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Center

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By

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The Role of the Aged in Community Recovery Following Hurricane Andrew

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The evaluation of community response to disaster recovery tends to focus on the group as a whole. Social, political and economic factors are delineated as the resource variables in recovery. This research varies, in that life cycle placement becomes the unit of analysis. The individuals under study are a small group of community residents that refused to relocate following devastation of their community by Hurricane Andrew on August 24, 1992. This emergent group provided the leadership in community recovery.

INTRODUCTION

The community serves as a visual record of the residents' history and identity, thus providing for a continuation of social functioning following disaster (Quarantelli and Dynes, 1977; Oliver-Smith, 1986; Alexander, 1989). Initial emergent groups, arising from within the devastated community are familiar with the past functioning and meaningful history. The utilization of this knowledge, on the individual and group level, provides therapeutic features which maximize action for social continuity. Recognition of prior community limitations influences planned change (Perry and Pugh, 1978: 106-110; Johnson and Schulte, 1992).

Communities are generally composed of mixed ages. The usual post-disaster evaluation of community needs concentrates on the vulnerability and helplessness of the aged (Bell, Kara and Batterson, 1978; Parr, 1987). This stance tends to overlook any productive leadership and community centered care-providing behaviors provided by the oldest individuals.

The application of knowledge, accrued with aging, played a vital role during the immediate recovery phase in an African village following massive destruction from a tornado (Guillette, 1991). Leadership and care-providing by the aged gradually lost significance, as these particular roles were usurped during long-term recovery by those having economic and political strength (Guillette, 1991; 1992). Disaster-related contributions of the aged, as a specific group, has not been investigated in the United States.

THE RESEARCH SITE

The research site, Americana Village Estates, is located on the eastern edge of the Everglades wetlands, approximately seven miles north of Homestead, Florida. The community was established during the 1960s as a retirement community. It was formally reorganized during the late 1970s as a condominium association, admitting all ages. Homes were double-wide trailers on purchased lots. Employed individuals were mainly service providers, with women working in restaurants and stores and men engaged in various trades. Retirees reflected histories of similar employment.

A spatial division between retirees and younger families occurred, with the aged continuing to purchase lots in eastern section of the community and families establishing homes in the western area. Residents reported a social division between retirees and families. Community activities reflected the age bias, with the aged attending the pot-luck dinners and younger individuals supporting the Saturday Morning Coffee Hour.

All of the 573 established homes underwent extreme damage by Hurricane Andrew. The community was declared unsafe for habitation and formally condemned two days afterwards. Twenty-six residents refused to relocate. This group, ranging in age from 6 to 70 years, worked

together to clear a side-road to maintain an on-going community. The reclaimed area was named Pandemonium Boulevard by the residents, and became the nucleus of community rebirth. All but two, who remained as a couple in their original, but severely damaged home, obtained recreational vehicles to serve as temporary residence.

During the first three weeks, the aged couple remaining in their home relocated out-of state, moving to their winter-home. A Cuban family, of middle aged parents and two children, also relocated. This family, which moved into the Americana Estates six months previously, had a history of frequent moves. The population of Pandemonium Blvd. remained stable until long-term recovery efforts were instigated.

METHODS

Site visits occurred during the second and third post-disaster week, in early October and early November, with the last site visit in mid-December. Residents were interviewed in depth during each visit. Both formal and ethnographic formats for interviewing were used. The initial interviews concentrated on pre- and immediate post-disaster experiences and loss. Repeat interviews centered on post-hurricane activities, including social networks for gaining immediate assistance, the development of formal and informal communication networks and support systems within the settlement, and the use of formal services provided by county, state and national governments.

Participant observation permitted observation of the flow of goods and services within the group. Of particular interest was the use of individual coping mechanisms, or those behaviors used to decrease stress. The impact of individual behaviors on the group was evaluated, along with the impact of group behaviors on the individual. As the social environment gradually changed from small group survival to community re-establishment, the focus of interviews and participant observation also altered. Increased emphasis was placed on social processes, centering on the formulation of community-centered recovery and responses to community continuity and change.

Individuals were categorized by age. International guidelines for age were used in order to allow for cross comparisons. Under this classification, the aged are those who are 60 years or more.

FINDINGS

The study group (N=20) remained constant following the initial exodus of the two families. Six new families entered the community during late October, a time when re-vitalization appeared certain. The predominate age group was 30-50 year old adults (60%), followed by those over 60 years (23%). High-school students and recent graduates composed the remaining 17% of the population. The group was evenly divided by gender. The majority were married couples, with one aged female living alone. The manager of the condominium, a man in his low sixties, was also a Pandemonium Blvd. resident.

Displaced community residents, who did not reside on Pandemonium Boulevard but visited daily, were the condominium president and his wife, and the ex-vice-president and his wife. This later couple were over aged 60. Another daily returnee was the 30 year old mailman, also a displaced resident.

Immediately following the establishment of Pandemonium Blvd., the group hung an American flag. Volunteer organizations, mainly churches, provided food, water and clothing during the first week. These services were later taken over by the U. S. Army. A generator-run street lamp was installed as looting and sightseers quickly became major problems. Males of all ages, and mid-adult females, organized "police-patrols" in attempts to maintain order in Americana Village. The residents obtained water for bathing and washing goods by placing a generate-run pump into an existing well. During the third week, a "community laundromat" was erected, using salvaged washing machines. Communication networks were informal, with the mail man and an older Pandemonium Blvd. resident maintaining the central grapevine "switchboard." Both individuals felt a commitment to protect the residents from misinformation as well as provide information.

Each individual along Pandemonium Blvd. was accepted, regardless of ethnicity, age, and disaster-induced changes in socioeconomic status. Each adult, young and old, had an observable role during this immediate post-disaster phase. Activity was centered on community membership as a means of survival. Younger adults provided the needed man-power and muscle-power for safety patrols and the movement and erection of equipment. Older members of the group were able to call in old-debts and had the necessary political and social relationships for directing out-side assistance towards community good. Other aged served as symbols of past community safety and cohesiveness. Residents, on seeing the retired woman walking her dog among the rubble, recalled earlier occurrences of seeing her when coming home, and thus knowing all was safe and secure.

Material losses were freely discussed. When asked "What was the most meaningful thing you lost?", physical items were never mentioned in direct response. Residents emphasized the loss of self-identity which reflected the meaning of their homes and possessions in establishing present and future orientations to life. Remaining in the condemned community provided opportunity to re-define and gain self identification. All ages responded in the same manner.

The concept of being a victim changed to that of survivorship by the end of the second post-disaster week. Individuals felt secure in knowing that their personal future could be self-controlled. At this point, the aged became the leaders in re-directing action for community revitalization. Residents living elsewhere were notified of the effort as they returned for possessions. The goal became "Home for Christmas".

The small-group approach of cooperation for survival became a community approach to rebuilding. Short term goals of re-establishing a potable water supply and sewage were assumed by the past manager. Younger male Pandemonium Blvd. residents, who had lost their previous employment due to hurricane damage, became the work crew. Older men were assigned investigative duties for the re-establishment of electricity, phone services and other related infrastructure needs.

The Condominium Association Board was re-established, with vacancies filled by Pandemonium Blvd. and other residents living locally. This board assumed responsibilities for the recreating the physical structures of the community. The governing Board served as a community representative and selectively negotiated with private contractors and state agencies for the good of the community. A former vice-president of the board, a retired male, was placed in control of managing land clearing and re-building. He served to link individuals with community action. Younger volunteers assisted, under his direction.

Pandemonium Blvd. residents felt the time of neighborhood clearing was also the time of greatest economic risk-taking, as failure of community re-birth was feared as possible. Investments of \$1,100 for debris removal would be lost if others did commit to re-building. It was known that some past residents refused to return and their lots were for sale. Would land purchase be a profitable investment for the future or putting money into worthless land? Married couples with teen-age children were the initial risk-takers, frequently purchasing lots adjacent to their own. This was also the group that was the first to invest in clearing. The aged residents were the second group to clear, although they did not invest in additional land. Those not residing on Pandemonium Blvd. were among the last to participate, regardless of age.

By mid-December, all but 30 of the 600 lots had been cleared. Over 50 new modular homes had been erected although not all had undergone the final state and local inspections. Although residents continued to be spatially separated by age, the pre-existing, pre-disaster, age bias in activities was missing. All ages attended the re-established Saturday morning coffee hours. The Thanksgiving Pot-luck dinner was attended by all boulevard residents.

Schism between ages had begun to emerge. The main source of conflict involved the creation of a recreational areas for children and teenagers. Younger parents wanted the association to create a safe areas for play. Older individuals felt it was more important to invest the association money in road and fencing repairs. Hints of decreased social status for the aged are beginning to emerge, with references occasionally made to age-related limitations.

DISCUSSION

Every resident of Pandemonium Boulevard made a commitment to survival, with the hope of recovery. What set the residents apart from disaster victims in other areas was a commitment to place. The banding together, and struggling against aversive forces, provided strength to the individuals and the group. The common bond, built on shared experience and situations, added force to commitment. The ability to maintain a sense of control over one's immediate post-disaster environment created a sense of control over the future. Each step forward strengthened commitment to rebuild and re-establish that which was lost. The resulting confidence led to early recognition of survivorship, displacing feeling of victimization and vulnerability. This was true for all ages.

The sharing of personal, and collective, painful and happy experiences was an unplanned consequence of the commitment. The disappearance of the past, upon which age bias was based, provided a new setting. Individuals were recognized for their contributions to the recovery process. The aged provided necessary symbols of the past and age-related knowledge and power. Younger individuals provided strength and stamina for provisioning and reconstruction. With the passage of time, the need for political and economic resources outpaced the need for symbolism of past stability. Many aged altered their initial roles to fit new social needs that symbolized and promoted the future. Leadership and followship among the aged was determined by the ability to control political and economic resources. Such control also involved abilities to selectively incorporate the use of outside service agencies effectively. The noted variations in sources of social approval and mechanisms to maintain social identity were similar to those found during the various phases of the disaster in Botswana (Guillette, 1991; 1992).

The spatial divisions between young and old, which were eliminated along Pandemonium Blvd., will resurface as new homes are replaced on previously owned lots. Social needs between the two geographical sides of the community will continue to differ. Whether or not the community can continue its social functions, and activities, without the pre-existing age bias is a question for the future.

CONCLUSION

This disaster-affected community was unique in that residents of mixed ages united for individual survival and community re-birth. The emergent group was goal-orientated and purposeful in action for short and long-term recovery. The refusal to allow social destruction of the community eradicated the previous community-based age bias. Life on Pandemonium Boulevard emphasized homogeneity of need, and thus minimized social distances created by age. Mutual aid, and coping through supporting and helping others, promoted group unification. Stress was minimized and recovery maximized, as every individual was recognized for their unique contributions during the recovery periods. In this manner, Hurricane Andrew provided unifying and therapeutic features.

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