

# Foreword

I FIRST MET Mark VanLandingham in early 2000, when he was a new faculty member in Tulane's School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine. Mark already had broad experience in studying the mental and physical health of Southeast Asian populations, in Southeast Asia and in the United States, and he was interested in the Vietnamese community of New Orleans, on which I had done earlier some work and which had been the source of a Russell Sage Foundation book that I had written in collaboration with Min Zhou. Mark and I met for lunch and exchanged thoughts on Vietnamese Americans, Southeast Asia, and the adaptation of new population groups to American society. I recall being favorably impressed by him, but I do not think I foresaw that he would become one of the most important researchers in his area or that he would organize and lead a remarkable research project that would stretch over years. I certainly did not foresee that his project would become a unique natural experiment dealing with how groups of people respond to disaster.

Mark VanLandingham's work has always stood out for its sheer geographic scope and its accumulation of data over years of careful study. In Southeast Asia, one of his projects has been a longitudinal investigation of how rural to urban migration affects the health of young adults from western Thailand. In a distinct but conceptually related study, he has traced the relationship between international migration and the mental and physical health of people in and from Vietnam. For this second endeavor, his contacts and resources on both sides of the Pacific Ocean enabled him to draw comparative data from three groups. His links to people in the Vietnamese community in New Orleans provided qualitative and quantitative indicators of health and well-being among people from Vietnam who had resettled in the United States. In Vietnam, he managed to collect data from two other population groups: those who had never left the country and those who had earlier emigrated from Vietnam

and later returned. With this ingenious research framework, he was able to work at estimating the effects of immigration and resettlement on health by controlling for characteristics that predispose individuals to migrate and isolating the influences of resettlement and adjustment.

As impressive as this cross-national research has been, one of the most valuable, if initially unintended, results was the way in which it set the stage for a before-and-after test of community response to disaster. His team of researchers had acquired an impressive body of information on the New Orleans Vietnamese community and he had achieved a deep personal understanding of this community when Hurricane Katrina slammed into the Gulf Coast in late August 2005. Most of us who were living in the Greater New Orleans Area then remember the following months as challenging. I recall my own several months of wandering homeless as less unpleasant than returning to a wrecked house with a cramped FEMA trailer in the front yard. But those of us who had good homeowners and flood insurance and savings set aside to begin repairs immediately were the lucky ones, far more fortunate than many who had been struggling to get by under normal circumstances.

New Orleans East, location of the largest Vietnamese neighborhood in the region, was hit especially hard. Many Vietnamese there had contacts in other Vietnamese American concentrations, notably in Houston, and this had given some support to those who had fled the storm. But not long after the reconstruction of New Orleans had begun, the rapidity of return and rebuilding in the Vietnamese neighborhood began to receive attention. Although people in this community were usually not the poorest of the poor in Orleans Parish, they did have some of the most severely damaged homes, and they appeared to be meeting their challenges with energy, determination, and even optimism. What made the relatively quick restoration of their homes possible? Were they really back from catastrophe as well as reported? At a more abstract level, what could their response to disaster tell us about the social forces that influence how groups of people deal with traumatic events and shape the physical and psychological effects of those events on individuals? Mark VanLandingham's unique pre-Katrina research and his preparation for further investigation in this community placed him in an ideal position to try to answer questions like these.

VanLandingham begins to tell us about his post-Katrina research with a touch of auto-ethnography, recounting his own frustrations and stresses during the rebuilding period and recalling how his Vietnamese friends and associates struck him as dealing with their greater problems with better psychological resources than his own. This may be a bit of a cautionary tale about the risks of impressions based on appearances because I remember VanLandingham in those days as reestablishing his research

team and proceeding with his work with calm and considered planning. We all know the troubles inside our own minds. All we know of others usually comes from the façades they present. But that is where the research comes in. VanLandingham extended his inquiries to find that the façades were not entirely deceptive, that the Vietnamese of New Orleans actually were doing surprisingly well in the face of their struggle, even compared with many of us who had greater material advantages than they did. In this book, he takes this observation into the realm of sociological theory, and from the simple question “why are the Vietnamese doing so well?” he derives valuable insights into the properties of social groups that shape how individuals adapt to their environments. These insights, I think, extend even beyond the important realm of disaster studies to areas such as community structures and ethnic stratification.

Every social group exists in time and space and VanLandingham sets the stage for us with an excellent short history of the Vietnamese diaspora, narrowing to focus on the development of the largely Catholic Vietnamese neighborhood of New Orleans East and tracing this development right up to the fateful autumn of 2005. As he points out, by accident he and his team were unusually well suited to study this group’s response to disaster because they had been collecting data until just a few weeks before the hurricane. Having lost the physical copies of my own questionnaires from this same community in an earlier flood, in May 1995 (fortunately after the data had been coded and saved in electronic form), I can well appreciate the fortuitous survival of VanLandingham’s pre-Katrina questionnaires in the attic of one of his graduate students. Even the best-planned research often depends on circumstance and happenstance, and fortune evidently favored Mark’s professional progress more than his personal well-being. But fortune only works for those who can recognize and work with what it offers. His ability to rise above his own struggles for recovery, to see the potential of his predisaster data for studying postdisaster resilience, and to activate his professional networks to obtain funding and move forward testify to his qualities as a top-notch scholar.

Building on the data from his pre-hurricane Health Impacts on International Migration (HIIM) Study, VanLandingham set up the Katrina Impacts on Vietnamese Americans in New Orleans, LA (KATIVA NOLA) study, intended to examine how first-generation immigrants (the target population of the earlier study) had been affected by the storm and how they were responding to it. Again, the unique suitability of the group to a study of this kind is clear. Because of his contacts in the community, especially with the Catholic church at its social center, VanLandingham and his team were able to come up with a representative sample of households with working-age Vietnamese adults, a set that would be comparable to his sample based in Ho Chi Minh City.

One of VanLandingham's advances from the before-and-after comparison of the New Orleans respondents lies in the clarity of his definition of recovery. I confess that I am sometimes skeptical about the term *resilience* as a way of thinking about responses to challenges. I often wonder exactly what the word means. Are resilient people those who are still alive? Does the resilience of a residential area following a disaster consist of how many of its houses are rebuilt? There often seems to be something tautological in discussions of resilience. Why did a neighborhood come back after being struck by a hurricane? Because it was resilient. How do we know it was resilient? Because it came back. By adapting an empirical, multidimensional measure of recovery, and by applying this measure to the before-and-after data gathered by his team, VanLandingham is able to move beyond vague, subjective assertions of resilience and provide an example of what recovery means for an identifiable group of people and for the individuals within that group. I believe all researchers will be impressed by the collection of data, not simply on outward manifestations, such as rates of return and economic behavior, but also on physical and mental health, as well as on the interactional dimension of community mobilization. The explanation of recovery, of course, remains in question, but the first task is to determine the relative extent to which it has taken place.

Although pre-Katrina data for some of the dimensions, such as those concerning health, are not available for other New Orleans area populations, those for which comparisons are available, such as rates of return, indicate that the Vietnamese had indeed recovered outwardly much better than their neighbors. When before-and-after comparisons are not available, the post-Katrina group comparisons provide clear indications that the Vietnamese were coming back from the hurricane more successfully than others. VanLandingham's impression that his Vietnamese contacts were overcoming their misfortunes better than he was, in other words, was more than a personal feeling, and they were overcoming misfortunes better than many people were. This leads to the central question from the fourth chapter onward: why are the Vietnamese doing so well?

To answer this question, VanLandingham attempts to look at resiliency in a way that gives the term a more specific meaning and moves beyond tautology by looking at features of the Vietnamese that may contribute to their recovery in ways that closely follow from the multidimensional measure. He finds that the Vietnamese community had not only characteristics that helped its members respond, but also characteristics that rendered them more vulnerable. But he identifies one area in which Vietnamese Americans may stand out, apart from their economic setting, social capital resources, information and communication, and

institutional bases for collective community action. This was the area of culture, and it is in his discussion of the role of culture in responding to stresses and challenges that I think VanLandingham makes his greatest contribution.

As he observes, some social scientists are suspicious of cultural explanations because they believe these may lead to “blaming the victim.” If the relative success of a set of people in some field of activity is attributed to culture, these social scientists reason, then the explanation is an implicit claim that the culture is in some sense good or desirable. By extension, less advantageous outcomes can be the consequences of cultures that are somehow bad or inferior. Cultural approaches to adaptation or advancement, therefore, run the risk of suggesting that the disadvantaged deserve their disadvantages because these are products of some “culture of poverty.”

This suspicion of cultural accounts is understandable, given the unequal distribution of power and resources in any society, that neither individuals nor groups can entirely control their destinies, and that the fortunate often do justify themselves by accusing the unfortunate. Still, I do not think that cultural approaches can be universally dismissed as blaming the victim. A causal explanation may be true or false, but it is not a moral judgment. More seriously, the blaming the victim objection to a sociological analysis is a logical fallacy, an argument from consequences. An explanation is wrong because it is poorly reasoned or does not fit the evidence, not because it would have undesirable implications if it were true.

There is, though, a more valid basis for objecting to taking culture as an independent variable: that it may serve as a multipurpose black box, to be opened whenever we need to account for some state of affairs. Although cultural explanations can be vague, overused, and simplistic, to deny that culture has any role in accounting for group characteristics or responses would be to deny that groups of people with common backgrounds and experiences develop shared ways of interpreting the world and interacting with others. VanLandingham’s most valuable theoretical contribution in this book is to draw from the Vietnamese New Orleans example a way of thinking about how culture works together with other aspects of collective life to shape how people react to disaster and to life more generally.

Pulling together the work of social scientists who have tried to deal seriously with culture as a real influence on sets of people, VanLandingham comes up with a clear definition of culture and examines how beliefs, values, and meanings constitute the glue that holds a community together in a specific way that will affect how the individuals of the community can react with greater or lesser success to environmental stresses. Cautious to avoid the multipurpose black box use of culture, in addition to defining it

carefully, he also distinguishes it from its “confounders,” the noncultural factors that also affect reaction.

I learned a lot from reading this new book. It offers unique before-and-after data on such difficult to study matters as physical and mental health. It is a careful and detailed study of Vietnamese American life. It gives us new insight into how a community responded to one of the major disasters of the early twentieth century. The book is also, in my opinion, a major advance in our theoretical understanding of what culture is and how it functions.

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