waffle House. It was the only way I could figure out where I lived. (P1)*

All participants felt that they could turn to someone for support. Support is as necessary as air or water in getting through a traumatic experience. Survival depends upon it. This requirement apparently remains for some who continue to struggle in the aftermath, even almost eight years later. When physical, emotional, and monetary support could not be given or obtained, the participants turned to their religious or spiritual affiliations to help them cope with the stress and trauma of the situation.

### **Theme 5: Spirituality**

The distinction between spirituality and religion is important because many of the participants did not follow a specific religious sect and did not attend church regularly or identify any specific religious affiliation. They did, however, all believe in a creator or higher power from whom they seek direct guidance and find solace in those beliefs. P1 discussed her link to God and Alcoholics Anonymous, which helped her feel comfortable with her own spirituality:

*I believe in God. I just don’t do organized religion. I am not an organized religion person. I don’t care what, you know. I was born Pentecostal, and I was raised Southern Missionary Baptist, and when I got sober, [pause] they told me that I didn’t have to be anything that didn’t feel right. She went on to talk about the struggle she experienced after the storm and how she worked hard to keep God and her spirituality with her after continuing to move through her personal recovery and the maintenance of her sobriety. (P1)*

P3, who does have a strong Baptist church presence in his life, discussed candidly trying to get the church back to what it once was, in a safer place that would be less at risk during another possible disaster:

*Gulfport High School allowed us to use their auditorium [for church services] on Sundays, and we actually just scaled back to one service on Sunday mornings. And we would come in there and set up the sound system that we had, set everything up, have church, then tear it down. And we did that for two-and-a-half, three years—three years before we finally acquired a piece of property and decided to build north of the interstate and not rebuild down at the beach. Which that was very hard to, because there was a lot of people much older than my wife that had been there all their lives as well. You know, her parents had been there for, well, I guess, since before she was born. There were people been in*

*that church 60, 70 years, and they did not want to move. They love it now, the ones that are still here. But it was tough to leave that property and to go build something new, but our church family is very close, too, so we were able to lean on them. (P3)*

Spirituality appears to be as much of a necessity as hope. The feeling that there is a higher power that will carry one to higher ground, safer shores, and easier times appears throughout the interview process. P2—also, admittedly, not a religious man—had nothing but hope, faith, and God to depend on when escaping from New Orleans after riding the storm out at home:

*I'm a Baptist member of the neighborhood church, [pause] but I've always felt that my connection with God was personal. And so I didn't necessarily have to be laboring within the church. I mean, I would go to church, but I was always guided by, I guess, is "What would God do?" Or you know, what you doing isn't pleasing in God's eyes, but [pause], I mean, all my life has been about community. (P2)*

P5 and P3 had a very deep connection to their spirituality and the Bible class they attended to the point of taking a member's advice as to when to evacuate and when to come to California. Their connection to the Institute of Divine Metaphysical Research informs their lives on a daily basis. They appear devout in their connection to this practice, which they enjoy, and which helps them understand and forge a closer connection to their spirituality and the Lord. P5 candidly discussed the importance of the Bible class to herself and her family:

*All the community we had is our Bible class. Our Bible class is our life... Back home we went to the Bible class mostly Fridays and Sundays... I have a family that adopted us out here, you know, whenever we need... They help us out a lot. (P5)*

She went on to talk about her faith in things happening for a reason:

*You know what? The King put me here, and he put me here for a reason, you know. I said he told us, you know, 'Don't look back.' I said, 'I don't look back on the past,' you know. I said, 'I miss my friends.' I said, 'I miss my family.' I said, 'But this is where the King want[s] me.' (P5)*

In some form or another, each participant identified a spiritual connection, and this faith led the participant to keep his or her own congress and seek out assistance and support within their spiritual affiliations. In other ways, it simply helped make things easier for the participants and gave each the feeling that hope is alive. It is this hope that leads to the last theme, which is resilience.

## **Theme 6: Resilience**

Each participant conveyed their own story of survival, and each experience was not without difficulty or strife. P1 expressed that she was much on her own in the aftermath and hanging onto her hard-earned sobriety:

*It was two days after the hurricane, and there still wasn't any news on the TV. I told my aunt, I said, 'You know, I either gotta go find me a bar or I gotta go find me an AA meeting.' And it wasn't the fact that I really wanted to drink alcohol; it was the fact that I wanted some relief. And I knew that alcohol would give me some relief, even if it was temporary. And I also knew that an AA meeting would do the same thing. And so, instead of going around the corner to the local watering hole, I drove about 50 miles to Tupelo, Mississippi, to an AA meeting. (P1)*

Resilience looks different to everyone. It can be as simple as being able to feel and process pain and suffering as well as to learn and grow from it. The elements of purposeful forgetting and avoidance play a role as well; in order to heal, one must move through the loss and focus on the need to recover. P3 explained a difficulty he faced looking at the damage to a certain road and how avoiding the area became part of the healing process:

*When the beach opened back up and we could drive down the beach to come to work, we drove down it a few times, but it just got to the point where we did not want to see the beach. Pass Road looked normal, and since we did not have to get to the beach to come to work 'cause the hospital was over in Gulfport, north of the railroad tracks—so we could drive Pass Road and see basically normalcy on the way to and from work, but anytime we would venture back to the beach or anywhere south of the tracks, it was tough... After they cleaned that debris line, then you could see past where it was and realized there was nothing, like, from here to the beach where before you had houses all the way to the beach. The big ones right on the beach and all that was gone. So it was tough even driving. We avoided a lot of areas that were real badly damaged just for that reason, 'cause it was just too hard to look at. (P3)*

P2 felt compelled to repair and to put things back not quite to what they were like before the storm—they will never be the same—but to as close as possible. He began returning from Texas to New Orleans without his family. At first, he reports he did not understand his need to return to New Orleans, as they had a home in Texas and had made a fairly good life for themselves there. He explained that, in time, he came to understand his compulsion:

*I actually got over that. I got over the experience at the convention center. I've never gotten over being separated from New Orleans, and what has helped is that my family recognizes that, so they don't give me no yada yada about when I want to come back to New Orleans. Now I have a purpose of the house. I stay here longer. When I had to go every second week of the month, they understood that. They may not have understood the first week, or the third week or the fourth week, but now that I have a purpose and they see some progress with restoration of the home... I kinda feel that while Texas has been good to my family, there's really no choice in whether I would want to stay in Texas versus New Orleans... I conceded that if they don't want to come back, they don't have to, and my wife's feeling is that she would not come back permanent, but she knows I'm always hoping that'll change. But if comes push to shove, I gotta go back to Texas, you know, which it will probably never happen laughs]. (P2)*

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P2 persevered, mostly on his own, to make a place for his family in New Orleans, even if they might not want to be a permanent part of it. He uses the area's rehabilitation as a form of resilience to get back what was taken and perhaps shed light on the scrappy determination that many in the region seem to possess. He sees a change in the rebuilding and recovery process and can see the storm's both positive and negative effects on the region.

P1 provided another good example of overcoming adversity. This excerpt refers specifically to her experience with substance abuse and Katrina:

*I was asked to speak at Bradford Health Services, which is an alcoholic, drug addiction place, and they asked me to speak, and [pause] I talked about Katrina and my alcoholism. And just because bad things happened doesn't mean we have to drink. We don't have to fall back to our old behavior. And after I got done speaking, they offered me a job.*  
(P1)

She also spoke of her need to return to the Gulf Coast—at the time of the interview, she resided farther inland in Mobile, Alabama—and what it meant for her to come back:

*I go back—even now, every time I go back, it's still hard, but it's not as hard as it was because my therapist said that cognitive therapy was the best kind for PTSD. So, when I go to Gulfport, I make it a point to go there, just because I need to. Every time I visit, it's a healing process. And every time I talk about it, it's a healing process. And it still hurts. But it's okay to hurt. And see, before I got sober, I would've stayed drunk the whole time and felt sorry for myself. But because I am sober and I have been for 12 years, the ability to feel things is a blessing. Yeah, so, I welcome it now.* (P1)

The examples presented here in this theme help illustrate resilience in various capacities. Participants depended on the support and assistance of others to keep their strength and perseverance alive and to survive and thrive. These similar stories provide examples of courage, bravery, and the ability to overcome adversity.

## Discussion

Natasha Tretheway (2010) props up the importance of telling one's story and uncovering what was difficult so that recovery can continue and so that we can avoid making similar mistakes in disasters of this proportion in the future. Each participant experienced Katrina in a different way, from their own bio-ecological lens. Each drew on a different family background—some difficult, some idyllic—but all participants used their past personal experiences to inform their response to this disaster and their recovery. For some, the role of the community was strong and ever present in the background, acting as a beacon to work towards and set their sights on. For others, their support came from small enclaves in places other than their pre-Katrina homes but nevertheless contributed to their stabilization and recovery. The emergent themes in this study illuminate robust, touching, and compelling stories about loss, emotional experiences, connectedness, broader social impact, and a sense of belonging and coming home. These stories not only deserve to be spotlighted and shared, they also can inform the development of research in the fields of psychology, public health, and disaster management, among others.

There are several limitations to this study. The first is the sample size, which included five participants who lived in an area directly affected by the 2005 storm. Since more than 1.5 million people were evacuated during Katrina (Groen & Polivka, 2008)—and to say nothing of Hurricane Rita that hit less than one month later (Brunsmas et al., 2007)—this sample is not even a fraction of the people affected by the storms. The study essentially addresses only five individual experiences of the storm and its aftermath. Three of five of the participants were of African-American descent and were from Louisiana. All the participants who resided in Louisiana during Katrina in 2005 were of African-American background, whereas the participants from Mississippi were Caucasian. Diversity within the sample would allow a more nuanced examination of cultural context.

Additionally, the whole of the Gulf Coast was not represented in the sampling of data, as Florida and Texas were not considered for research and no participants could be obtained to represent Alabama. The first two states were not included because their damage was not considered to be as significant, and the storm still being considered a Category 3 event at the time that it made landfall in those areas; however, 11 people were killed in Florida (CBC, 2005). While Texas was minimally affected by the storm, the state likely accepted the majority of the survivors who had no other place to go. Many were taken directly there during the evacuation process (CBC, 2005). As for Alabama, its shores received the full brunt of the storm. Mobile and other waterfront communities experienced a storm surge up to 11 feet, with much of the beachfront community completely destroyed (Jackson 2005). The ability to provide a voice to all the cities, states, and even countries that were affected is impossible, but hopefully the stories shared provide some useful insights.

Additionally, the limited age range of the participants—all participants were over 45 at the time of the interview—limits available information. The median age of the study participant was 54, with the youngest being 49 and the oldest 61. Future studies looking at similar themes should explore a younger population to see what differences in community and social ties might exist and how the events affected their family and their individual decisions to leave or remain in the area after the initial evacuation was lifted. The perspective may appear vastly different based on age because the person's priorities, ability to cope, and ability to start over in a new location might be different to someone in their late twenties or early thirties compared to that of someone in their mid-fifties.

## Conclusion

Hurricane Katrina will be remembered in history as an event that tested the will and mettle of those who went through the storm and its aftermath firsthand, and as a surreal experience for those watching from their homes what seemed like a world away. The disaster revealed the resilience of a community and the people of the Gulf Coast and unearthed serious concerns about the United States' ability to assist in a disaster of this magnitude. This study aimed to uncover the experiences of the people of the Gulf Coast in their own physical and emotional recovery after the storm. The expectation is that roughly one-third of victims of any disaster experience PTSD, with increasing risks of mood and anxiety disorders, substance abuse concerns, difficulty in relationships, and trouble with adjustment to new circumstances, including problems with work and physical health (Weissbecker, 2009). The state of cities such as New Orleans, Louisiana, and Gulfport, Mississippi, are virtually unknown to those not living in or visiting their immediate vicinity, as the news media has taken the Gulf Coast's plight out of headline news.

There are many explorative angles that can be continued with this research. Future research could narrow the scope to focus on any of the issues discussed here, such as marital stress and longevity as the result of a traumatic event; substance abuse and relapse; secondary trauma due to loss of employment, goods, and services; increase or decrease in religious faith;



or internal turmoil due to extreme personal loss in an event. Any of a number of other factors could be explored in further research. Each participant had a unique and different experience that bears further exploration and unpacking, and in reality, the rest of the million-plus survivors who were displaced have their own stories that bear repeating.

Based on the information conveyed by the participants, the field of psychology, and more directly, psychotherapy can seek to establish appropriate therapeutic interventions to correspond with reintegration to the pre-disaster location or assimilation to new environments. Public health professionals can use these stories to establish a picture of the lived experience of those who were victims of this disaster as a model of what went wrong and how city and government officials, as well as clinicians working in related disaster fields, can improve upon trauma response. Preparedness and expectation are key to resilience and people who feel that they have power over their situation fare better than those who do not (Moreno & Shaw, 2019). Ideally, stories shared will help to elucidate the positive and negative experiences of the participants and illustrate outcomes of a community resilience model that includes pre-disaster preparedness, organized trauma response, and appropriate aftercare from the mental health profession.

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