



## How the Vietnamese of New Orleans Recovered from Hurricane Katrina

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Observers have often noted that the Vietnamese community of New Orleans seems to be recovering better than other groups of residents who suffered terrible flood damage from Hurricane Katrina in the late summer of 2005. Early evidence was purely anecdotal, but my research collaborators and I have managed to compare data collected before and after the hurricane to show that, in fact, a representative sample of Vietnamese Americans are doing better than others of similar status who experienced comparable damage. As expected, the Vietnamese had significant declines in mental health status during the year following the hurricane. Yet by the second year after the disaster, their average mental health had bounced back to a level indistinguishable from just before the storm struck. The same before-and-after approach shows a much higher rate of return to the city for Vietnamese compared to African Americans or whites. We also find less post-traumatic stress among the Vietnamese than among other groups.

Why are the Vietnamese of New Orleans doing better? Many have speculated that cultural understandings and “ways of doing things” have facilitated their remarkable recovery. I have looked into the issues with care and conclude that cultural factors are part of the explanation – but only a part.

### Circumstances Helping the Vietnamese

The term “culture” is sometimes used in such a broad way that it is hard to say what counts and what doesn’t – and vague references to group cultures can smack of blaming those who are faring poorly while lionizing those doing better. This can be particularly galling when results attributed to culture are due to other group advantages. Immigrants, for example, often come from privileged segments of the societies they left behind – or are people with extra gumption.

To think through carefully what role specific cultural factors might be playing, I have first weighed a variety of other important advantages that aided Vietnamese recovery from Katrina. I think of these factors as “culture confounders,” since they confound the relationship – or muddy the waters – between culture and recovery.

- Compared to the Vietnamese who stayed behind, the immigrants who fled their homeland were better off. Many early arrivals were well-off government and military functionaries back in Vietnam. Many who came later were much less well-off but as a group, the Vietnamese who came to America did not include the poorest of the poor. A spot on a departing vessel was out of reach for the poorest Vietnamese.
- Also helpful to Vietnamese immigrants has been their overall good health. Results from research I have done with collaborators shows that our sample of immigrants has large advantages in physical health

compared to compatriots who remained behind. We did not assess personality profiles, but such data might well show that Vietnamese immigrants are unusually resourceful and tolerant of risks. Escaping Vietnam after the war was not for the faint of heart.

- Like other immigrant groups, Vietnamese in America enjoy key benefits from close ethnic connections and living close to kindred spirits. Ethnic community generates social strength.
- Features of Vietnamese life in New Orleans East reinforce such advantages. Vietnamese residents of the city consist of a few thousand people tucked in a far corner of an area surrounded by levees, and a single Catholic church serves as the center of gravity for most.
- Whereas many of their flooded neighbors are forced to endure negative stereotypes about African Americans on a daily basis, Vietnamese in New Orleans enjoy a favorable social image, which has encouraged others to offer many resources to speed their recovery.

### Cultural Attributes Have Also Helped

After working through all of these helpful influences, is there any room left for explanations of Vietnamese recovery in New Orleans grounded in culture proper? Yes, there is. Vietnamese-Americans, including New Orleanians, share what scholars consider the essence of culture: “specific systems of meaning” used to “weigh and consider” the social world. Shared meanings certainly do not arise out of thin air; they flow from shared histories and narratives that create a sense of common destiny – fostering what political theorist Benedict Anderson has called an “imagined community.” Specific features of the imagined community that binds together Vietnamese in New Orleans provide what I think of as “cultural abutments,” shared attributes that have reinforced their community post-Katrina and facilitated its recovery.

- **A sense of collective perseverance.** The identity of Vietnamese New Orleanians invokes historical memories of overcoming adversity together. They are confident that their social supports can help them devise and implement shared strategies to overcome threats.
- **An insular outlook of self-sufficiency.** In both Vietnam and the ethnic diaspora, Vietnamese distrust government and corporate institutions, from suspicions grounded in both personal experiences and historical narratives. In difficult times, people feel they can rely only on family and the local community – a sense reinforced for those in New Orleans by their shared Catholic heritage and membership in one church.
- **Respect for hierarchy.** Confucian ideals about family and authority in traditional Vietnamese society are further buttressed by the hierarchical nature of the Catholic Church to which so many of Vietnamese New Orleanians belong. After Katrina, every group of city residents experienced bickering and disagreement about whether and how to rebuild. But as other flooded groups had difficulty moving beyond such arguments to rally behind a strategy and leaders committed to implementing it, the Vietnamese were well-positioned to do so.

Understanding the role of culture in disaster recovery is important, but understanding the circumstances that muddy the waters is also important. We should celebrate the good fortune of communities that benefit from cultural attributes – resulting from their complex and unique histories – that happen to facilitate post-disaster recovery. But we should also take care not to imply that less fortunate groups should emulate the more

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fortunate. What the less fortunate will need are extra resources.