

Making Meaning: A Critical Literature Review of Young Adults' Post-Katrina Volunteer Experiences

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Abstract: *Hurricane Katrina dealt a devastating blow to the soul of America which resulted in a collective response of young adult volunteers. Understanding the experiences of these crisis volunteers can provide meaningful insight and underscore the importance of investigating human resilience, civic operations, and self-perceptions for life-long learning curricula.*

The devastation left by Hurricane Katrina sparked a compassionate response across America, enabling citizens of diverse backgrounds to take action in meaningful ways to ameliorate the suffering of the Gulf Coast residents. Although volunteerism has been an integral part of life throughout American history, studies of the role and impact of volunteerism have only emerged since the 1950's, making it a relatively young field of study. Volunteers are people who give selflessly of their time and talent with the intention that their actions will benefit another person, group or organization (Penner, 2004; Wilson, 2000). Studies that focus on volunteer behaviors have contributed to pro-social behavior, role-identity, group-identity, and personal responsibility theories (Callero, Howard & Piliavin, 1987; Finkelstein, Penner & Brannick, 2005; Penner, 2004). Education, income, group membership and family ties are consistent indicators of volunteerism (Wilson, 2000; Penner, 2004). Educational institutions contribute to the development of pro-social behaviors and enhance opportunities for organizational membership (Wilson, 2000). It is imperative that adult educators understand the meaning volunteer opportunities represent for young adults as a way to bridge and bond knowledge and inquiry to community life and professional practice.

Volunteer Studies

Studies of American citizens born between 1982 and 2003 indicate that this generation will be among the most engaged of any in the past four generations (Howe & Strauss, 2000). The earliest members of this generational cohort were students who were nearing completion of college and entering full adulthood at the time of Katrina in August 2005. Organizations across the service spectrum realized significant increases in volunteer interest following Hurricane Katrina, especially among college students and young adults, prompting some to see potential for civic renewal in our country (Penner, 2004).

Five years following this traumatic storm, research on volunteers in the post-Katrina environment is still in its infancy and scholarly studies are scarce. Stories of college-aged volunteers who were willing to risk exposure to mold and other hazards abound as anecdotal accounts in blogs and magazines. Notably, three post-Katrina scholarly studies were found that support traditional volunteer theories – and bring new challenges to consider for continuing education and leadership development.

Michel's (2007) quantitative study of frequency of volunteering in shelters of East Baton Rouge Parish residents supports traditional volunteer research findings that education and social

capital contributed significantly to volunteering; that self-efficacy is strongly related to feelings of personal responsibility; and that multiple role-identities results in higher numbers of hours in volunteering. Akin-Little and Little (2008) offer a narrative of their two-week experience in September 2005 as school psychologists assigned to provide counseling in central Louisiana. They focused on the individual resiliency of evacuees, compassion of sheltering communities and the need to respect cultural nuances, and the importance of professional courtesies. Both expressed profound personal change in beliefs regarding mankind and professional direction. Plummer, Ai, Lemieux, Richardson, Dey, Taylor, Spence and Kim (2008) studied volunteerism among social work students at four colleges located in the Gulf Coast that were not directly hit by Katrina, finding that previous volunteer experience, hurricane related stressors, altruism and commitment to social work values were the strongest predictors of action. Such studies can provide guidance for adult educators in the fields of social work, psychology, experiential learning, community engagement, and non-profit and volunteer management.

Where Do We Go From Here?

Absent from the literature are studies on young adults who volunteered following Hurricane Katrina in formal and informal groups. Future research may address this gap through employment of a case study narrative of the experiences of young adults from northeast Ohio who volunteered together in New Orleans in October of 2005, just weeks after residents were allowed to return to their homes. Engaging these emerging adults in reflective research can illuminate how they made meaning of this experience and foster ongoing dialog regarding the role of volunteerism in young adult lives. We will gain further understandings about their perceptions of crisis volunteerism, how it impacted their career choices, and their beliefs about community engagement, leadership, and life-long learning.

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