

Introduction

Why Are the Vietnamese Doing So Well?

ABOUT A year after the Katrina disaster, I was in eastern New Orleans with one of my doctoral students conducting health interviews that provide part of the empirical basis for this book. Things were not going well for me. Our home had flooded and our insurance companies had dug in their heels, insisting that they would only pay about a third of the approximately \$100,000 in damages that our home had sustained. This was not only infuriating but also causing cash flow problems for me, as were disputes with contractors (one had long delayed the work we had contracted for while refusing to refund my substantial deposit). Our neighborhood was deserted and depressing. I was tired of dealing with piles of debris, things that were broken, and the never-ending series of inconveniences that had come to characterize life in a severely wounded city. My wife was suffering from residual effects of covering Hurricane Katrina for the *Times-Picayune* as well as burnout from her stressful job of delivering information and perspective to a city starving for both. Tulane University, my employer, was to be censured the following year by the American Association of University Professors because of the termination of tenured faculty and the elimination of major units in the weeks after Katrina without adequate faculty input. We were struggling to attract students and retain faculty. Several of my favorite colleagues had had it and were departing.

I was not sleeping well, was easily irritated, and was angry about how poorly government, corporations, and other institutions were responding—or were not responding—to the challenges that their leaders had declared responsibility for.

During a break from the structured interview, I asked the respondent, a Vietnamese immigrant about a decade younger than I, how he was making out with the rebuilding of his flooded home. His experiences were very similar to mine. His insurance companies were refusing to

honor their full obligations. The work of gutting and rebuilding was difficult and time consuming, and his job was very demanding; actually, his *jobs* were demanding. He had taken on two jobs because of the post-Katrina spike in wages. He was also doing most of the rebuilding work himself—with the help of his Vietnamese neighbors—and had used up all of his savings in the process. His wife and kids were living out of state, and he missed them.

Like me, he was physically tired. But unlike me, he was upbeat, optimistic, and generally very happy about his situation. He spoke at length about how Katrina had resulted in a practically brand new home for him and his family. Rather than being infuriated at his insurance companies for trying to rip him off, he settled with them for what seemed to me to be a meager payout given his damages. I was surprised when I finally grasped that he had never expected to receive anywhere near a full payment from them. He had a mortgage, and it became clear that he saw his insurance payment more as a required “tax” than as a contract with a company to cover his full investment in the event of a catastrophe. And he saw their payout, meager as it was, as a windfall that he could use to partially replenish his deleted savings or use to pursue some new business ventures in the economic Wild West that was post-Katrina New Orleans. He was optimistic about the future and pleased by what he perceived as his good fortune.

Even more remarkably, as my colleagues, students, and I began to analyze the data that resulted from this post-Katrina assessment at about the one-year mark, it became clear that this fellow was not unusual. On a wide range of measures that are used to assess postdisaster recovery, members of our Vietnamese American cohort were doing much better than we had expected. At around the same time, we—and other observers of New Orleans’ post-Katrina recovery—also began to notice that the major Vietnamese enclave in eastern New Orleans seemed to have a lot more rebuilding activity and home occupancy than did the surrounding neighborhoods. Several local and national media sources and a number of organizations interested in recovery began to pay attention to this previously neglected area of the city and began to speculate about whether it was indeed recovering more quickly than other areas, and if so, why.

Our team set out to accomplish two goals. First, we wanted to conduct a systematic assessment of post-Katrina recovery for this community. The approach and results from this assessment are the focus of chapter 3 of this volume. The overall conclusion is that the initial impressions of an especially robust recovery within the Vietnamese American community were correct. Our second goal was to try to explain why the post-Katrina recovery of the Vietnamese American community was more robust than it was for other communities experiencing similar levels of impact from that disaster. The approach and results of this exercise is the focus of

chapters 4, 5, and 6 of this volume. The overall conclusion is that culture matters in postdisaster recovery, but not to the extent nor in the ways one might imagine given the current state of the literatures focusing on disaster-related resilience and recovery.

To pursue these two goals, I draw on a wide range of data that our team collected for a series of studies of this community both before and after Katrina; data and results from other teams focusing on Katrina; and extensive recent scholarship in sociology, demography, the other social sciences, public health, immigrant studies, history, and disaster studies. I began this journey well-acquainted with some of these literatures—especially with regard to their treatment of Vietnamese Americans and other immigrants—but I’ve only become an avid consumer of the rich and vast literatures focusing on disasters since I experienced my own when Katrina struck my city in August 2005. My year spent at the Russell Sage Foundation between 2013 and 2014 provided an extraordinary opportunity to immerse myself in these rich bodies of work and to reflect upon how they relate to each other.

One point of departure from popular perspectives that have tried to explain the post-Katrina success of the Vietnamese American community is that I will argue that their remarkable recovery is not attributable to a great and charismatic leader.¹ This is a variation of the super hero perspective. Such status is usually conferred on the head priest of the principal Catholic church serving this population at that time, Father Vien Nguyen, who happens to be a remarkable man (and remarkably modest, as it turns out). But a super hero he is not.

A second point of departure from popular perspectives that have tried to explain the advantages of immigrants on a wider range of outcomes is that I will argue that the especially robust Vietnamese recovery post-Katrina is not attributable to essential cultural traits that predispose them (and similar groups) for success *ipso facto*.² This is a variation of the model minority perspective. Instead, I argue that culture defined in a much more limited and dynamic way can be one part of an explanation of why some groups fare better than others, especially if care is taken to distinguish factors that are rightly designated as cultural from other—often associated—factors that are more akin to privilege.

I will be proposing an explanatory framework that is more structural, academic, and critical in perspective. By structural, I mean that I propose to discern overarching features that distinguish the Vietnamese from other ethnic groups (including African Americans and whites) as opposed to more esoteric influences that might influence postdisaster recovery like big personalities and twists of fate. By academic, I mean that as I lay out this framework I try to be as precise and transparent as possible about what culture (and other social science constructs that I will use) is and means and about where this meaning comes from. I also

mean that I will draw heavily on my own and others' empirical research findings that speak to these issues. By critical, I mean that I propose to disentangle important influences on postdisaster recovery that appear to be cultural but in fact have little or nothing to do with it from influences that are more genuinely cultural.

I begin the book by introducing the Vietnamese immigrant community in New Orleans in chapter 1, highlighting both the remarkable history that they brought with them from Vietnam as well as their forty-one years in America. This chapter is primarily a review of the extensive literatures that focus on the history and social structure of the Vietnamese and Vietnamese Americans, and especially their exodus from Vietnam during the 1970s and 1980s and their subsequent adaptation to the United States.

In chapter 2, I describe my data and analytical approach to addressing my central question: Why are the Vietnamese doing so well in post-Katrina New Orleans? Much of these data and analyses were collected and conducted by the research team I lead at Tulane University, but I also draw heavily on the Katrina-related research of other teams as well. This chapter specifies the sources of the data and findings I use to support the central arguments that I make in subsequent chapters, and describes the strengths and weaknesses of these empirical building blocks.

In chapter 3, I review state-of-the-art approaches for assessing post-disaster recovery, and then describe the extent to which the data described in the previous chapter support the impression of many observers that the Vietnamese are doing remarkably well in their post-Katrina recovery. The principal empirical basis of this chapter is the longitudinal health survey of Vietnamese immigrants that I lead at Tulane. This study began as the cross-national and comparative Health Impacts of International Migration Survey before Katrina, and later evolved into the Katrina Impacts on Vietnamese Americans living in New Orleans (KATIVA NOLA) after Hurricane Katrina flooded this community in August 2005. In addition to these primary data collected before and after Katrina by my team at Tulane, in this chapter I also draw extensively upon the Katrina-related research led by other teams. I find that Vietnamese Americans returned to New Orleans more quickly and more completely than did other groups; that their post-Katrina health and economic outcomes were better; and that their post-Katrina community mobilization was more vigorous.

In chapter 4, I review perspectives developed by leading disaster scholars to help explain differentials in postdisaster recovery such as those that I report in the previous chapter. I draw upon a widely used framework—the resilience framework—to organize my approach for explaining how and why Vietnamese Americans fared better than similarly affected groups in their postdisaster recovery. I draw attention to the fact that both this and other widely accepted frameworks of resilience neglect potentially impor-

tant cultural influences; and I highlight the negative consequences of this neglect, especially with regard to our understanding of how culturally distinct minorities might recover after a major disaster.

In chapter 5, I focus on this perennially challenging, controversial, and charged—but for my purposes, inescapable—topic of culture. I draw on both dated and very recent scholarship on culture to provide an overview of what is meant by this construct when used by modern social scientists. I also draw on well-developed empirical literatures in the health and social sciences to introduce and illustrate a wide array of other influences on health and well-being that can confound those of culture; I label these influences *culture confounders*. I go on to leverage rich literatures focusing on immigrants, disaster recovery, resilience, and culture to propose a new conceptual framework for incorporating a role for culture in postdisaster recovery.

In chapter 6, I use this framework to organize my empirical findings about what led to the exceptionally strong recovery of the Vietnamese American community in post-Katrina New Orleans. Here, I again use primary data collected by my team at Tulane University for our KATIVA NOLA study, but the data I analyze for this chapter are primarily qualitative in nature, consisting mostly of transcripts of our extensive interviews of a wide range of leaders (key informants) from the Vietnamese American community in New Orleans.

In chapter 7, I summarize these findings and discuss their relevance for other immigrant communities as they face similar disasters and conclude with some predictions about what the future likely holds for the Vietnamese American community in New Orleans.