Chronic Inequities: Environmental & Structural Racism during COVID-19 and Hurricane Laura Disaster Recovery

Tomeka M. Robinson  
*Hofstra University, tomeka.robinson@hofstra.edu*

Sabrina Singh  
*Rutgers University - New Brunswick/Piscataway, sabrina.singh1@rutgers.edu*

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Chronic Inequities: Environmental and Structural Racism during COVID-19 and Hurricane Laura Disaster Recovery

The COVID-19 pandemic has amplified the realities of systemic health inequities within the United States. While the virus has severely impacted the entire country, people of color bear the brunt of this pandemic, from surges of COVID-19 cases in their communities to spikes in unemployment rates. Simultaneously, citizens are dealing with the impacts of hurricanes along the Gulf Coast. The common denominator concerning these two stressors is that they can be exacerbated by institutional racism. This can be seen in the case of a small city in Southwest Louisiana, namely, Lake Charles, which has become a prime site of compound risks as COVID-19, natural disasters, and institutional racism converge in one location. While the state of Louisiana did not create COVID-19 or hurricanes, it did help to create the structural conditions within the state that allowed these risks to disproportionately impact marginalized communities. In this paper, critical race theory, specifically counter-narratives, is used to analyze interviews with Lake Charles residents to prioritize the voices of those directly affected by the convergence of risks.

[environmental racism, COVID-19, counter-narrative, hurricane, Louisiana, crisis]
It is the perfect storm here in Southwest Louisiana. We are facing multiple crises simultaneously. We have a cultural crisis going on. We have a natural disaster and a pandemic, and absolutely, they are all intertwined. The stress of each is bearing on everyone’s mind. It is absolutely a daunting task, if you think about what is happening in the nation. Most of the nation is dealing with two of those. Everyone is dealing with the cultural crisis that is going on. Everyone is dealing with COVID-19, but everyone doesn’t have a natural disaster on top of it. (Interviewee D, African-American male, mid 30’s)

The COVID-19 pandemic has amplified the realities of systemic health inequities within the United States. While the virus has severely impacted the entire country, people of color bear much of pandemic’s brunt, from surges of COVID-19 cases within their communities to spikes in unemployment rates (Wood 2020; Parkhurst, Huyser, and Horse, 2020; Terrell and James 2022; Gould and Wilson 2020). Simultaneously, along the Gulf Coast, communities are dealing with the impacts of weather-related disasters such as hurricanes, in part due to climate change increasing the likelihood of these disasters (Balaguru et al. 2023). The magnitude of these weather-related disasters is highlighted by the fact that the 2020 Atlantic Hurricane Season earned the top spot for busiest on record
(National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration 2020). While these two stressors may seem unrelated, the common denominator associated with both is that they can be exacerbated by institutional racism (Washington 2020; Collins et al. 2019; Johnson and Rainey 2007; García-López 2018; Rodriguez-Díaz and Lewellen-Williams 2020; Rivera, Jenkins, and Randolph 2022). The enduring legacy of institutional racism can be seen in the policies creating conditions that worsen the effects of these crises for marginalized communities (e.g., one form of institutional racism is environmental racism; Ihejirika 2023). However, policies are not the only place where this legacy can be illustrated. For instance, in cities across America, the continued memorialization of racism via Confederate statues (Szayna 2020) which some Americans connote with symbols of racism (Public Religion Research Institute and E Pluribus Unum 2022) is also a part of this legacy. Overall, symbols and policies that are often embedded into everyday life can serve as painful reminders for marginalized communities that insidious forms of racism shape their realities, including the creation of health inequities.

Given the overlapping crises (i.e., COVID-19, hurricanes, and racial tensions in their community) shaping marginalized communities’ well-being, the goal of this paper is to understand the types of narratives these communities are crafting to make meaning of these interconnected events. Krieger (2020) notes that crises such as pandemics and climate change do harm communities of color without
human influence creating the conditions to magnify the harms. Consequently, she argues an acknowledgement of the injustices towards these communities and the imbalances of impacts is worthy of interrogation. One way to start this acknowledgement is to make space for the narratives from people of color about how they coped with an unprecedented start to the 2020s. Furthermore, this study helps to advance environmental justice by making visible stories about how our study’s participants are personally being shaped by these stressors (Kohl 2021).

Critical race theory, specifically the emphasis on counter-storytelling, is used as a theoretical framework to highlight the experiences of our participants. Previously, scholars have studied the intersection of COVID-19 and hurricanes (Pei et al. 2020), COVID-19 and racial tensions (Rahman et al. 2022) and hurricanes and racial tensions (Henkel, Dovidio, and Gaertner 2006). However, we have not seen a study that looks at racial tensions, COVID-19, and hurricanes in tandem. To attempt to see how these different crises intersect within individuals’ narratives about how they made sense of this turbulent time, we conducted semi-structured interviews and focus groups with residents of Lake Charles, Louisiana.

Lake Charles is the fifth largest city in Louisiana and was created in 1861 (City of Lake Charles 2023). The city has a diverse makeup which in part is due to its petrochemical refining and education sectors (City of Lake Charles 2023). We
chose this location because this small city had become a prime site of compound risks as COVID-19, weather-related disasters, and racial tensions converge in one location (Pei et al. 2020; Philips et al. 2020). Residents already had an outsized risk to each crisis which made this convergence harmful to their health and well-being. Ultimately, by shining a light on these narratives, we want to remind the wider world that while communities like Lake Charles can be very resilient in the face of unprecedented struggles, organizations need to improve their crisis responses to be more culturally sensitive to work alongside resident-developed crisis strategies.

Timeline of Events

COVID-19 Pandemic

COVID-19 (coronavirus disease 2019) is an illness caused by severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (Mayo Clinic 2023). The virus was first discovered in 2019 in China, and by March 2020, it had spread to the United States, infecting individuals across the country (Siddiqui, Alhamdi, and Alghamdi 2022). In the early days of the pandemic, New Orleans became a COVID-19 hotspot as the virus spread due to Mardi Gras festivities, with experts noting that the events in New Orleans helped to spread the virus to other parts of the state.
(Zeller et al. 2021). New Orleans had higher death rates from the virus in comparison to other American cities because many New Orleans residents suffered from pre-existing conditions such as hypertension that made them more susceptible to COVID-19 (Brooks 2020). Throughout southern Louisiana, similar Mardi Gras festivities occurred during the season, particularly in Black communities like those within Lake Charles, and these communities were similarly susceptible to COVID-19 because of similar environmental and social stressors that are present in New Orleans (Hu et al. 2022). Louisiana continued to be plagued by COVID-19 during the summer of 2020 as the state experienced a surge in newly diagnosed cases and some state leaders rejected mask mandates, a precaution that could have helped to reduce the spread of the virus (Westwood 2020).

_Hurricanes Laura and Delta_

On August 27, 2020, Hurricane Laura made landfall on the southwestern coast of Louisiana with sustained winds of 150 miles per hour, making it the strongest hurricane to strike the state of Louisiana since 1856 (BBC 2020). The surge threat prompted mandatory evacuation for Lake Charles, forcing about 78,000 people to evacuate. In a state that was already struggling to contain the spread of COVID-19, government officials directed evacuees to stay in government-paid hotel rooms, mostly in New Orleans, LA, Houston, TX, and Dallas, TX, or to sleep in
their cars because officials did not want to risk the further spread of COVID-19 with the implementation of mass shelters (Haines 2020). The storm devastated the region, with power cuts to more than half a million homes coupled with a chemical fire from an industrial plant in the area shortly following the passing of the hurricane (BBC 2020). The Lake Charles disaster saga only worsened for residents due to the local government’s inability to make effective decisions with its most historically marginalized residents’ needs in mind. On September 11, 2020, Calcasieu Parish, the parish where Lake Charles is located, decided to lift mandatory evacuation orders with the language:

Residents who want to return to Calcasieu Parish must understand that basic services remain limited in much of the parish. Residents need to know the status of services in their area before deciding to return home. If you do decide to return, we recommend that you look at your property, handle any temporary needs on the property and be prepared to return to evacuation until services are more fully restored (so strongly consider not checking out of the hotel where you are staying). Residents who return to Calcasieu Parish and decide to stay must be self-sufficient (Calcasieu Parish, 2020).

This order allowed businesses to recall workers, even those that did not have homes to return to, and if they did, these residents did not have access to basic
utilities such as electricity or clean water. Six weeks later, on October 9, 2020, a second hurricane, Hurricane Delta, also made landfall in Southwest Louisiana (Cineas 2020). Many residents worried that the country would forget about the devastation in their community, given that they struggled to obtain the help they needed to repair their community’s infrastructure (Rojas, 2020). By November 2020, thousands of individuals were still displaced because their homes were uninhabitable (Karlin 2020). Only eighteen months after the initial devastation – in March 2022 – did Louisiana receive federal aid totaling $1.7 billion, with around $10.8 million going to Lake Charles (Smith and Ballard, 2022). However, residents and scholars noted that the money had come too late for Lake Charles residents because many had permanently left the area (Bittle 2022).

Protest regarding South’s Defenders Memorial Monument

In the wake of George Floyd’s murder, protests erupted in 2020 in response to racial discrimination, and protestors’ demands for racial justice included removal of Confederate statues (Domonoske 2020). In Lake Charles, the protestors’ attention was on the South’s Defenders Memorial Monument, a Confederate soldier statue placed on top of a pedestal at the courthouse downtown (American Press Staff 2020; Tompkins 2020). Although the official reasoning behind the South’s Defenders Memorial Monument was to honor fallen soldiers, statues like
the one in Lake Charles were often part of a larger trend during the Jim Crow era as a means to intimidate Black residents rather than to remember fallen soldiers (Parks 2017). When residents attended multiple city council and police jury meetings, wrote countless editorials to the local newspaper, and even staged protests throughout the city to demand the removal of a Confederate statue, city officials and white residents argued that the removal was completely unnecessary, and its placement was a vital segment of the history of the city. A highly controversial decision was made just days before Hurricane Laura made landfall when the city’s police jury voted to keep the Confederate monument on public grounds (Tompkins 2020). This decision sparked massive protests throughout the city as many residents, specifically the city’s Black population, felt the decision completely ignored their concerns and activism efforts (American Press Staff 2020). In a twist of events, the statue was knocked down by Hurricane Laura, and as of 2022, the statue is in storage with only the base remaining on public grounds (Tompkins 2020; Lyttle 2022).

**Environmental Racism**

Oftentimes, weather-related events such as hurricanes are called “natural disasters” because the causes and impacts are seen as beyond human control, but
the term “natural disasters” ignores the ways in which certain communities are harmed through policies that disenfranchise them across racial and socio-economic lines (Chmutina and Von Meding 2019). Research has shown that the effects of institutional racism can be seen in the difficult recoveries of communities that are primarily made up of individuals of color and lower socio-economic class when faced with weather-related disasters because they lack access to social capital and resources to overcome these disasters (Collins et al. 2019; Johnson and Rainey 2007; García-López 2018; Substance Abuse and Mental Health Administration 2017; Rodriguez-Díaz and Lewellen-Williams 2020). Specifically, these groups are more likely to be the subject of discriminatory housing practices that put their homes in hurricanes’ paths, cannot always leave work to evacuate safely due to at-will employment laws, and find it difficult to obtain funds after a crisis (Zonta 2019; Baker and McElrath, 1996; White 2017). Moreover, work on the impacts of environmental racism and racial capitalism discusses the link between the devaluation of certain bodies in pursuit of municipal solvency and the intentionality of these decisions as a necessary component of the neoliberal state (Pulido 2016). While scholarship on environmental justice movements has increased, critical environmental justice scholars argue that traditional environmental justice research has a tendency to focus on only one or two forms of social inequality rather than addressing the
multiple categories of difference that are entangled in the production of environmental injustice (Pellnow 2016).

However, the impacts of racial capitalism and environmental racism on the lived environments of communities facing weather-related disasters are only one part of the equation. According to Laster Pirtle (2020), racial capitalism can also account for both an essential root of disease as well as the inequities along racial and socio-economic lines within the COVID-19 pandemic. To make this point, Laster Pirtle (2020) cites Link and Phelan (1995), who argue that a social condition is a fundamental cause of disease disparities if (a) it influences multiple disease outcomes, (b) it affects disease outcomes through multiple risk factors, (c) it involves access to flexible resources that can be used to minimize the consequences of disease, and (d) it is reproduced over time through the continual replacement of intervening mechanisms. For residents of Lake Charles, and more specifically in the northern section of the city, where the population is primarily comprised of poor Black residents, a myriad of social inequalities were present that left them more susceptible to both the impacts of the hurricanes and COVID-19.

The first inequality can be seen through the historical lack of investment in the well-being of Lake Charles residents. As Ranganathan (2016) emphasizes,
analysis of racial capitalism necessitates that we focus on the past and how wealth, power, and poverty have been historically created and reinforced. Residents of North Lake Charles have argued for decades about the lack of governmental and economic investment in the northern section of the city, including the lack of grocery stores and the drainage issues plaguing the entire northern section of the city. This historical lack of investment echoes Pulido (2016) who avows that the lack of investment in infrastructure can be seen as an act of cruelty because these poor Black residents are seen as expendable bodies in the eyes of their local government. The second inequality is that the proximity of several oil and gas refineries across the river from Lake Charles which exposes the residents to environmental health risks from chemical spills, releases, and industrial fires. Research on the social determinants of health and environmental justice reveals the importance of addressing how systemic racism distributes unequal health risks via differential exposure to air pollution (Alvarez 2023; Ard 2016; Kampa and Castana 2008). Exposure to air toxins has both acute and chronic health consequences, such as respiratory and cardiovascular problems, both of which have been cited as increasing the severity of COVID-19. As the full impact of COVID-19 is still being assessed by researchers, early results show residential segregation has led to increased rates of contracting COVID-19 (Yearby and Mohapatra 2020; Tan, DeSouza, and Raifman 2022).
Despite the severe impacts of structural and environmental inequalities on North Lake Charles’ residents health and ability to return to their homes following Hurricane Laura, the dominant discourse is that racial practices contributing to unequal distributions of resources and disproportionate exposure to environmental risks are part of a bygone era in American history (Dart 2015; Dickinson 2012; Hallegate et al. 2017). We argue that these risks are still a present threat to the lives of Lake Charles residents, and it is vital to start listening to these residents’ narratives. The conflux of racial tensions, a global pandemic, and weather-related disasters provides a critical moment to reconfigure crisis responses. In this paper, critical race theory, specifically counter-storytelling, is used as a lens to analyze interviews with Lake Charles residents to prioritize the voices of those directly affected in order to modify crisis responses in a manner that is culturally sensitive and focuses on the needs of the community during rebuilding.

Theoretical Frameworks

*Critical Race Theory and Counter-Storytelling*

Critical race theory emerged in legal academia in the 1970s as a way to understand the backlash to the 1960s civil rights movement in the United States and is underpinned by the notion that racism is ingrained in American society
Critical race theorists focus on the reduction of racial inequalities by grounding solutions within the socio-historical legacy of racism (Delgado and Stefancic 2001). While there are many themes within critical race theory, five themes form the crux of the theoretical perspective: (a) the centrality and intersectionality of race and racism, (b) the challenge to the dominant ideology, (c) the commitment to social justice, (d) the centrality of experiential knowledge, and (e) the interdisciplinary perspective (Solorzano 1997; Solorzano and Yasso 2000).

A highlight of critical race theory is the emphasis on storytelling and “naming one’s own reality” to challenge narratives about racial injustice (Delgado and Stefancic 1993, 462). The act of telling these stories is counter-storytelling because these stories are a form of defiance against mainstream stories about race (Delgado 2000; Miles 2019). As Ray (2023) notes, these stories, often called counter-narratives, are a way to unsettle mainstream narratives that harm communities of color (i.e., not providing timely access to hurricane relief funds) because these narratives are deemed acceptable and simply a natural function of civil society.

Critical race theory has been used within disaster studies to show the human role in linking race and weather-related disasters. These linkages range from
communities of color being more likely to be susceptible to weather-related disasters (Davis 2023) to mainstream narratives about recovery efforts justifying the displacement of residents from marginalized communities (e.g., teachers and students affected by Hurricane Katrina) as opposed to recognizing the central role of race in creating the conditions necessary for the unequal recovery efforts (Cook and Dixson 2013; Dixson, Buras, and Jeffers 2015). However, critical race theory has also been suggested as a tool for training emergency managers and responders to aid impacted communities in a culturally nuanced manner while helping to reducing the inequities plaguing these communities (Leach and Rivera 2022; Mills and Miller 2015). Overall, critical race theory can be used to understand how structural conditions were created that allowed communities of color to be unequally impacted by weather-related disasters and health crises like COVID-19 as well as provide a tool to reduce these conditions in the event of future disasters. Moreover, this study of compound risks for Lake Charles residents helps to advance work within critical race theory by illustrating how marginalized communities craft narratives of self-reliance in response to the intersection of racial tensions, a global pandemic, and weather-related disasters.

**Methodology**
The research question for this project was, “What types of narratives do residents tell regarding the intersections of racial tensions, a global pandemic, and weather-related disasters in the city of Lake Charles?” To address the research question, data were collected using semi-structured interviews and focus groups based on qualitative naturalistic inquiry. A naturalistic inquiry was chosen because it allows researchers to understand multiple, socially constructed realities (Lincoln and Guba 1985).

In 2020, Lake Charles, LA had a population of 77,800 people, with 47.8% of residents identifying as Black or African American, 43.9% as White, and 2.32% as Asian (Data USA, n.d.). Interviewees were recruited via the social media outlets of Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram through both personal networks as well as multiple Lake Charles-based social media groups, including faith and civic communities. We interviewed 12 members in Lake Charles, and the surrounding communities. All of the participants self-identified as people of color, either African-American, Creole, or mixed-race. The interview data were thematically analyzed based on the literature on counter-storytelling within critical race theory. Interviewees included individuals who were over the age of 18, had lived in the community for at least 10 years, were from a mixture of racial
and socio-economic backgrounds, and were employed in various sectors of the local community. The interview questions focused on three key areas: COVID-19, Hurricanes Laura and Delta, and racial tensions within the community (see Appendix A). All interviews were conducted via Zoom. Each interview lasted around 45 minutes and took place between November 2020 and January 2021. The interviews were recorded via Zoom and transcribed by the researchers to ensure accuracy. Some 52 pages of transcripts were uploaded into NVIVO12 to complete the planned thematic analysis. The qualitative data were coded and analyzed using thematic analysis and cross-checked by all the researchers to ensure agreement about the themes (Miles 2014; Saldana 2003; Boyatzis 1998). The data presented in this paper are drawn from these transcripts.

Given the sensitive nature of the topics discussed in the interviews (e.g., weather-related disasters, death, racism), we attempted to take precautionary measures to protect our participants. First, as a research team, we met virtually prior to the interviews to discuss how to conduct the participant interviews. Given that one of our team members grew up in Lake Charles, we relied on her expertise to ensure that the questions were asked in a manner appropriate to community members (e.g., guidance about how to talk about the impacts of hurricanes on Lake Charles). During this meeting, we discussed the protocol in case interviewees
became visibly upset by the interview questions. Second, this study was approved by the Institutional Research Board of Hofstra University in November 2020. Overall, we wanted to give our participants a way to share their perspectives with as many of the risks mitigated as possible.

Findings

The letters “C, D, E, F, G, H, L, P, S, U, V, and W” will be used to refer to the interviewees when presenting the results to respect their privacy. Based on our analysis we saw three types of narratives emerge from the data: (1) differing governmental responses to COVID-19; (2) delayed recovery from Hurricanes Laura and Delta; and (3) the interconnection of COVID-19, Hurricanes Laura and Delta, and racial tensions.

Differing Governmental Responses to COVID-19

The first narrative arose out of a series of questions (Questions 2–4) that dealt with the impact of COVID-19 on the local community. Specifically, the narrative
was that the federal government made several missteps along the way while the local government was able to get Lake Charles the information they needed. In terms of the local and state governmental response, ten interviewees were fairly complementary. This sentiment is highlighted by Interviewee D, an African American, male in his mid-30s, “Locally, I think we were handicapped because of the federal response, so I give a little bit more grace to the local level because we were out of the loop of everything, and when we got the information, I think our governor did an extraordinary job.” Only two interviewees felt that the local and state government could have done more.

This complementary nature did not extend to the federal response, and all the interviewees were very critical of the response. Interviewee E, a self-identified mixed-raced woman in her 60s stated,

The federal government, I don’t think they did as much as they should have done. We should have been warned long beforehand that this pandemic was upon us here in the United States, and they chose not to for some reason. So, I just think when you are able to get information as fast as possible, then we could have curtailed some of the deaths.
Four of the interviewees discussed the politicization of the pandemic. According to Interviewee V, a mixed-raced woman in her early 40s:

It was surprising to see how a health concern, you know there are medical things that have been made political, but these were clear health concerns that were affecting everyone. It was nondiscriminatory and I was shocked to see how political it was becoming and the ways they were making it political. It was disgusting frankly.

One area where there was also no disagreement was how the community itself went to work to help provide relief to residents of the community. All twelve interviewees made some reference to community efforts. According to Interviewee D,

We immediately started thinking you know this is going to be tough, people are going to be struggling. There are going to be food issues, toiletry issues, and all of those things. We kind of automatically went into disaster relief mode because we have been a part of those several different times.

Interviewee C, an African American woman in her early 20s added, “Our health center, which primarily services lower-income residents, ended up doing a lot of
relief work, including testing, serving meals, and providing cleaning supplies to the local community.”

Delayed Recovery from Hurricanes Laura and Delta

The second narrative was that Lake Charles residents were experiencing delays with hurricane recovery, and this narrative came out of the next series of questions (Questions 5–8) focused on the impact of the hurricanes on the community. Eight of the interviewees reported having major damage to their homes. When asked about recovery in the community, all interviewees argued that recovery in the community has been extremely slow. Interviewee D also notes the lack of supplies:

Supplies, as far as housing supplies, like plywood and sheetrock, there are days you cannot get sheetrock within 100 miles, so it has definitely been hampered. Anyone who has received major damage like ourselves have 8–12 more months before we are back in our homes. Those with lesser damage is probably another 2–3 months before people are back in their home.
But it wasn’t just the lack of supplies or contractor schedules that the interviewees blamed for the slow recovery. All twelve interviewees point to both governmental and structural failures for the delayed recovery. According to Interviewee P, a mixed-raced woman in her mid 50s:

You know the state came out with horses and soldiers for Hurricane Rita. They created a program for money; you didn’t have to pay back through Road Home. Everybody was helped. You had trailers placed all over. They rented property to place these FEMA trailers on, and now there are people who are homeless and it’s so difficult to get a trailer. I don’t understand. I don’t know if it’s because they did so much for Rita and funds are dwindled, but the response to this hurricane, which is 10 times worse than the 2005 Hurricane Rita has been little to nothing. There are people who are literally homeless for the last 90 days because they can’t get a trailer.

Beyond the lack of governmental response, all interviewees reported how poorly the insurance companies were handling storm recovery. Many interviewees had to fight with their insurance company to get the funds they needed or highlighted that their insurance companies found loopholes that allowed them to escape
covering hurricane damage entirely. Interviewee E noted, “I think the insurance companies should honor the code…I’ve been with them 42 years and have never had a late payment. They promise you so much on those policies until it’s time to actually do something, then they find a way to make it seem as though no, that’s not covered.”

Eleven interviewees discussed the disparity between recovery efforts in the northern and southern portions of the city. The northern portion of the city is predominately made up of Black residents with a lower socio-economic status, while the southern portion of the city is predominately White with a higher socio-economic status. As Interviewee U, a mixed-race woman in her mid-30s noted:

I wouldn’t say a lot of progress in my neighborhood has occurred. Recovery efforts aren’t going as fast as some other neighborhoods because of where I am located. But that’s to be expected. It’s just like when the lights and stuff came back on for the city, this side of town was the last people to get lights. We are always the last people to get anything.

Seven interviewees spoke specifically about the time difference in electrical services being restored between the northern and southern portions of the city.
Two of these interviewees acknowledged that this was a bigger infrastructure issue. According to Interviewee S, an African American male in his mid-40s:

My thoughts initially were that I felt the same way because you are getting all of the people south of town, and I think a lot of it was the education process on why things happened the way they did. Because I worked for the power company for a number of years, I understand the language they were talking and the way the whole infrastructure was built and that the way they had to divert certain areas because of damage, it made sense to me. But on the same token, I feel that it is important for them down the line, when it comes to rebuilding the infrastructure for them to be more diversified and not just this part depends on whether this part is connected. They need to have different options for recovery, and I am hoping they take that into consideration because it is very obvious that the way it was built in the past was very directive.

The Interconnection of COVID-19, Hurricane Recovery, and Racial Tensions

The third narrative was on the central role of racism in North Lake Charles which impacts the quality of life for residents. This narrative emerged from the final set of questions (Questions 9 and 10) which dealt with the protests in the city
surrounding the Confederate statue. Eleven interviewees (C, D, E, F, G, H, L, P, S, U, and V) supported the removal of the Confederate statue and were happy that Hurricane Laura removed it. “The police jury all voted to keep the Confederate monument up, but when the hurricane came, it took the monument down. So, in a way, we felt that God was intervening with that particular incident” (Interviewee E). Another participant noted, “Hurricane Laura kind of took care of that…it was almost like, ‘OK, ya’ll didn’t do the right thing, so I took care of it’” (Interviewee S). It wasn’t just the statue issue, however; for all eleven interviewees that supported the statue’s removal, it was a much deeper issue about the racial tensions within the community that seemed to be exacerbated with hurricane recovery. According to Interviewee D:

> It is the perfect storm here in Southwest Louisiana. We are facing multiple crises simultaneously; we have a cultural crisis going on, we have a natural disaster and a pandemic and absolutely, they are all intertwined. The stress of each is baring on everyone’s mind. It is absolutely a daunting task if you think about what is happening around the nation. Most of the nation is dealing with two of those, everyone is dealing with the cultural crisis that is going on, everyone is dealing with COVID, but everyone doesn’t have the natural disaster on top of it.

Interviewee E further contended,
Our city is not as progressive as I think it should be as far as racial equality. There’s still this undertone of racial bias. Everything that comes into that, and they expect us to be all right with that. That may have been alright with our ancestors, but this is a new day. We are not people who are not educated. We hold professional careers, and we feel that we deserve everything that everyone else gets.

Interviewee U also argued,

I think the town we live in is like a racist town in general. Like some things won’t be publicized, but there is a racial undertone, racial things that are subtle, but not so subtle to where you can’t feel it. And it is shown with things like the lights coming back on in the community. When resources are made available to the community, what side of town gets those resources first? It’s evident in those ways.

Discussion

In this study, we highlight three counter-narratives that residents crafted as alternative understandings of the compounded risks they experienced in their city:
(1) differing governmental responses to COVID-19; (2) delayed recovery from Hurricanes Laura and Delta; and (3) the interconnection of COVID-19, Hurricanes Laura and Delta, and racism. The first two counter-narratives served as a way for residents to make meaning of the events surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic and unprecedented hurricane season. The third counter-narrative demonstrates how race and crisis recovery efforts were linked in the case of Lake Charles.

*Counter-narratives as a Form of Sense-making*

The first counter-narrative provided by interviewees was that the federal government failed to provide clear directives as to how to handle COVID-19, but local and state governments efficiently provided direct instructions on how to deal with the illness. Local actors are hailed as more effective actors in comparison to larger organizational bodies, who are thought to have greater amounts of oversight and thus are expected to make more impactful and helpful decisions than their state and local counterparts. State and local actors are far more likely to recognize the needs of the individual communities they serve and thus create more effective responses compared to larger organizations. However, this counter-narrative did leave out certain pertinent health information from the narrative such as the fact that Calcasieu Parish and, more specifically, Lake
Charles were identified as one of the hot spots in the state for COVID-19 infection rates throughout the crisis (Mayo Clinic 2021).

The second counter-narrative provided was that Lake Charles residents experienced delays in hurricane recovery in part due to insurance companies and government agencies. Participants highlighted that even without the major flooding event that was predicted, there was still extreme property damage, and insurance companies have been hesitant to pay for those damages. Moreover, while Governor Edwards declared a State of Emergency ahead of the storm, federal assistance was delayed. Therefore, interviewees discussed the tangible actions taken by members of the community to deal with hurricane recovery. As Interviewee D notes, “We kind of automatically went into disaster relief mode because we have been a part of those [disasters] several different times.” This feeling that the responsibility to organize disaster relief fell on the shoulders of individuals or local nonprofit organizations in the face of weather-related disasters stands in direct contrast to the mainstream narrative that government agencies and major disaster relief organizations (e.g., FEMA and American Red Cross) were being responsive actors during and after weather-related disaster events. The residents’ counter-narrative has been further bolstered in recent years by reports of racial disparities within aid distribution at FEMA, with White communities
receiving more aid than Black communities even when the damage is similar (Frank 2021). Residents rely on counter-narratives as a way to mitigate the impacts of weather-related disasters because it allows them to preventively plan as a community about the best way to prepare for an event like a hurricane.

Although the COVID-19 pandemic is unprecedented in its impacts on the residents’ way of life, this community was so primed for disaster relief that they were able to carry out a more impactful COVID-19 response in their own communities than the federal government was able to implement. In fact, it seems to suggest the existence of a recurrent narrative that is entrenched in the idea of community resilience produced by the habitual failings of the federal government, especially in response to communities of color: The community must respond when the powers that be inevitably fail. This corresponds to recent research about the blurred boundaries between the social and cultural factors involved in disaster preparedness (Appleby-Arnold, Brockdorff, and Callus 2021; Shapira, Aharonson-Daniel, and Bar-Dayan 2018). For example, issues like socio-economic status, financial resources, and even community identity and cohesion are all interconnected within disaster recovery. There is a direct connection between preparedness, perceived self-efficacy, and agency, and unfortunately, in communities of color, often lower levels of perceived self-efficacy and agency.
Even when individuals know that a weather-related disaster is impending, if they lack the financial resources to prepare, they cannot engage in preparation activities.

Moreover, the distribution of resources pre and post-disaster within communities also requires interrogation. While the idealized narrative following a disaster is that everyone is all in this together (e.g., disaster collectivism; Solnit 2009), the counter-narrative is that certain communities, specifically communities of color and individuals with lower socio-economic status, are given even less attention, and resources are not proportionally distributed. In a time that required repair and rectification, many insurance companies failed to provide much-needed assistance to the individuals of the area due to contract loopholes. Despite having paid for insurance, interviewees found themselves without aid from their insurance providers and their own government. Insurance companies, motivated by avoiding loss to ensure profit, failed to provide for individuals of the region, and governmental agencies were unresponsive. As suggested previously, the proactive nature of the community was able to help some of those in need of aid, but without tangible materials to rebuild, insurance payouts, and governmental aid, progress has been minimal in the area, and many are still displaced.
Complications of Racism during Crises

The third counter-narrative of the interconnection of COVID-19, Hurricanes Laura and Delta, and racism helps to highlight the way in which racism can complicate crisis responses. Beyond the overall lack of response by the government, interviewees noted a substantial difference between the northern and southern parts of the region. Interviewees discussed the disparity of damage repair in the northern region, which is predominantly Black and has a lower overall socio-economic status compared to the southern part. One interviewee cited that without governmental aid, those without the means to do so cannot afford to repair the damages incurred during disasters. Unfortunately, this means that entire neighborhoods are demolished with no resources to begin rebuilding efforts, and many are left homeless. In addition, interviewees mentioned the stark contrast in the time it took to bring back electricity on both sides of town. The local government and the electricity companies attempted to promote the idea that the power grid construction forced the differences in reconnection time, thereby using the infrastructure itself as a scapegoat. An interesting notion raised by one of the interviewees suggested that unless the entire region could get its power back, perhaps it would have been better to hold off on restoration efforts until that was possible. This speaks to the perceived disrespect of community members from
response teams in their lack of adequate and timely coordination to addressing of the various issues plaguing the area at the time. The fact that the casino resorts in the city had power restored and were reopened for business while an entire region of the city was still in the dark provides a compelling counter-narrative regarding the role of race in disaster recovery, especially because many interviewees seemed ready to note these particular racial disparities. In essence, the problems that interviewees raise are examples of local and federal governments valuing economic needs (i.e., casinos making money) over the needs of individuals to be supplied with basic necessities, which are some of the impacts of neoliberalism.

The final questions in the interviews spoke to the issue of the Confederate statue and the protests surrounding them. The community discussion about the removal of the statue could be said to have primed the residents to think about the racial tensions in the area, but based on interviewees’ statements, notions of racist undertones within the city were already in their purview even before any discussions of the statue. While some members of Lake Charles promulgate the idea that racial segregation are no longer prevalent in the city, the counter-narrative highlighted by our participants is that the city is still very divided along racial and class lines. When discussing the Confederate statue itself, many of the interviewees discussed the hurricane’s removal of the statue as a positive thing.
To the interviewees, the hurricane had caused devastation beyond what had been imaginable. However, this particular bit of devastation was perceived as a positive thing, an act of ‘divine intervention.’ To the interviewees, although the hurricane had exacerbated certain issues of race in terms of health outcomes and governmental aid, the hurricane was able to provide this one bit of racial justice.

**Practical Applications**

The analysis demonstrates that future disaster relief efforts need to be conscious of existing racial disparities in access to necessary resources to limit damage and suffering. Current constructions of disaster recovery that rely only on idealized narratives about how disaster recovery ought to occur that do not take into consideration issues of race and class, unfortunately, tend to miss opportunities to better serve communities of color. Not only do those responsible for disaster efforts need to be conscious of racial and class barriers, but also, organizations must engage with unofficial community leaders and residents who often take it upon themselves to provide aid when governmental actors do not. To counteract the idealized narratives about how disaster recovery ought to function, organizations that provide direct relief to residents impacted by disasters can provide trainings to its employees to help them be better aware of racial
disparities within disaster recovery. By being aware of and attending to counter-narratives, governmental agencies as well as organizations can foster cultural changes towards greater disaster preparedness that includes (a) encouraging measures that build upon already existing cultural values and daily routines, (b) organizing disaster preparedness activities that are a part of residents’ everyday activities, and (c) improving perceived self-efficacy (Appleby-Arnold, Brockdorff, and Callus 2021).

Furthermore, this analysis demonstrates the need to work with residents impacted by a disaster to understand the scope of their needs. Residents felt abandoned by their country and tried to help themselves in the wake of the hurricanes. Efforts at addressing disparities cannot simply be hollow initiatives but should make a genuine effort at understanding the systemic factors and the lived experiences of those affected by a system of inequality (Robinson, Shum, and Singh 2018).

**Conclusion**

This study provided a venue to help amplify environmental justice efforts by amplifying the narratives of individuals who experienced overlapping crises. Future research should explore additional connections between critical race
theory, narratives, and disaster research. For instance, researchers could analyze multiple forms of qualitative data (i.e., social media posts, public websites, documents retrieved through a Freedom of Information Act request) provided by local and federal governments about Hurricane Laura and Delta to see the specific ways that these institutional narratives differ from an individual community’s understanding of the weather-related disasters and the role that race can have in the construction of these narratives. Additionally, researchers could take a comparative approach to understand how multiple communities across the state of Louisiana handled these overlapping crises to see points of convergence and divergence in these counter-narratives. Ultimately, if we are to protect historically marginalized communities from health and weather-related crises, then we need to start to interrogate our taken-for-granted assumptions about disaster mitigation and relief to create responses that work alongside, rather than against, these communities.
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Appendix A. Interview Guide

1. Can you tell me a little about the area you live in?
2. Can you walk me through a typical day during the COVID-19 pandemic from March 2020 to July 2020?
3. How do you think the local and federal government has responded to COVID-19 in your community?
4. In your opinion, what would be an ideal government response to COVID-19 in your community?
5. Can you tell me how your family coped with Hurricane Laura and Hurricane Delta?
6. How did the recovery efforts in your neighborhood go?
7. How do you think the local and federal government has responded to past hurricanes in your community?
8. In your opinion, what would be an ideal government response to hurricanes in your community?
9. In your household, how did you react to the racial justice protests in the community about the confederate statues?
10. How did those in your community respond to the protests?