Looking for the Silver Lining: Benefit Finding after Hurricanes Katrina and Rita in Middle-Aged and Older Adults

Katie E. Stanko1, Katie E. Cherry1, Loren D. Marks2, Jennifer Silva Brown3, David A. Welsh4, S. Michal Jazwinski5, Kyle S. Ryker2, Farra Mughal6, Brianna Barrios7, Macie Colly1, Rachel Anderson1, and Savannah Sanchez1 1Department of Psychology, Louisiana State University; 2Louisiana State University Health Science Center; 3School of Medicine, Tulane University Health Sciences Center

Abstract

Looking for potentially positive outcomes is one way that people cope with stressful events. The purpose of this study was to examine perceived "silver linings" after the 2005 Hurricanes Katrina and Rita among indirectly affected adults. **Method:** In Study 1, participants enrolled in the Louisiana Healthy Aging Study (LHAS) responded to an open-ended question on perceived silver linings during the immediate impact phase (1-4 months after the storm) and post-disaster recovery (6-14 months post-disaster) phase. Three age groups were compared and categorized: middle-aged (47-64 years); older (65-89 years), and oldest-old (90-95 years). Study 2 was a conceptual replication using a different sample of adults (ages 31 to 82 years) who were interviewed once at least five years after the storm. Qualitative grounded theory methods were employed to analyze these narrative data. **Results:** Team-based coding yielded three emergent themes in Study 1: learning experience and better preparedness for future disasters, having improved cities (including both Baton Rouge and New Orleans), and an increase in "Good Samaritan" acts as strangers helping one another. Older adults (ages 65-89) were the least likely to find positives in both the immediate recovery and periods. In Study 2, the core theme of preparedness was replicated and extended to include improved family and social cohesion. **Conclusions:** Our findings suggest that identifying lessons learned and finding positive outcomes can be a method of post-disaster coping and meaning making.

Introduction

Hurricanes Katrina and Rita caused catastrophic damage to neighborhoods, communities, and businesses along the U.S. Gulf Coast in 2005 (Cherry, 2009). Many studies have examined the well-being for disaster-affected individuals during the immediate impact period, focusing primarily on youths and traditional family (Kilmer, Gil-Rivas, Tedeschi, & Calhoun, 2010). However, very few studies have addressed long-term effects five or more years after the event. In addition, Study 1 focused solely on middle-aged and older adults (age range: 47-95), whose needs and thoughts about the hurricanes may be different than a younger sample.

We focused on indirectly affected participants' response to perceived "silver linings" or benefits after the storm due to the significant connection between positive reappraisal and posttraumatic growth (Prati & Pietrantoni, 2009). While these adults mainly resided in Baton Rouge—80 miles away from the central hurricane disaster zone—many had to take on responsibilities such as hosting displaced friends and family. Their responses permit new insight into perceived benefits of a disaster that may remain salient in their lives even five years after Hurricane Katrina originally struck.

The open-ended question respondents to was:

> "They say every cloud has a silver lining, and even the most awful events have positive outcomes. Do you think there are any positive outcomes that can come from Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, and if so, what are they?"

Method

Participants and Procedure. In Study 1, participants were 66 indirectly affected Baton Rouge residents who were middle-aged adults (n = 20; M = 53.9 years, SD = 5.9), older adults (n = 20; M = 73.8 years, SD = 7.2), and oldest-old adults (n = 26; M = 92.0 years, SD = 1.3). Participants in Study 1 were interviewed during the immediate impact phase (October 2005 to January 2006) and post-disaster recovery period (March 2006 to November 2006).

In Study 2, participants were 22 indirectly affected Baton Rouge area residents who were mostly middle-aged and older adults (M age = 59.7 years, SD = 12.3 years, age range: 31 to 82 years; 10 males, 12 females) interviewed at least five years after the hurricanes. They were tested individually in two sessions in their homes, or in a conference room at Catholic Charities, or in the laboratory at Louisiana State University. The assessment protocol included sociodemographic characteristics and multiple indicators of social participation, health and well-being.

Qualitative analysis with a three-level analysis approach (individual, partner, six-person group) resulted in three major themes in Study 1 and 2 emerging from these data. These are listed next along with direct quotes from participants:

**Study 1**

**1-14 months post-storm**

**Theme 1: Better preparedness and learning experience**

• **S19:** Well, the positive outcome would be they can see how dangerous it is and to better prepare for any future cities. Like building better houses and just getting the word out so that if a hurricane ever comes again, they could have transportation ready to take evacuation routes before the storm even gets there. They didn’t do that. They didn’t look at houses; they didn’t prepare. They were flooded and it was too late then to see that. -

• **S38:** Well, first of all, they could prepare for the next one, better prepared. Know what the conditions will be and have remedies. For instance, communication, food supplies, and transportation; mostly under highway regulations. People were eleven hours from New Orleans to Baton Rouge on the highway, stuff like cars everywhere.

**Study 2**

**Baton Rouge and New Orleans**

**210:** So, yes... you rebuild. You can’t abandon a city like New Orleans. It has to be rebuilt. It’s history.

**Theme 2: Better City (Baton Rouge and New Orleans)**

• **S23:** Well, I am like so much earlier, the most important thing is that we learn from this and get prepared for next time because there will be another next time, and I am talking whether it’s next year or in fifty years, there will be another storm of this magnitude one day, and maybe a hundred years, but it may be next year.

**Theme 3: Strangers Helping Strangers**

As participants mainly resided in the Baton Rouge area, many participants found silver linings in the improvement in their own town as well as major changes to New Orleans.

**Study 1**

In Study 1, particularly in the second wave of data (6-14 months after the hurricanes), the theme of strangers helping strangers and appreciation of Good Samaritans came to light.

Unique to Study 2, improved social cohesion amongst friends and family became a salient theme.

**Results**

From one month to five years after Hurricanes Katrina and Rita participants expressed how they had believed that they themselves and bureaucracy were better prepared for the next time a hurricane struck.

**Study 2**

**Baton City (Baton Rouge and New Orleans)**

• **S23:** [My son] had a good business in Slidell when he, and he was able to get help and so, after Katrina, people moved from New Orleans to Gonzales and they needed work and, so, he was able to get dependable, experienced workers in his restaurant. These transplants from New Orleans, as a result of Katrina. So, he benefitted greatly. My brother-in-law in Baton Rouge, she was able to kind of make a new life for herself in Baton Rouge after losing everything from Rita in Cameron, Louisiana.

**Theme 2: Better City (Baton Rouge and New Orleans)**

22: If you had a good business in Gonzales with the restaurant and, but, he was about to close it because he could not get dependable help and so, after Katrina, people moved from New Orleans to Gonzales and they needed work and, so, he was able to get dependable, experienced workers in his restaurant. These transplants from New Orleans, as a result of Katrina. So, he benefitted greatly. My brother-in-law in Baton Rouge, she was able to kind of make a new life for herself in Baton Rouge after losing everything from Rita in Cameron, Louisiana.

**Theme 3: Improved Social Cohesion (Friends and Family)**

28: But, overall, I think to, you know, tell me we had to have a hurricane but, for us, my family, and for my extended family, it was a benefit to us because of the devastation she had.

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