To the survivors of disasters (and those who stand in solidarity with them) who respond to tragedy with boldness, courage, and love, exemplifying with their compassion and action the new world we carry in our hearts.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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PARTICIPATORY HORIZONS: PARTICIPATION AND SHARED POWER
IN MUTUAL AID DISASTER RELIEF ORGANIZATIONS

By

James Dunson

May 2016

Chair: Michael Spranger
Major: Family, Youth and Community Sciences

Rooted in a participatory action research framework, this is an in depth exploration of two mutual aid disaster relief organizations: Common Ground and Occupy Sandy, and what makes their approach distinctive and effective. Participatory horizons can mean two diametrically opposed realities that coexist at the same time. On the one hand, horizons means the limits of perception or experience. In this way, it is representative of the limit of the naive view that involvement alone is enough. How far can participation without sharing power take us? If the past is any indication, it will only take us to the familiar dead ends we have known so well. On the other hand, as Common Ground and Occupy Sandy exemplify, if we have the courage to truly value the voices and lives of disaster survivors, as equals, which means respecting their needs as they define them for themselves, there is the sun of a new day waiting to rise where the ocean meets the sky. This radical new approach to disaster relief and to social movement organizing, comes just in time for the storm clouds that even now are threatening in the distance.
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Rationale for Study

Over a decade ago, I visited friends in Panama City. They were glued to the television, watching Hurricane Katrina make its landfall on the Gulf Coast. A few days later, I jumped into a caravan delivering supplies to New Orleans and surrounding areas. The caravan dropped off supplies and left. I had asked if there was work that needed to be done, and when the answer was “Yes,” I decided to stay. I was 20 years old, with no experience in disaster relief, but prior involvement with homeless advocacy, global justice and antiwar organizing. I had $60 on me. I did not know what exactly I was going to be doing, but I understood enough of the situation to know that waiting for others more experienced or with more resources or more power to act, was not an option. I found myself with a small contingent of Veterans for Peace set up in Covington, Louisiana at a Red Cross facility. The Red Cross facility did not have electrical power or internet. But the veterans did and offered it, along with food and other resources to the Red Cross and evacuees. More volunteers and more supplies came in. We soon moved our operation to a campground. I linked up with a native of New Orleans, a recent veteran from the war in Afghanistan who knew the poorest neighborhoods in Orleans and Jefferson parishes. He would navigate, and I would collect supplies, go through the camp asking recently arrived volunteers if they had a vehicle and wanted to help. Then we would all caravan to these neighborhoods and offer what we had to residents. Everywhere I went I heard the same response. We were the first help they had seen.

Two weeks later, Hurricane Rita was on its way and the Veterans for Peace made the choice to evacuate. Before they did, I helped them deliver a boat to New
Orleans. Where we delivered the boat, they were having a meeting to decide which tasks people would take. When washing dishes came up and nobody else raised their hand immediately, I did. Over the next two to three months, I lived out of that house, helping to transform it into the first distribution center of Common Ground Relief. Common Ground procured a rental moving truck, and with my $60 and their gas reimbursements, I continued my mobile distribution to public housing facilities, trailer parks, and other impoverished neighborhoods in the New Orleans area. Other individuals, similarly took initiative, discovered needs, and met them. I came to give, but everywhere I went, people offered something back to me whether it was cold water, food, or invitations to family events. Altogether, I spend 8 months in, and around, New Orleans distributing aid, picking up debris, washing dishes, and otherwise helping with the relief effort. Again, everywhere I went, I heard the same response that if it was not for us, people would not have received any assistance.

It was clearly evident how important the work I did was to me, and how important it was to the people I assisted. At the time, I woke up early and went to sleep late, and had no time for reflection. But after I eventually left and looked back on my experiences, I questioned why we were so effective compared to the larger, more established institutions, whose financial and other resources far overshadowed our own. Superstorm Sandy, and similar results of Occupy Sandy further piqued my interest and curiosity on the subject. Looking forward, we are faced with the certainty of climate change, and with it, many more severe storms similar to Katrina and Sandy on the horizon. I am convinced that exploring why these small grassroots responses were effective while large relief organizations were not is vital to preparing for the future,
advancing our movements for social change and collective liberation, and ultimately, helping to ensure our survival in the context of potential changes to political and economic realities, radically altered by extreme weather events.

Disasters have a profound impact on people and the communities where they live. For example, between the years 2010 - 2012, disasters affected more than 450 million people and caused an average annual economic toll of $100 billion (Laframboise & Loko, 2012). Billions of people are exposed to natural disasters in their lifetime (Lin Moe et al., 2007). There has been an increase in the frequency and intensity of natural disasters over recent decades (Goldenberg et al., 2001; Elsner & Kocher, 2000; Emanuel, 2005; Warren, 2010; Webster et al., 2005). There were a documented 73 global natural disasters in the first decade of the 20th century compared to 2,788 in the first half of the first decade of the 21st century (Kusumasari et al., 2010). There are on average six times more natural disasters a year than there were thirty years ago (Scheuren, J.M. et al., 2008). This does not take into consideration the current effects of climate change, wetlands loss, urbanization and other factors which are estimated to increase the amount of natural disasters five-fold once again over the next 50 years (Thomas & Kopczak, 2007).

The early impacts of climate change are already documented (McCarthy et al., 2001; Parmesan and Yohe, 2003). Average global surface temperatures have risen by 0.6 ± 0.2°C over the course of one century (Nakicenovic et al., 2000). According to model projections, by the end of the twenty first century, we will see warming of global surface temperatures by 1.4 to 5.8°C accompanied by a rise in sea levels of between 0.09 and 0.88 meters (Nakicenovic et al., 2000).
We are quickly approaching irreversible changes to our global ecology, and even if the worst does not happen, mitigation will have to be combined with adaptation to climate change (McCarthy et al., 2001). Adaptive capacity has been defined as “the ability of a system to adjust to climate change, including climate variability and extremes, to moderate potential damages, to take advantage of opportunities, or to cope with the consequences” (McCarthy et al., 2001).

In the past, government and large institutions were the primary sources that individuals and communities would rely on for post-disaster relief. However, the top-down approach taken by these large institutions, the growing magnitude and frequency of disasters, and the critical need to build adaptive capacity in the face of climate change suggest that this is not the most effective way to respond to disasters and build resilient and empowered individuals and communities. According to a White House report, community groups helped Katrina victims "In spite of not because of government" (The White House, 2006, p. 49). Similarly, an investigative report by the U.S. House Committee on Homeland Security entitled Trouble Exposed: Katrina, Rita, and the Red Cross: A Familiar History, cited racial insensitivity, cultural insensitivity and bureaucracy in hindering the relief and recovery efforts. The report bluntly stated, "As the Red Cross’ responsibilities have increased, its ability to meet the challenge of providing efficient and effective service has not" (U.S. House of Representatives, 2005). A similar scenario played out after super storm Sandy. In the words of the New York Times: "Where FEMA fell short, Occupy Sandy was there" (Feuer, 2012). With the looming threat of climate change, and the extreme weather that will accompany it, super storms like Katrina and Sandy will most likely become far more prevalent (McCarthy et al., 2001; Van Aalst, 2006; Mann &
Emanuel, 2006). When these disasters do come, it is vital that there is effective, efficient, and responsive assistance that empowers survivors and strengthens the community’s resilience in the face of possible future disasters.

What makes a disaster relief organization effective, efficient, responsive, and empowering? Prior research into civic engagement theory, empowerment theory, and disaster scholarship suggest a possible answer: participation of those impacted by the disaster, especially those most vulnerable. Given the importance of participation in social service client’s, patient’s, and worker’s outcomes (Arnstein, 1969; Charles et al., 1997; Fischer & Brodsky, 1978; Greenfield et al., 1988; Rodin & Langer, 1977; Miller & Monge, 1986; Stewart, 2003), in addition to the significant role participation plays in disaster relief scholarship, coupled with the emergence of bottom-up, participatory approaches to disaster relief in the United States exemplified by Common Ground Relief and Occupy Sandy, it is necessary to examine these disaster relief organizations and their propensity to allow for and value participation in hopes of discovering what makes their approach unique. In the process, I will analyze the link between participation, empowerment, effective disaster relief and increased resiliency.

**Purpose of Study**

Based on a participatory action research framework, I will conduct a comprehensive exploration of the inner workings of grassroots, solidarity-based, mutual aid disaster relief in hopes that future manifestations of this phenomenon will be longer lasting, more effective, and able to build on the successes while avoiding the failures of previous incarnations. Furthermore, this study will add to the body of knowledge in disaster scholarship about the importance of participation in disaster relief organizations.
and, due to the iterative approach taken, will allow for other factors that may contribute to grassroots, solidarity-based, mutual aid disaster relief organizations’ success to emerge.

There is general consensus that disaster management includes five distinct but interrelated phases: prediction, warning, relief, rehabilitation, and reconstruction. (International Strategy for Disaster Reduction, 2004). Although participation of those impacted by disasters is certainly needed in all aspects of preparing and responding to disasters, for purposes of this study, I will focus on the relief stage, which involves providing for the immediate needs of those people affected by the disaster and can be immediate, short-term or longer term (International Strategy for Disaster Reduction, 2004).

In my research investigation, I seek to explore the extent to which mutual disaster relief organizations value and allow for participation, explore how this is accomplished, and what results are achieved from this participatory model. Questions that I will address include the following: What is the role of participation and working "with" as opposed to "for" those impacted by a disaster in the disaster relief context? How is power shared? And does this have an effect on the outcome? What makes a mutual aid, solidarity-based disaster relief approach different than a more traditional approach? Lastly, this study seeks to explore whether or not participation of those impacted by a disaster could be a key factor in determining disaster relief effectiveness, and how participation is related to increased empowerment and resiliency.

**Significance of Study**

Despite the knowledge of the key role that participation of affected individuals plays in increasing positive outcomes, and despite the known connections between
participation and empowerment and resilience, there is a gap in the research literature analyzing how well disaster relief organizations are engaged in authentic, meaningful participation of the community members they are supposed to be helping. By authentic, meaningful participation, I am referring to participation on the far side of the spectrum, involving control and power, as opposed to nominal, manipulative, or passive participation.

As major disaster after major disaster strike with an increase in frequency and intensity, it is vital that disaster relief organizations do not repeat the same mistakes of the past. Resilience, according to the National Science and Technology Council’s Subcommittee on Disaster Reduction (Subcommittee on Disaster Reduction, 2005), is “determined by the degree to which the community is capable of organizing itself to increase its capacity for learning from past disasters.” It is not enough for a localized community to learn from past disasters, although this is needed now more than ever. It is also critical that the organizations responding to disasters learn from past disasters as well. This study will contribute to understanding what has been and continues to go wrong in disaster response, and also will highlight new horizons for disaster relief organizations in hopes that this knowledge will further action and contribute to societal transformation.

Definition of Terms

For purposes of this study, I use a popularly cited and comprehensively researched definition of disaster created by McFarlane and Norris (2006): “A potentially traumatic event that is collectively experienced, has an acute onset, and is time delimited; disasters may be attributed to natural, technological, or human causes.”
Social movements is a term that I follow previous scholars’ definition as “collectivities acting with some degree of organization and continuity outside of institutional or organizational channels for the purpose of challenging or defending extant authority” (Snow, Soule, and Kriesi, 2008, p. 11).

Grassroots is a term I use as synonymous with “bottom up.” Without traditional avenues of power, grassroots organizations mobilize people in order to create changes from below. These organizations and social movements can sprout from the soil of people’s daily lives and, “grounded in a local community,” with limited infrastructure and limited resources, achieve monumental effects (Luft, 2009, p. 75).

I have adopted Scott Crow’s definition of mutual aid, “voluntary, collaborative work and action to accomplish more together than any single individual, group, or community could do alone” (Crow, 2014, p. 77).

Participation has been defined a number of different ways by researchers. In the creation of her classic “ladder of participation,” Arnstein defined citizen participation as “a strategy for the redistribution of power that enables the have-not citizens, presently excluded from the political and economic processes, to be deliberately included in the future” (Arnstein, 1969). This definition is not neutral and carries with it a political and economic concern for the poor and oppressed.

Drawing from a human services background, Fischer and Brodsky (1978, p. 1) define “informed participation” as “the right to engage with one’s would-be helpers in formulating and implementing decisions about one’s life, whether these plans deal with oneself alone or with the environment shared with others.” Researchers in youth development operationalize “meaningful participation” as a term referring to involvement
in decision-making including three dimensions: meaning, control, and connectedness (Weiranga et al., 2003; Oliver et al., 2006). Finally, Heller et al., (1984) define citizen participation as “a process in which individuals take part in decision making in the institutions, programs, and environments that affect them.” All the above definitions center on either decision-making or control.

In a similar intellectual current, health researchers have used empowerment theory to compose indices measuring individual perceptions of control (Israel et al., 1994). In a study by Israel et al., empowerment is defined as “the ability of people to gain understanding and control over personal, social, economic, and political forces in order to take action to improve their life situations.” This systematized construct is broken down into individual, organizational, and community dimensions. The authors relate empowerment to positive health characteristics.

Empowerment has been differently defined by different scholars. Rappaport, (1984; 1987) defines empowerment as “a process, a mechanism, by which people, organizations and communities gain mastery over their affairs.” Similarly, Zimmerman and Rappaport, (1988) define empowerment as “a process by which individuals gain mastery over their own lives and democratic participation in the life of their community.” Both of these definitions highlight that empowerment is a process rather than an action or event and it involves “gaining mastery.” Another definition of empowerment comes from a health perspective: “the ability of people to gain understanding and control over personal, social, economic, and political forces in order to take action to improve their life situations” (Israel et al., 1994). Craig (2002), within the context of community defines empowerment as “the creation of sustainable structures, processes, and mechanisms,
over which local communities have an increased degree of control, and from which they have a measurable impact on public and social policies affecting these communities.”

Again, the idea of control is critical, a near synonym for mastery.

Another term that is critical to the purposes of this study is self-determination. Self-determination was originally a product of political science and post-colonial theory, which led to the end of traditional forms of imperialism. It described the right of nation-states to determine and control their own governance (Cobban, 1947; Emerson, 1960; Eagleton, 1953). This term was later adopted by disability rights advocates (Nirje, 1972; Wehmeyer & Shwartz, 1997). In this context, it is a term related to empowerment and has been defined as, “acting as the primary causal agent in one’s life and making choices and decisions regarding one’s quality of life free from undue external influence or interference” (Wehmeyer, 1992). In this framework, self-determination has four dimensions: empowerment, self-realization, autonomy of behavior, and self-regulation (Wehmeyer, 1995). Social workers have also adopted the concept of self-determination and hold it as a fundamental value (National Association of Social Workers, 1993). Social workers have defined self-determination as the condition in which one’s behavior comes from their own choices, decisions, and desires (McDermott, 1975), and elsewhere as the “right and need of clients to freedom in making their own choices and decisions” (Biestek, 1957). In this context, self-determination is said to be affirmed by an approach involving partnership and mutuality rather than providing solutions, leading to the possibility of increased self-efficacy, self-respect, strength, courage and hope (Rooney et al., 2010). Denying self-determination denies the client these opportunities of personal growth.
**Empowerment**

“Empowerment is the ability of people to gain understanding and control over personal, social, economic, and political forces in order to take action to improve their life situations.” (Israel et al., 1994).

A multi-dimensional construct that includes but is not limited to: 1. Having decision-making power. 2. Having access to information and resources. 3. Having a range of options from which to make choices (not just yes/no, either/or)” (Chamberlin, 1997).

“A process, a mechanism, by which people organizations and communities gain mastery over their affairs.” (Rappaport, 1984; Rappaport, 1987).

“A process by which individuals gain mastery over their own lives and democratic participation in the life of their community” (Zimmerman, 1988).

**Participation**

(Citizen) “A strategy for the redistribution of power that enables the have-not citizens, presently excluded from the political and economic processes, to be deliberately included in the future” (Arnstein, 1969).

“Acting as the primary causal agent in one’s life and making choices and decisions regarding one’s quality of life free from undue external influence or interference” (Wehmeyer, 1992).

(Informed) “The right to engage with one’s would-be helpers in formulating and implementing decisions about one’s life, whether these plans deal with oneself alone or with the environment shared with others” (Fischer & Brodsky, 1978).

“That condition in which an agent’s behavior emanates from his own wishes, choices and decision” (McDermott, 1975).

“Self-determination is the practical recognition of the right and need of clients to freedom in making their own choices and decisions” (Biestek, 1957).

(Citizen) “A process in which individuals take part in decision making in the institutions, programs, and environments that affect them” (Heller et al., 1984).

**Self-determination**

“Using the above scholarship as a base, I composed the following definitions of empowerment, self-determination, and participation which I will use for the purpose of my research:”
Table 1-1. Key concepts and definitions.

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Key Concept</th>
<th>Definition</th>
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<tr>
<td>Empowerment</td>
<td>Process by which people gain control over their own lives.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-determination</td>
<td>The condition in which one has the agency, ability, and power to make their own decisions and choices.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participation</td>
<td>A spectrum of individual’s involvement in decision-making in the institutions, programs and environments that impact them, ranging from manipulation to self-determination.</td>
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I define self-determination as the condition in which one has the agency, ability, and power to make their own decisions and choices. This is a condition, action, or event hinging around control and power. Empowerment is a related term but is differentiated from self-determination in that empowerment is a process. Participation will be viewed as a spectrum along the lines of previous scholars (Arnstein, 1969; Fung, 2006; Pretty, 1995; White, 1996; Choguill, 1996; and Bishop & Davis, 2002), and will be more fully explained in Chapter 2. On one end of the spectrum is non-participation, manipulative participation or passive participation, on the other polarity is self-determination, which I also refer to as meaningful, authentic participation. Through actions and events in which self-determination is allowed to exist, the empowerment process is strengthened.

Resilience comes from the Latin word *resilio*, which means ‘to jump back’ (Klein, Nicholls & Thomalla, 2003). Prior to its use in disaster research and scholarship, the term has been used in physics and mathematics (Van der Leeuw & Leygonie, 2000; Gordon, 1978), ecology, (Holling, 1973), psychology (Werner, & Smith, 1989), and psychiatry (Masten, Best, & Garmezy, 1990). The concept has its fair share of critics (Bodin & Winman, 2004; Carpenter et al., 2001; Cowen, 2001; Klein, Nicholls &
Thomalla, 2003; Hanley, 1998) but is now ubiquitous in disaster scholarship, some even calling the current focus on resilience a new paradigm (McEntire et al., 2002).

Cardona et al. (2003), define resilience in a similar way as it is defined in other disciplines, as “The capacity of the damaged ecosystem or community to absorb negative impacts and recover from these.” In a similar vein, Paton, Smith and Violanti (2000) define community resilience as “the capability to bounce back and to use physical and economic resources effectively to aid recovery following exposure to hazards.” Coles and Buckle (2004) include the concept of full participation in their definition of community resilience: “a community’s capacities, skills, and knowledge that allow it to participate fully in recovery from disasters.” Similarly, Pfefferbaum et al. (2007) define resilience as “the ability of community members to take meaningful, deliberate, collective action to remedy the impact of a problem, including the ability to interpret the environment, intervene, and move on.” Scholars have recently synthesized past discourse on resilience and established the following definition: “a process linking a set of adaptive capacities to a positive trajectory of functioning and adaptation after a disturbance” (Norris et al., 2008). For purposes of this study though, I use the definition from the National Science and Technology Council’s Subcommittee on Disaster Reduction (Subcommittee on Disaster Reduction, 2005): Resilience is

The capacity of a community exposed to hazards to adapt, by resisting or changing, in order to reach and maintain an acceptable level of functioning and structure. It is determined by the degree to which the community is capable of organizing itself to increase its capacity for learning from past disasters.
CHAPTER 2
LITERATURE REVIEW

Participation

In Arnstein’s influential work A Ladder of Citizen Participation (1969), Arnstein notes that participation is fundamentally about control and power. She defines citizen participation as citizen power. Arnstein created a continuum or ladder that could be used to categorize citizen participation. This ladder ranged from nonparticipation to tokenism to citizen power and control.

![Figure 2-1. Arnstein’s ladder of participation (Arnstein, 1969).](image)

For Pateman (1976), participation also centered on power, with ranges from pseudo participation to partial to full, meaningful participation. Another continuum was
developed by Pretty (1995). In this model, participation ranges from manipulative and passive participation on one end of the spectrum to self-mobilization on the other. In White’s model of participation, the spectrum is from nominal to transformative participation (White, 1996). White argued that nominal participation functions to put participation on display for the purposes of legitimizing a project by the powerful. Transformative participation, in contrast, involves empowering decision-making from below (White, 1996). Choguill (1996) similarly conceptualizes participation as a range based on the level of influence participants have. Finally, the International Association of Public Participation created a spectrum of public participation based on the increasing impact participants have on decision-making. The spectrum ranged from “inform” on the low-end of decision-making influence, to “involve” in the middle, and “empower” at the far end representing the most decision-making power (International Association of Public Participation, 2006).

Alternate visualizations of the principles of participation include a cube and an orbit. Fung (2006) expands the conceptualization of participation into a three dimensional cube. In this framework, participation is divided into three dimensions with each dimension having its own spectrum. The dimensions are based on: 1) who participates, 2) how information is exchanged and decision-making achieved, and, 3) who has the final power and authority (Fung, 2006). Creighton (2005) conceptualizes participation as a series of concentric circles. On the far outermost circle is what he calls unsurprised apathetics. As one has more and more involvement and power, one moves closer to the center, culminating in becoming a co-decision maker.
The conceptualization of participation as a range based on influence is widespread. Even those who seek to keep ultimate decision-making authority in policy-makers' hands acknowledge this, although they disagree whether or not more influence is of any higher value than less influence (Bishop & Davis, 2002; Shand & Arnberg, 1996; Thomas, 1990).

![Figure 2-2. Shand-Arnberg participation continuum (Shand & Arnberg, 1996).](image)

Although scholars have composed different forms of participation spectrums, there is a fairly high degree of continuity between them, as Figure 2-3 suggests.

![Figure 2-3. Participation spectrums.](image)
In an article by Rodin and Langer (1977), participation, involving the ability to make choices and increased control by elderly patients of nursing homes, was shown to increase a patient’s level of activity and happiness. Miller and Monge (1986) performed a meta-analytic study on the result of participation in the work-place. This study found that increased participation led to increased job-satisfaction and productivity. Numerous studies have also shown how increased patient participation in medical decisions increases overall health (Greenfield et al., 1988; Charles et al., 1997; Stewart, 2003).

A similar intellectual current, with some roots in Arnstein’s work is found in youth development studies. Meaningful youth participation has been defined as involving three dimensions: control, connectedness, and meaning (Wieranga, 2003). This youth participation has been linked with increased personal resilience and decreased mental health issues (Oliver et al., 2006).

Fischer and Brodsky (1978) bring together diverse professionals in human services to illustrate what they call the “Prometheus Principle.” The Prometheus Principle asserts that individuals must be allowed to actively participate in decision making in order to get the most out of human services. They later claim “informed participation” otherwise referred to as “client collaboration” acts as the cornerstone of the Prometheus Principle, and is based on the right of service users to engage with helping professionals in decision-making. Examples of this principle in action are drawn from classrooms, prisons, psychiatry, programs with the developmentally disabled, and several other areas.

Scholars have different understandings of the purpose of citizen participation. Gulati (1982) asserts that citizen participation is meant to ensure effective service
delivery and make that service delivery responsive to those who it is serving. The stated purpose has also been described elsewhere as decreasing a sense of powerlessness, especially among ethnic minorities, and improving service quality (Iglehart & Becerra, 2010; Rose & Black, 1985). Alinsky, in a slightly more openly confrontational approach, argues that the purposes are to: dispel apathy, disrupt the status quo, share tools for changing the status quo, and build power in order to alter existing power arrangements (Alinsky, 1957). Regardless of the purposes one has in mind for participation, citizen participation has been shown to correlate with many positive outcomes.

Citizen participation has been shown to be related to neighborhood and community improvements (Cassidy, 1980; Hallman, 1984; Yin & Yates, 1974). Citizen participation has been shown to be related to stronger interpersonal relationships and a stronger social fabric (Unger & Wandersman, 1983; Woodson, 1981). It helps those who do participate feel more competent and less alienated (Levens, 1968; Zurcher, 1970). And finally, citizen participation is related to an increase in feelings of personal and political self-efficacy, self-esteem and self-worth (Cole, 1974; Cole, 1981; Florin & Wandersman, 1984; Zimmerman & Rappaport, 1988).

This is not to mention the ethical issues of not allowing for participation. As far back as 1957, Saul Alinksy advocated for participation as a corollary of respect, writing

We learn that when we respect the dignity of the people we work with that they cannot be denied the elementary right to participate as fully as possible in the working out of their own problems. That they [the people we work with] must have that vital self-respect which arises out of their having played an active role in resolving their own crises rather than being in the degraded position of being helpless, passive, puppet-like recipients of special private or public services. To give people help without their having played a significant part in the action makes the help itself relatively valueless and contributes nothing to the development of the individual that you are ostensibly 'helping'. In the deepest sense it is not
giving but taking; taking from their dignity. Denial of the opportunity for participation is denial of human dignity and democracy. It will not work. (Alinsky, 1957)

In a similar vein, Nancy Thomas in Democracy by Design (2014), advocates for explicitly connecting public participation efforts and social justice work. For Thomas (2014), these are two critical, overlapping elements to a comprehensive strategy for a stronger and healthier democracy.

Participation is not without its critics. Participation as a construct has been criticized by some as too vague (Pretty, 1995) involving people who have no desire to participate (Rahnema, 1992) and being a tool used by those in power (Chambers, 1974). To counteract this more negative side of participation, Andrea Cornwall (2008) suggests that discussions about participation should explicitly include what exactly people are being asked to participate in, why, who is involved and who is excluded. Marginalized and vulnerable people are hardest to involve, but these are the ones with the most to lose or gain from participation (Hardina, 2003; Abatena, 1997; Raco, 2000). Cornwall suggests, like other scholars (Arnstein, 1969; Pretty, 1995; White, 1996; Choguill, 1996), that influence rather than involvement is what makes participation meaningful. In fact, participation without influence is actually dis-empowering (Rich & Rosenbaum, 1981; Rich, Edelstein, Hallman, & Wandersman, 1995). Or to say it another way, participation itself means very little without the ability to achieve effective participation (Luedeking & Williams, 2003).

**Link between Participation and Empowerment**

Empowerment was introduced and recommended by Solomon (1976) as a new approach to social work in African American communities that would allow marginalized
people to increase their skills and influence. Soon afterwards, Berger and Neuhaus (1977) used the concept to highlight the role of mediating institutions in civil society, linking low-income individuals with government, but also to set an ideological groundwork for conservative anti-government discourse.

The notion of a link between participation and empowerment has been introduced by Zimmerman and Rappaport (1988). In Citizen Participation, Perceived Control, and Psychological Empowerment, these authors convey the results of three studies exploring the link between participation and empowerment. In all three studies, one laboratory, and two real-world settings in different locations involving students and community residents, individuals who reported a greater amount of participation scored higher on empowerment indices. The resulting empowerment involved reduced feelings of alienation and oppression, increased feelings of self-efficacy, and was closely correlated with the development of leadership skills (Zimmerman & Rappaport, 1988).

In Citizen Participation and Empowerment: The Case of Local Environmental Hazards (Rich, Edelstein, Hallman & Wandersman, 1995) the authors clarify and expand on this link, noting that meaningful participation can be empowering, whereas manipulative participation can actually have a disempowering effect. Information sharing and listening to citizen’s concerns have a disempowering effect if citizen’s concerns are ignored or not addressed. Again, just as the earlier literature on participation made clear, self-determination, agency, and power are the critical determining factors.

Florin and Wandersman (1990) cite four reasons why empowerment should be connected to citizen participation and community development frameworks: 1) to connect empowerment to a rich literature base, 2) to offer a multi-disciplinary
perspective, 3) to provide concrete settings for empowerment to be studied, and 4) to put empowerment into a broader community context.

Similarly, Perkins (1995) advocates focusing on citizen participation as a way to study empowerment for three reasons. The first is because participation, being a behavior, is measured more reliably than empowerment. The second reason is because focusing on participation makes researchers study empowerment at three different levels: individual, organization, and community. And finally, focusing on participation underscores how interactions of participation impact empowerment and are impacted by empowerment (Perkins, 1995).

White (1996, p. 8) writes, “The idea of participation as empowerment is that the practical experience of being involved in considering options, making decisions, and taking collective action to fight injustice is itself transformative.” Thus for White, this type of participation is simultaneously a means and an end, to achieve empowerment through empowerment (White, 1996).

Maton and Salem in Organizational Characteristics of Empowering Community Settings (1995), looked at multiple case studies of organizations successfully empowering clients to discover what characteristics these community organizations had in common. They found that empowerment is strengthened, among other things, by shared leadership and what they call “opportunity role structure” in organizations, which Maton and Salem describe as “the availability and configuration of roles within a setting which provide meaningful opportunities for individuals to develop, grow, and participate” (Maton & Salem, 1995, p. 643). Or in other words, these organizations create a setting which offers meaningful participation.
After reviewing the literature on empowerment in social work, Holosko, Leslie, and Cassano (2001) created a model of the empowerment process based on this literature. The first branch of the model, determining if the process leans towards empowerment or disempowerment, is whether the organization has input or not. By input, the authors mean “mechanisms and activities required for effective service user participation” (Holosko, Leslie, & Cassano, 2001, p. 129). Thus, participation is not the only component needed to advance the empowerment process, but it is the first and primary component. According to this model, if the organization achieves concurrence between the decisions the organization makes and service user’s needs or expectations, this increases empowerment even more, especially if feedback is also involved.

Figure 2-4. Framework for a service user input and empowerment process (Holosko, Leslie & Cassano, 2001).
Other scholars have argued that involving constituents in decision-making (again the deciding factor in the spectrum of participation) increases self-efficacy and empowerment (Zimmerman et al., 1992; Itzhaky & York, 2002; Peterson & Speer, 2000). While still other scholars (Florin & Wandersman, 1984; Stone & Levine, 1985; Zimmerman et al., 1992) have also found that participation leads to empowerment, but on the condition that through their participating, they either acquire a consciousness of their ability, influence others, or increase their trust in the structures at play in their lives. Gutierrez (1995) says it most simply, that the goal of empowerment is to increase the power of the client or the community. Expanding on this just slightly, Reisch, Wenocur and Sherman (1981) claim that the end goal of empowerment is liberation of those without privilege or power.

Hardina (2006) has compiled a list of strategies and best practices in nonprofit organizations that are known to advance citizen participation and empowerment. These strategies include the following: include clients in decision-making, empower organizational staff members, be culturally competent, strengthen and maintain informal community networks, serve as a mediating link between residents, local institutions and government agencies, have participatory evaluation techniques, promote participation in political action, and have ongoing education and skills training (Hardina, 2006).

Through different academic trajectories, the literature on participation and empowerment, dovetail well, both pointing towards increased decision-making and control of constituents and stakeholders. Disaster scholarship is not far behind.
Participation in the Disaster Relief Literature

The top-down, traditional or mainstream disaster relief model, is one that Cuny (1983) describes as an approach that ignores citizen participation and does not support local social systems or initiatives. In this approach, without accountability to survivors, survivors become victims who are merely recipients of aid and not active, meaningful participants who have a right to determine their own lives. This results in paternalism and a reinforcement of helplessness. This type of disaster response ignores the needs of communities (Yonder, Akcar, & Gopalan, 2005). It focuses on technology and the role of experts (Allen, 2006), and often times not only does not help local capacity building and long-term development, but actually undermines it (Anderson & Woodrow, 1989). Thinking that outside experts are more knowledgeable about a community’s vulnerabilities and strengths, and better capable of responding to a disaster than those communities impacted by the disaster is increasingly disparaged and seen as “old time thinking” (Kent & Burke, 2011).

Many previous scholars have demonstrated that the participation of disaster affected individuals and communities is critical to the success of disaster relief and redevelopment efforts (Andharia, 2002; Coghlan, 1998; Cuny, 1983; Goodman et al., 1998; Konishi, 2005; Lin Moe & Pathranarakul, 2006; Mansingh, 2005; Maskrey, 1989; Newport & Jawahar, 2003; Onstad et al., 2014; Pfefferbaum et al., 2007; Twigg, 1999; Victoria, 2002).

In his book, Disasters and Development (1983), Cuny was one of the first scholars to explore the importance of participation in disaster relief. He called this alternative framework a citizenry-based and development-oriented approach to disaster
response. Citizenry-based is in the name, because this approach depends on the capabilities of survivors to help each other and considers their participation “essential” or a “central element” to effective disaster management. Cuny is clear that by participation, he does not just mean consultation but “an empowering process” meant to “change unjust power relations” (Cuny, 1983, p. 36). He explains this further by noting:

An agency that offers a pre-determined plan or one prepared without the full participation of the disaster victims misses the opportunity to increase the people’s ability to make choices and to help them attain self-confidence in decision making. In essence this represents a continuation of one of the major obstacles to development. (Cuny, 1983, p. 92)

Figure 2-5: Community based development oriented disaster relief approach vs. dominant approach (Cuny, 1983).

Shortly afterward, Maskrey (1989) also explored community-oriented approaches to disaster relief based on his experience of disaster response in the Rimac Valley in Peru. Again, a community-based approach whose key component was community participation led to empowerment and to effective mitigation and a lessening of the
impact of natural disasters. By focusing on the affected people, their knowledge and expertise, programs could achieve large results with minimal financial and other outside assistance (Maskrey, 1989). This is in contrast to the top down approach that Maskrey (1989) argues rarely reaches those most vulnerable, and therefore those most impacted, and can actually increase their vulnerability.

Promoting participation can actually be seen as a financial investment. Investing in a community’s ability to respond to disasters without relying on vast amounts of external aid would save money over the long term and enable a faster and less-resource intensive response (Ethike Media, 2012). After highlighting the importance of building community capacity to increase resilience, Rabindra Osti (2004) speaks of the values of participation in regards to water induced disasters, but her analysis is just as valid for natural disasters in general. She writes: “The best strategy for the immediate as well as the long term cost-benefit and pro-environmental implications that will ensure prevention, mitigation and rehabilitation of water-induced disaster is to ensure strong community participation (Osti, 2004, p. 6).

In response to the Indian Ocean tsunami of 2005, nongovernmental organizations were successful in taking a human rights approach and advocating for marginalized and oppressed individuals and communities, which involved listening and responding to the needs of those impacted. (Kumaran & Torris, 2011; Srinivasan & Nagaraj, 2007). Civil society was activated and strengthened. In response to this unprecedented disaster, there was an unprecedented outpouring of support from spontaneous volunteers, local and international NGOs and foreign governments. Key to the success was indigenous NGOs capacity to be active participants and
communication within and between all organizations involved (Cerny & Durham, 2005; Kumaran & Torris, 2011).

The Kobe earthquake of 1995 in Japan killed over 6,000 people and left over 200,000 people temporarily homeless. Despite the severity of the disaster, civil society was reawakened, and community solidarity and self-governance was strengthened, at least temporarily. Impacted people's participation in decision-making was integral to this process (Shaw & Goda, 2004; Tatsuki, 2000).

Researchers in India have similarly described the benefits and applicability of a community-oriented approach in their country of origin. Newport and Jawahar (2003, p. 33) argue, “disaster preparedness will not be effective without the participation of the vulnerable communities. The prime component is to involve the vulnerable community in the disaster mitigation process.” These researchers recount 44 villages in Prakasam District where a community participation approach to disaster was initiated and this approach resulted in strengthened community assets and more effective management of disasters in that area.

Goodman et al. (1998) explore dimensions of community capacity. The first dimension that these authors discuss is citizen participation, including citizen involvement in both defining their own needs and addressing them. Goodman et al. (1998) operationalize the concept of community capacity. Citizen participation is one dimension in this construct and has sub-dimensions of the following: “strong participant base, diverse network that enables different interests to take collective action, benefits overriding costs associated with participation, [and] citizen involvement in defining and resolving needs” (Goodman et al., 1998, p. 261).
Social capital is the intangible assets and wealth built up in the relationships between people (Coleman, 1988). Onstad et al. explored disasters and resilience, and found that citizen participation, or “empowering community settings characterized by individuals playing meaningful roles” was a key dimension of social capital (Onstad et al., 2012, p. 572). This leads to the understanding that to promote social capital and increase community resilience after a disaster, victims and survivors of disasters need to be “intimately involved” in disaster relief (Onstad et al., 2012, p. 571). This strengthening of social capital is greatly needed, as evidence suggests that social capital in the United States is actually on the decline (Putnam, 1995).

Pfefferbaum et al. (2007) explore a framework for understanding community resilience to disasters and trauma. Through their exploration, they identified seven factors that are associated with community resilience. Participation is again integral. Lin Moe and Pathranarakul (2006) composed ten critical success factors for successful and effective disaster management. Again, one of the primary critical success factors is participation of those impacted: the clients or target beneficiaries.

Similarly, Norris et al. (2008) note that strengthening community resilience comes from local people having ownership over the recovery efforts. This sense of ownership is not possible without authentic, meaningful participation.

In Community Recovery, A New Value Proposition for Community Investment, Calvin (2012) stresses the importance of community engagement and participation in the context of disasters. Calvin advocates involving the whole community in disaster response and differentiates two different kinds of leadership: technical and adaptive. In technical leadership, authorities and other officials do the work. Adaptive leadership, in
contrast, involves people creating solutions together – a community-based response. The second is what is needed to truly rebuild communities impacted by disasters (Calvin, 2012).

Another current of community-based disaster response scholarship involves highlighting asset-based community development. This framework involves public-private partnerships and emphasizes local resources, local strengths, and local knowledge (assets of the community) instead of relying on outside experts (Green & Haines, 2012; Spranger, 2014). One key component of asset based community development is the inclusion of the whole community in development and recovery efforts including those sometimes ignored such as youth, the elderly (Hales, 2012) and local artists (Spranger, 2014). For a relief organization to not value and allow for participation is to run the risk of an under-estimation and underutilization of the resources disaster impacted communities still have despite the effects of the disaster, something that happens all too often (Dynes, Quarantelli & Kreps, 1972).

Community based disaster relief models are increasingly being promoted and recognized as essential (Kafle & Murshed, 2006; Victoria, 2002). As one author noted, society may be entering an “age of accountability” with regards to disaster response (Twigg, 1999). Over a decade ago, 168 governments adopted the Hyogo Framework of Action emphasizing the need to focus on community-based approaches in responding to disasters (United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction, 2005). Indeed, as Lorna Victoria (2002) has previously made clear, over a decade of real world experiences in varying countries with different contexts from PREDES and La Red in Latin America, to the Asian Urban Disaster Mitigation Program, from Nepal to the
Philippines to Sri Lanka to Cambodia to South Africa, community based approaches “with community participation as the crucial and pivotal element” have increased community members confidence, pride, and capabilities while instituting sustainable and cost-effective solutions that are in line with what survivors need and want (Victoria, 2002, p. 270).

Even the Federal Emergency Management Agency, FEMA, has in recent years recognized this shift in the winds of disaster response and stressed the importance of community engagement, empowering local action, and promoting public leadership in decision-making in official documents (FEMA, 2009; 2011). They refer to this approach as a “Whole Community Approach” and borrow heavily from previous community-based disaster efforts in formulating their principles and strategic themes, evidence that community-based disaster response has largely made it to the mainstream (FEMA, 2011).

The classic public administration approach relied on professional expertise and treating recipients of aid as consumers. Knowledge and resources flowed in a single direction, from the top to the bottom. Participatory disaster relief, in contrast, empowers individuals to become engaged in the decisions that affect them, and can be seen in the light of efforts to increase full-citizen involvement more broadly and “deepen democracy” creating what other scholars have termed “strong democracy” in an age of democratic decline (Barber, 2003; Gaventa, 2006). Scholars have long argued that this participatory, shared-power approach, built on networks rather than hierarchical power, is ideally formulated to effectively tackle difficult problems (Crosby & Bryson, 2005).
In fact, many scholars have documented the potential of disasters to strengthen power from below, rejuvenate communities’ sense of solidarity and openness, and/or open up new possibilities for long-term social change (Cobb & Elder, 1983; Drabek & McEntire, 2003, Drabek, 2012; Fritz, 1961; Mileti & Darlington, 1997; O’Brien, 1991; Dynes & Quarentelli, 1975). For example, Oliver-Smith documented how an earthquake in the Andes resulted in a reinforced communal orientation that led to improvements in their society (Oliver-Smith, 1986). Drabek (2012) and Drabek and McEntire (2003) provide a comprehensive literature review of instances in which disasters have been the catalyst for the creation of altruistic individuals and communities and emergent norms. Drury and Olson (1997) elaborate still further and show how disasters can contribute to popular movements by opening up space for them to act and organize. Disasters have certainly not always resulted in changes for the better, but when disasters have resulted in positive changes and a strengthened civil society, participatory efforts have been integral to this process.

Despite the research being very clear about the importance and benefits of participation in disaster relief and despite the growing mainstreaming of community-oriented and participatory approaches, there is evidence that there is still a gap between theory and action. Davidson et al. (2007) found that participation involving shared decision-making is rarely achieved in the context of disasters and, in the majority of cases, community participation does not happen at all except nominally as in the case of using locals as a labor force.
Anti-Participation Arguments

One criticism of this participatory approach is that it has the potential to increase the responsibilities on locals impacted by a disaster without also increasing their capacity (Allen, 2006). Although this is a valid criticism, participation itself has been shown to increase individuals and community's capacity. Furthermore, history has shown that informal, spontaneous responses by community members after a disaster is, and has been, a prevalent phenomenon (Drabek, 2012; Raphael, 1986). The question is not, whether or not locals affected by disaster will act. They do. The question becomes whether or not assistance from formal organizations will play a supportive and facilitating role to further these local mobilizations or whether these mobilizations will be ignored as in the past (Schilderman, 1993).

Another criticism is that experts alone have the necessary knowledge and skills to respond to disasters. However, even in highly technological matters, decision-making can be achieved through citizen participation (Carson & Martin, 2002). Furthermore, Hardina (2006) counters this criticism by noting that expert knowledge carries with it the very real possibility of keeping or entrenching power inequalities between privileged and vulnerable groups. One cannot decrease vulnerability, a key factor in community resilience, by reinforcing vulnerable groups’ powerlessness. Cuny (1983, p. 36), sums up the argument against relying on experts by saying, “People’s participation is basic because safety, stability of livelihood, well-being and disaster management in the last analysis, is their own concern and not solely of ‘experts’ such as government, scientists, aid agencies and specialists.”
Concurrent Research

Rachel E. Luft (2008), a member of the Anti-Racist Working Group of Common Ground, and facilitator of antiracism workshops for short-term volunteers, interviewed several Common Ground volunteers and based on this and her own observations, wrote a case study highlighting what she called “homegrown disasters of racism and sexism”. In Looking for Common Ground: Relief Work in Post-Katrina New Orleans as an American Parable of Race and Gender Violence, she acknowledges the “inspiring force” Common Ground was in New Orleans, while also shining an intersectional feminist spotlight on Common Ground’s failures in responding to sexual assaults reported by white Common Ground Relief females. In response to the assaults, Common Ground created discourse that targeted the African American neighborhood in which they were working, rather than the white male relief workers who in most cases were the accused perpetrators (Luft, 2008).

At the same time that Common Ground Relief flourished, Christopher R. Groscurth performed a case study on American Red Cross volunteers, focusing on the issue of race, but it is also relevant to participation and shared decision-making power. In Paradoxes of Privilege and Participation: The Case of the American Red Cross, Groscurth recounts one volunteer he calls “Joe” stating that the Red Cross has the authority to define disaster victim’s needs for them (Groscurth, 2011, p. 305). Groscurth’s interviews, informed by the Red Cross principles demonstrate how impartiality and universality in the organization, despite diversity training, also meant color-blindness and ignoring racial difference (Groscurth, 2011). This approach, Groscurth found, upholds white privilege by instituting policies that do not allow for
cultural and racial differences (Groscurth, 2011). In a theoretical example, Groscurth illustrates this biased “un-bias” on the part of the American Red Cross by explaining how, given a majority Muslim population, the Red Cross would still distribute cans of pork and beans to all victims of disaster equally, staying true to the organization’s principles of universality and impartiality, but thereby disregarding individual’s religious dietary needs. He goes on to say, “This ideology is problematic in that it invalidates the particular needs of the communities it serves, which can be extremely important to them” (Groscurth, 2011, p. 305).

Using many dozens of interviews and additional qualitative data, the Superstorm Research Lab (2013a) wrote A Tale of Two Sandys in which the authors found that there are largely two different understandings of Hurricane Sandy. One understanding views the impacts of Sandy as being caused by the storm itself. The other views the impacts of Sandy as having its origin in previously existing injustices, inequalities, and vulnerabilities. These two different perspectives, produce two different responses: one bureaucratic, top-heavy, and restricted to a narrow focus, the other: grassroots, responsive, and addressing the longer term needs of the storm impacted communities, which due to poverty, neglect, and economic injustice were disaster zones prior to Sandy. (Superstorm Research Lab, 2013a).
CHAPTER 3
RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

Participatory Action Research

This is a reflexive, qualitative approach rooted in participatory action research. A leading author on qualitative research explains the qualitative research approach as "the collection of data in a natural setting sensitive to the people and places under study, and data analysis that is both inductive and deductive and establishes patterns or themes." (Creswell, 2012, p. 44). As a qualitative researcher, I came with research questions, a research design, and built on prior research findings (deductive) but also was open to changing course based on what emerged from the research process and data (inductive). Qualitative research is ideal for the in-depth exploration of an issue. A more nuanced and accurate knowledge is gained through the inclusion of many viewpoints. These viewpoints are generally included as quotes from participants and then grouped into themes (Creswell, 2012).

Participatory action research differs from conventional research in three ways. It is action oriented, participatory, and contextual (Baum, MacDougall, & Smith, 2006). Participatory action research zeroes in on research that can contribute to action. Thus the role of the researcher is to not just understand, but through combining understanding and action, help facilitate societal transformation. This does not mean participatory action research is any less vigorous scientifically. In fact, because action researchers are so invested in accurate knowledge that can contribute to social change, they have a compelling interest in achieving scientifically rigorous and valid conclusions (Greenwood & Levin, 2006).
Participatory action research seeks to “improve upon the practices in which they [the researchers] participate and the situations in which they find themselves” (Baum, MacDougall, & Smith, 2006). Personally, I seek to reflect on, shine light on, and improve upon, the ability of those of us rooted in social movements to respond effectively to disasters, so that we can deepen this crack in history and utilize this opportunity to address people’s immediate needs while contributing to longer term systemic changes as well. Disasters do not happen in a vacuum and neither should disaster relief or scholarship on those subjects. Racial inequality, gender disparity, economic injustice, state violence, climate change, and numerous other contextual factors need to be taken into account in the disaster relief equation.

In speaking of participation and empowerment in my research, it would be disingenuous if I, as a researcher, was not also conscious of participation and power differentials. In choosing a participatory action research framework, I follow a research tradition that places emphasis on an empowering research process for research participants (Baum, MacDougall, & Smith, 2006). This approach also necessitates a willingness to share power as a researcher and seek as much as possible to erase the boundaries between researcher and those researched. For this research, this commitment manifested as sharing my personal experiences, findings, and drafts to research participants, listening, being open to adaptation, including my personal experiences as a participant/researcher, and, in general, building alliances with and being accountable to the individuals and communities I am researching.

Participatory action research is done with those researched, rather than on them (Kemmis & Wilkinson, 1998). A key factor of this approach is allowing the “voice of the
participants [to be] heard throughout the research process.” (Kemmis & Wilkinson, 1998, p. 27). Thus, I included as many diverse voices as possible from diverse sources, fact-checked the information that I gathered from other sources with those I Interviewed, provided what I wrote to those interviewed and other stakeholders to make sure it was true to the spirit as well as the letter of their statements and work, and ensured nothing was misinterpreted or taken out of context.

I participated in Common Ground and the Occupy movement, as well as many other movements for individual and collective liberation. Currently I advocate for an end to violence against women, organize mutual aid efforts supporting oppressed communities including recently arrived refugees, people experiencing homelessness, and people experiencing altered states of consciousness labeled "madness." I work to bring about environmental justice, social justice, sustainability, peace, human rights, freedom, dignity, and a world free of exploitation. Hurricane Katrina and the mutual aid, solidarity-based relief efforts that we created following it, made a profound impact on my life. My background and ongoing involvement as a participant in the movements which I discuss informs my interpretation. This approach does reduce objectivity (Hubberman and Miles, 2002).

However, researcher subjectivity is inevitable and rather than seeking to appear objective, it is a much better strategy to lay bare one’s own subjectivity and discuss how this impacted the research (Peshkin, 1988). Situated as an active participant, I had an insider perspective and access to networks that an unaffiliated researcher would not have had. I drew heavily on these to discover sources and triangulate my findings. In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, we created a slogan for our mutual aid disaster relief
efforts: “Solidarity not charity”. Going into the research, I thought that this differentiation, together with participation, would make up the bulk of my findings. I did not expect to find so many diverse sub-themes that illuminate the many ways a participatory, mutual aid, solidarity-based approach was distinctive.

I, like my readers, have much to gain from this study and its subject matter. My humanity, wholeness, survival, and well-being is incomplete without the humanity, wholeness, survival, and well-being of others. Collectively, we have a new, better world to gain and nothing to lose but our chains.

**Scope of Research**

The theoretical population for this study was those who engaged in mutual aid disaster relief as part of Common Ground and Occupy Sandy. Common Ground formed in 2005 after Hurricane Katrina and operated in the greater New Orleans area. Occupy Sandy formed after Superstorm Sandy in New York and New Jersey. Both organizations were grassroots, mutual aid, solidarity-based disaster relief organizations.

**The Post Katrina Portraits**

The primary accessible population for this study was those Common Ground volunteers found in The Post Katrina Portraits drawn by Francesco di Santis (2007). The Post Katrina Portraits consists of self-written or transcribed accounts by New Orleans residents and volunteers. It is full of rich primary source material, ripe for analysis consisting of 352 first-hand accounts. Francesco di Santis arrived in New Orleans shortly after Katrina and immediately undertook a massive historical project that involved drawing portraits and collecting first-hand accounts from Katrina relief workers and survivors. In his own words, Francesco recounts, “Seeking prospective candidates
for the project, I essentially adopted a ‘come one, come all’ policy that ran the gamut of diverse walks of life, types of people, and an incredible range of emotion” (di Santis, 2007, p. 420). If people were not comfortable writing, they could narrate their story and somebody else would transcribe. Participants’ portraits were drawn by the artist, and they were free to write anything they wished. In this collection, many Common Ground Relief volunteers narrate their motivations and experiences with their own words.

There are many accounts in The Post Katrina Portraits that were written by members of diverse relief organizations. I will only include Common Ground volunteers for purposes of this analysis. These were people who I could reasonably be certain were, in fact, Common Ground volunteers by virtue of their explicit mention of volunteering with Common Ground or their explicit mention of being in New Orleans in the capacity of a volunteer and a stated reference to Common Ground facilities such as “Blue house” or “St. Mary’s” (Both Common Ground operated facilities) in their writings. This approach, although certain to leave accounts out of the analysis that were in fact written by Common Ground volunteers, nevertheless provided a safeguard in reducing researcher bias and the potential of accidentally including accounts in the analysis that, were not written by Common Ground volunteers.

Out of 352 portraits and autobiographical stories, 12 are in 8 different foreign languages, some obscure. I chose to drop these from the sample. Of the remaining English language accounts, 84 consist of writings which indicate the piece was written by a Common Ground volunteer. I read The Post Katrina Portraits front to back twice, identifying and transcribing which accounts I could confirm as written by Common Ground volunteers. Once this population was discovered, I performed a content
analysis of the data, reading each account through multiple times, composing and then fine-tuning the codes, and finally grouping these codes into distinct overarching themes. Since some of the respondents in The Post-Katrina Portraits did not include their name in their written account, I counted all the respondents in the book (352), and gave each respondent a number based on their order and used this number as an identifier for those instances in which names were unknown.

To increase the validity of my research, first-hand accounts by New Orleans residents impacted by Hurricane Katrina who mentioned Common Ground, FEMA, or the Red Cross in The Post Katrina Portraits will also be used as a source of supplementary data. Out of the 32 accounts written by locals affected by the hurricane who mentioned Common Ground, Red Cross, or FEMA, I divided the remarks into positive, neutral, and negative.

**Additional Archival Sample Selection**

Using many different supplementary data sources allowed me to portray the perspectives of Common Ground and Occupy Sandy volunteers in their own words and ensured the most holistic examination of mutual aid disaster relief possible. To achieve the additional archival sample, I performed a digital search for newspapers, magazine articles, scholarly articles, and other sources through University of Florida’s One Search. I performed the digital search using the key words "Common Ground Collective" “Common Ground Relief” and “Occupy Sandy.” I then explored the references to these articles for additional sources. I also followed up on sources other Common Ground and Occupy Sandy volunteers recommended.
After compiling the newspapers, articles, books, and documentaries, I limited the sample to those that provided information of specific relevance to my research. For example, in choosing newspaper articles, I was less concerned with the author’s perspective, and paid closer attention to whether or not I could glean from the article the motivations, thoughts, behaviors, and experiences of participants, so as to include the voices of diverse Common Ground and Occupy Sandy volunteers. I also included articles that described actions that were mentioned in The Post Katrina Portraits, to give a broader context. Using these criteria allowed me to identify secondary sources that would provide rich information and allow me to triangulate my findings. Especially relevant, Scott Crow, cofounder of Common Ground, wrote a memoir, Black Flags and Windmills (2011). In this book, Scott Crow documents the rise of Common Ground and both personal and organizational experiences, from which I draw additional verification of The Post Katrina Portraits data.

**Interview Sample Selection**

In order to find interview respondents, I attempted to go through Occupy Sandy official organizational channels and conduct a snowball sample and relationship network analysis, asking for members or volunteers of Occupy Sandy. My aim was to continue this process until I reached data saturation. Email solicitation was the primary medium of recruitment. I also used social networking sites such as LinkedIn and Facebook. However, I achieved very limited success. But through this process, I learned of the Superstorm Research Lab, a mutual aid research collective with a wealth of primary source data on Occupy Sandy, from which I include a small number of interviews. These too were chosen with specific relevance to my research questions. Interviews
from Superstorm Research Lab were obtained through a decentralized effort of many different researchers each doing semi-structured interviews at different times and locations, who then offered their transcribed accounts to the research collective in order to facilitate the wider use of the data. I also rely on unstructured interviews with a cofounder of Occupy Sandy, Bobby Cooper, and a cofounder of Common Ground, Scott Crow, to corroborate my findings and analysis.

In addition, over the last decade, I have had on-going personal correspondence and conversations with numerous individuals who were involved with Common Ground and Occupy Sandy, which although rarely recorded or cited, nevertheless informs my analysis. One example of this is the Common Ground reunion, held August, 29th 2015, on the ten year commemoration of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans, during which previous Common Ground participants reunited and reflected on motivations, experiences, accomplishments, and failures. These, and other informal conversations strengthen the triangulation of my data and increase the validity of my methodology and analysis. Reliability and validity were also strengthened by peer review of the thematic analyses and discussion by key participants in Common Ground and Occupy Sandy.
CHAPTER 4
RESULTS

This chapter contains the results of the thematic analysis of the archival and interview data. First, I present an overview of the two organizations that I am exploring more in depth. Second, I describe the theoretical and emergent themes that arose from the archival data, autobiographical accounts, newspapers, books, interviews and other sources.

History of Common Ground and Occupy Sandy

Common Ground was founded a week after Hurricane Katrina hit on September 5th, 2005 when Malik Rahim, a former Black Panther and community organizer sent out a call for support amid threats by white vigilantes patrolling the streets and shooting unarmed black males in the neighborhood of Algiers (Crow, 2011, p. 62; Common Ground Relief, 2006). Responding to this initial call, Scott Crow, a veteran anarchist community organizer arrived at Malik’s house. Malik Rahim, his then partner Sharon Johnson, and Scott Crow, pooled their money together, a mere fifty dollars (Goodman, 2006; Crow, 2001, p. 145; Common Ground Relief, 2006, p. 2), and put out a call for more help. Help came, first by the dozens, then as word spread, by the hundreds, and then by the thousands.

In Common Ground’s Mission Statement, it described itself as

a community-initiated volunteer organization offering assistance, mutual aid, and support. This work gives hope to communities by working with them, providing for their immediate needs and emphasizing people working together to rebuild their lives in sustainable ways. (Common Ground Relief, 2006, p. 2)

Common Ground projects consisted of the following: a health clinic, legal clinic, eviction defense, roof-tarping, distribution of aid, a community garden, a woman’s shelter, tree-
cutting service, community media center, bioremediation, stopping house demolitions, documenting police abuses, tool-lending library, house-gutting, debris clean-up, free after school educational programs, and a radio station (Common Ground Relief, 2006, p. 7-8; Crow, 2011, p. 201-207; Tobocman, 2006 p. 4-8). By 2008, Common Ground experienced the influx of over 23,000 volunteers (Crow, 2011, p. 4) and served, according to some estimates, over 180,000 people in direct and indirect services (Arend, 2009, p. 199).

Occupy Wall Street began in New York’s Zuccotti Park in 2011, where a number of protesters attempted to take nonviolent direct action to shut down Wall Street and raise awareness about issues of economic injustice and inequality. About a year later, as Hurricane Sandy approached, an email was sent over an Occupy list-serve requesting possible locations to set up disaster response capabilities (Feuer, 2012). On the night of the hurricane an Occupy Sandy Facebook page, Twitter and Wepay were created (B. Cooper, personal communication, February 7, 2016). People made requests for assistance over social media, and the next day, before the rain had stopped, Occupy Sandy volunteers delivered supplies, food, water, and clothes and helped evacuate stranded families (B. Cooper, personal communication, February 7, 2016). Occupy Wall Street organizers then met at Red Hook Initiative for the expressed purpose of building a decentralized network of mutual aid disaster relief (B. Cooper, personal communication, February 7, 2016).

Shortly afterwards St. Jacobi Evangelical Lutheran Church in Brooklyn and the Church of St. Luke and St. Matthew quickly became large distribution centers and volunteer headquarters. Other veterans of Occupy similarly self-organized in the
immediate aftermath of Hurricane Sandy, in Rockaway Park, Cony Island, and other locations, building off the networks built up through Occupy Wall Street (Superstorm Research Lab, 2013a).

Occupy Sandy programs included: medical assistance, construction, a tool lending library, volunteer mold removal, free meals, distribution of aid, free legal help, a free store, educational services, and more. Within two months, Occupy Sandy had 18,000 registered volunteers (Radywyl, 2014), a number soon to grow to, according to some estimates, 60,000 people (Blasio, 2012). Occupy Sandy described itself on its organizational website as “a grassroots disaster relief network that emerged to provide mutual aid to communities affected by Superstorm Sandy” (Occupy Sandy, 2016).

Common Ground and Occupy Sandy were composed entirely of volunteers, at least initially. Later, several long-term volunteers received small stipends. These two organizations were not accidently similar in approach, tactics or vision. They were intricately connected to each other as a cofounder of Common Ground describes:

Occupy Sandy would not have existed without Common Ground. The connections are deeper than causal. For example Lisa Fithian was a core founder and organizer of Occupy Wall Street, Suncere was a big part of Occupy Sandy in the Rockaways, [both key Common Ground organizers] I and others consulted on conference calls with Occupy Wall Street and Occupy Sandy. – Scott Crow (S. Crow, personal communication, March 1, 2016)

Overview of the Data

I expected to find neutral remarks about FEMA, Red Cross, and Common Ground by locals in The Post Katrina Portraits, but did not. Remarks about FEMA by New Orleans residents were almost entirely negative, with one exception. Remarks about the Red Cross by New Orleans residents were majority positive but few.
References to Common Ground by locals affected by the hurricane were all positive and numerous.

Table 4-1. Remarks by locals referring to FEMA, Red Cross and Common Ground in The Post-Katrina Portraits

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organization</th>
<th>Positive references</th>
<th>Negative references</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>FEMA</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Red Cross</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Common Ground</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Katrina survivors in The Post Katrina Portraits tell a similar tale to what I heard first-hand over a decade ago. A woman who gave her name as Miss Carol in The Post-Katrina Portraits notes “Fema is gone, fema been gone… If it wasn't for the children from out at Common Ground Collective with the love that they have to share, there would be no help. Common Ground set the example of a good role model and plan” (di Santis, 2007, p. 304). Donald Brusseauf of Houma, similarly recounts how there was “no help except Common Ground” and how a volunteer named Pauly would help him and his neighbors with “anything you need” (di Santis, 2007 p. 115). This same sentiment is verbally and visually expressed by New Orleans residents in the documentary HELLP (Ryan and Warison, 2006).

Three overarching themes arose in the data that help explain the distinctiveness and effectiveness of this mutual aid, solidarity-based approach: disaster relief work seen in context of struggle, mutuality, and participation. Together these three themes account for the vast majority of the coded content (78%) written by Common Ground volunteers in The Post-Katrina Portraits. If the code: autobiographical narrative, which is more language style than content, (See the Appendix for full list of codes and their frequency)
is dropped from the equation, these three themes jump up to account for 88.5% of the coded content. The main codes, their frequency and overarching themes can be seen in Table 4-2.

Table 4-2. Main codes and themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Codes</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Social movement roots</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>Disaster relief work seen in context of struggle.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critique of government</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>Disaster relief work seen in context of struggle.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critique of media</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Disaster relief work seen in context of struggle.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critique of large charities</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Disaster relief work seen in context of struggle.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critique of capitalism</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>Disaster relief work seen in context of struggle.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critique of FEMA</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Disaster relief work seen in context of struggle.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race consciousness</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Disaster relief work seen in context of struggle.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environmental consciousness</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Disaster relief work seen in context of struggle.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Context of revolution</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Disaster relief work seen in context of struggle.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Civil Disobedience</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Disaster relief work seen in context of struggle.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Militant posturing</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>Disaster relief work seen in context of struggle.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recounting vigilante violence</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Disaster relief work seen in context of struggle.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recounting military/police violence</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Disaster relief work seen in context of struggle.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Receiving from experience</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Mutuality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being affected</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Mutuality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sense of belonging</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Mutuality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expression of gratitude</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Mutuality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>See self in others</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Mutuality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working with</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>Participation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shared decision-making power</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Participation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listening</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Participation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taking initiative</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Participation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Disaster Relief Work Seen in Context of Struggle

By far, the most prevalent theme among Common Ground volunteers in The Post-Katrina Portraits were remarks highlighting disaster relief in the context of social struggle. In Scott Crow’s memoir, Black Flags and Windmills, he highlights the roots Common Ground had in social movements including anarchism, the Black Panther Party, and the Zapatistas (Crow, 2011). In addition to the former Black Panther Malik Rahim who was active in the Black Power movement, early members of Common Ground included the following: street medics used to delivering first aid at large mobilizations during the global justice movement, Food Not Bombs volunteers with experience feeding large amounts of people, and media activists who had experience setting up independent media centers to document their political actions.

Scott: Common Ground wouldn’t have come into being without the alternative globalization movements of the early millennium. Most of the original networks we drew on and many of the core organizers were anarchists: food not bombs, street medics, legal teams, eviction defense and more all grew out of movements which were anarchist oriented (S. Crow, personal communication, March 1, 2016).

These movement roots of Common Ground participants are also discussed in The Post Katrina Portraits.

Turtle: I’ve initiated and supported 100’s of different actions and protests and peace gatherings (di Santis, 2007, p. 302).

#261: “I’ve been supporting non-violent direct action on various issues since 1990, but just to name a few: environmental defense in Northern California, the Sierras, Idaho and in Montana (with the Buffalo Field Campaign), pro fair trade protests against the World Trade Organization and the World Bank, advocating for direct democracy (in opposition to) the ‘96 Democratic National Convention…. Homeless rights in the San Francisco Bay Area, Native American issues at Big Mountain, anti-nuclear testing… (di Santis, 2007, p. 303).

All these skills they learned over the years were redirected to respond after Katrina:
“It was pretty much logistically similar to feeding a mass anti-corporate globalization protest… this seems to be another opportunity with the real potential to dream the kind of world we want to live in (di Santis, 2007, p. 305).

Noting continuity between the original goals of Occupy Wall St. and its later manifestation as Occupy Sandy, Occupy Sandy volunteers similarly are quick to point out that their efforts are not a “second act” but instead part of “challenging the scarcity logic of capitalism” (Jaleel, 2013). Elsewhere Occupy Sandy volunteers also positioned their disaster relief work as a continuation of their activism.

Justin: When we started this, people were making a hard distinction between the Occupy movement and Occupy Sandy, but if you get what is going on, you see that all is one. When I came down and started yelling on Wall Street, eventually my arm got tired. Then I looked behind me and saw all these people cooking and making art, and I realized that it wasn't just a protest movement. Zuccotti Park was a mutual-aid experiment. We don't demand things, because we demonstrate it. And when we want a culture of mutual aid, we make it (Lawrence, 2013).

In addition to these skills, these activists brought a political consciousness that questioned power, aligning themselves with historically marginalized communities.

Noah: It seems to me that much of the state and city government is not planning to give them a warm welcome... I hope that what people see here they bring out to share with those who can't see the crimes that are happening here for the TVs between here and them (di Santis 2007, p. 119).

Enku: 2 weeks with Red Cross. Middle-Class charity hundreds of desperate calls. Nurses weeping in the halls as days passed and people died – forced to wait for paperwork & permission. Racist volunteers mocking survivors. Lacking answers. Volunteers referring to vouchers to survivors as ‘handouts’ while eating at the best restaurant in town, all on the Red Cross bill, right across from the FEMA workers, bastions of the inefficient downing martinis… (di Santis, 2007, p. 70).

#76: Authoritarian relief groups claiming their presence for the same crisis with millions and billions in national currency could have made our most valiant, intelligent, well-meaning and well-organized attempt totally irrelevant in a heartbeat with the grace of the world’s wealthiest nation-state and its tax base and the ‘disposable income’ of a philanthropic
surplus economy, ‘they’ could have hired and assembled tens of thousands of workers and volunteers of Middle America. But since the government and mainstream relief group bureaucrats chose not to, many residents of North America’s Gulf Region needed what we would call “Solidarity & Mutual Aid” (di Santis, 2007, p. 103).

Andrea: And you know, FEMA sort of mismanaging their money and putting people in hotels for all these times where we have a huge amount of apartment resources that they could have instead. You know, that sort of thing. It’s just like a silly use of money and resources. And then these gigantic institutions, which I don’t doubt that there are people there that have good intentions and want to help. But the bureaucracy is, like you know, ossified (Superstorm Research Lab, 2013c).

Bobby: The city of NY and Red Cross and FEMA have an agenda to their own survival as institutions and so must convince, first and foremost, others that they are taking care of the relief effort and others aren’t needed. It’s in their nature… the Government, the Red Cross and FEMA will never be much better, it’s in their nature to be the way they are (B. Cooper, personal communication, February 7, 2016).

Anti-capitalist and class-conscious statements were especially frequent manifestations of this critique of power.

Noah: All the people of the gulf coast have been victimized at the hands of a country where it is a crime to be poor (di Santis, 2007, p. 119).


Meghan: Gutting these houses is not just gutting houses. This act is itself a message. The poor and exploited will not be ignored and forgotten (di Santis, 2007, p. 291).

#315: Only seeing the situation on the ground did I realize that it is always the poor and forgotten that suffer the brunt of disasters, that the skyscrapers and other cogs of the ecocidal capitalist machine can weather more storms than hundred-year-old wooden shotgun duplexes, and that hurricanes can’t wash away the oppressive structures we rage against (di Santis, 2007, p. 377).

Predictably, Occupy Sandy volunteers also placed emphasis on the economic system.

Ian: We know capitalism is broken, so we have already been focused on organizing to take care of our own needs (Goldstein, 2012).
The political consciousness and context of Common Ground volunteers was easily apparent to outsiders. One reporter visiting the Common Ground Health Clinic, saw the words “infusing all we do with anti-oppression intentions” on a board listing medical and other tasks the clinic staff had to perform (Shorrock, 2006). This anti-oppression positioning included acknowledging how they benefit from systems of domination and oppression.

Jimmy: I middle-class white person, show up to court with a lawyer. The judge throws out my case on the condition that I not sue. All the inmates except two broken-hearted people were black. All the guards were black. Every time one of the inmates went up to see the judge, somebody would ask him if he wanted to go home today. Of course he would say yes. They enter a no-contest plea on his behalf and make him pay $100, $300, $500, whatever. A typical power hungry white judge presided over the courtroom. It was all so obviously reminiscent of slavery. It was slavery… I was angry. Not only at the system and the judge, but at my own privilege (di Santis, p. 281).

In a documentary about New Orleans in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, Jeff Moore, a Common Ground Relief volunteer, echoes this race consciousness by aptly noting,

Jeff: We’re all in this together, right, but we’re not in this together. We’re separated by class, we’re separated by race, and the effect of Katrina follows those channels (Ryan and Warison, 2006).

Acknowledging privilege was not an endpoint in itself. But it was a component to then using that privilege, as a weapon to support people’s survival and self-determination

#315: I know that my white privilege can get me past disaster checkpoints so I can use my able body and medical skills. My European heritage gave me the opportunity to come down here, and I won’t let myself forget it (di Santis, p. 377).

Other volunteers filled their pages recounting either military or police violence and contextualized this violence as one front in the struggle for justice.

#152: They were yelling @ him and he was backing up with his hands in the air (later someone said he had a steak knife) that is when the cops maced
him and shot five times... Why was he killed? He was poor, black, and mentally ill, this is racial cleansing – the past never left... We must organize to fight imperialism (di Santis, 2007, p.190).

Some Common Ground volunteers went a step further and explicitly portrayed their disaster relief work as part and parcel of making revolutionary change.

Tyler: A revolution is being born (di Santis. 2007, p. 100).

Ash: Wanted to be part of the Common Ground revolution (di Santis, 2007, p. 244).

#261: I’m not sure this is a budding revolution. It certainly may be, has the potential to go that way... I view it as the spark that has lit (di Santis, 2007, p. 304).

Seth: Hali showed me a flower. She said the plant it was growing on had never had flowers before the Hurricane. A flower that blooms after a disaster, that is a pretty good metaphor for revolutionary organization (di Santis, 2007, p. 378).

Likewise, Orissa Arend, in her book Showdown in Desire: The Black Panthers Take a Stand in New Orleans about the New Orleans Black Panther Party, clearly places Common Ground within a revolutionary historical framework, calling Common Ground “a conduit for the twenty-first century version of the Ten Point Program” (Arend, 2009, p. 194). The Ten Point Program was the Black Panther Party founding document, a revolutionary black-nationalist version of the Bill of Rights (Anderson, 2012). Arend also notes the similarities in the Panther survival programs, the best known of which was their free-breakfast program, with Common Ground’s programs:

The party’s survival programs included medical clinics, free breakfast for children, food give-aways, free clothing, political education, and prisoner support, all of which Common Ground was providing. Then and now, young people, fearless and full of hope for the future, seized buildings to take a righteous stand. Then and now, young people handed out food and medical supplies to provide aid where the government failed. The lessons of the Panthers, self-determination and political activism, rediscovered in
their basic form as if they had been evolving in some counterculture time capsule, are again being applied. (Arend, 2009, p. 202)

In Common Ground’s black power roots, survival programs, and multi-racial makeup, it thus also had similarities with the original Rainbow Coalition. Not to be confused with the later manifestation under the leadership of Jesse Jackson, the original Rainbow Coalition was a radical initiative pioneered by the Chicago Black Panther Party to organize with Puerto Rican Young Lords and poor whites on common class-based interests (Williams, 2013). This multi-racial organizing was cut tragically short, however, after the police assassination of Fred Hampton.

Part of their critique of the state, capitalism, and large relief organizations, was a willingness to take constructive action that, beyond fulfilling a needed function, also served to dramatize these institution’s inaction and complicity.

Joe: Last Tuesday, four groups of us went to various parts of New Orleans. These areas were tested the most toxic in the city by the EPA after Hurricane Katrina; we were visiting them to take the samples the EPA said they couldn’t do (di Santis, 2007, p. 222).

With backgrounds in social movement organizing, Common Ground volunteers did not shy away from engaging in tactics familiar to them in other contexts, including nonviolent civil disobedience, when the need arose.

#76: The only thing between government-hired bulldozers and so many precious redeemable homes would be our bodies (di Santis, 2007, p. 103).

Meghan: The residents want the school reopened so they can move back with their children, but the state seems to have other priorities. Our plan was to work on the school despite “The Man” (di Santis, 2007, p. 291).

Jimmy: Following the parishioners’ urging, me and a handful of friends decided to take direct action to save the church and barricaded ourselves within the church’s rectory (di Santis, 2007, p. 336).
Occupy Sandy volunteers, not to be outdone, taught survivors how to engage in nonviolent civil disobedience, themselves, in the event of attempts by authorities to remove them from their homes (Nir, 2013). Beyond overt forms of direct action, the day to day responding to marginalized survivors of Sandy was also a form of direct action, made necessary by institutional racism.

Bobby: A regional director of the Red Cross days after Sandy when I called to ask why they were not to be found in the Rockaways: “We heard it was too dangerous there.” (B. Cooper, personal communication, February 7, 2016).

Similarly, the same Occupy Sandy volunteer recounts overhearing a police officer tell a resident of the Rockaways that they would not receive aid as fast as other neighborhoods.

Bobby: “Let me tell you this straight. You will be the last people helped.” – Police officer (B. Cooper, personal communication, February 7, 2016).

From a brief overview of the data from The Post Katrina Portraits, another aspect of the disaster relief work seen in the context of struggle theme: militant posturing, seems to figure quite prevalently among Common Ground volunteers.

Brandon: I bought a small boat and a bunch of equipment and got a few friends who were veterans and special forces guys. They helped me out with what I would need to survive for a month in the urban environment that was going on at the time (di Santis, 2007, p. 39).

Brandon: Cuz, there was a bunch of us, just a couple of them. And maybe we should have, but at the time, we just didn’t do it because we didn’t have the right weapons… If we had been armed properly… probably we would have gotten into armed conflict with the [Convention Center] Guards (di Santis, 2007, p. 43).

However, upon closer investigation, this data is clearly skewed. Brandon, the author of these passages, and, in fact all the instances of militant posturing among Common Ground volunteers examined, was overrepresented in The Post Katrina
Portraits. Most people in The Post Katrina Portraits recounted their experience in one or two pages. Some even being interviewed on two separate occasions. Brandon’s accounts were broken up into 13 separate parts, totaling 18 pages. Still, I chose to include all of Brandon’s accounts in the data set, because from my experience as part of Common Ground Relief, I recall that Brandon took up more space in the organization itself, and perhaps his over-representation in The Post Katrina Portraits is simply a reflection of this fact.

Nevertheless, the presence of this sub-theme, although not a necessary or integral part in explaining the whole, is still connected to interpreting disaster relief work in the context of social struggle. Without the broader aims of social justice and revolutionary change of which Common Ground volunteers saw their disaster relief work as a continuation, there would have been no contextual ground for Brandon to attempt to strengthen his activist prestige by the use of these militant remarks.

This political awareness, global justice, anti-racist, and other movement organizing background was integral to the other two themes on which Common Ground volunteers focused.

**Mutuality**

Harkening back to Common Ground and Occupy Sandy’s mission statements, the prominence of the overarching theme of mutuality is not surprising. Both among Common Ground and Occupy Sandy volunteers, mutuality was a frequent topic. However, some of the subthemes were unanticipated. Under mutuality, I discovered sub-themes of receiving/learning from the experience, expressions of gratitude, being affected, seeing self in others, and sense of belonging.
Similar to my experience of coming to give, but being humbled by the kindness and generosity of people who gave back, other Common Ground volunteers also highlighted the idea that their community work in the context of a disaster was not a one way exchange. Shortly after arriving and helping to set up the Common Ground Health Clinic, Bork recounts how a couple local women assisted in “making sure we ate!” (di Santis, 2007, p. 83). Another Common Ground volunteer also speaks of the mutual nature of the relief effort.

Beccah: I experienced the joy of offering what I have in service to others. And, incredibly, I experienced others lifting me up, keeping me strong, so together we could restore our hope in humankind, nail by nail. I came to New Orleans to give people what I could. I leave New Orleans having been given perspective, strength, wisdom, love, and any number of new questions as the journey to become whole continues (di Santis, 2007, p. 405).

Noah referred to his experience in the aftermath of Katrina as “an eye opening experience” [di Santis, 2007, p. 119). Others similarly stressed how this grassroots, solidarity-based approach to disaster relief provided learning opportunities.


Kristen: Through this I learned… I won’t leave here the same, as many have said before (di Santis, 2007, p. 254).

Rebecca: It has been a life changing time for me (di Santis, 2007, p. 279).

Topher: This place has changed my life (di Santis, 2007, p. 306).

Other volunteers were more specific, noting that it was actually disaster survivors who they came to know personally who gave the most valuable gifts.

Ayotunde: Looking at Ms. Eunice, a bold & courageous woman gave me a whole new perspective on how I should view my life (di Santis, 2007, p. 260).

#254: Those who had nothing gave all. Poor blacks, Cajuns, and Vietnamese fed and sheltered us (di Santis, 2007, p. 296).
Reuben: I may have made a small difference in one man’s life, but what I have gained is something that goes beyond emotions and feelings. Herbert’s words will ring in my ears forever, and so will the pictures I have captured in my heart (di Santis, 2007, p. 297).

#315: Although I came to give my time and energy to the people of this city, they have given me more than I could ever provide (di Santis, pg. 377).

At times it was simple acts of kindness and encouragement that, though small, touched volunteers deeply. One volunteer recounts the story of how a man insisted on paying for volunteers’ cigarettes. This Katrina survivor’s comments to the volunteers as told in The Post-Katrina Portraits sheds light on how beyond directly assisting individuals, their work was also building community and creating a cycle of reciprocity.

#222: You guys are my heroes, you’re saving this place, and every person you’re helping, is helping me too! (di Santis, 2007, p. 261).

Volunteers and those impacted by Katrina, alike, expressed gratitude for each other.

#209: I’m so thankful to have this opportunity and I know we will all change from these moments on! (di Santis, 2007, p. 247).

Liam: I am grateful to have been able to serve them in their time of need (di Santis, 2007, p. 277).

#315: I am grateful for this opportunity and experience (di Santis, 2007, p. 377).

The presence of a two way exchange, beyond the ordinarily proscribed limits of market economics or the constrictions of traditional philanthropy, helped flip the notion of powerlessness on its head.

#170: Providing counseling will have had as much of an effect on those who I’ve worked with as it’s had on me. Who’s powerlessness was this trip about? I suspect it’s my own (di Santis, 2007, p. 208).

For Common Ground volunteers, boundaries that would normally separate themselves from the “other” dissolved as part of this mutual relationship.

Talia: I know this school, it could’ve been mine (di Santis, 2007, p. 293).

Michael: Everyone who came into the clinic could be my family – my brother, my sister, my wife (di Santis, 2007, p. 403).

A less broached but also important part of developing relationships of mutual aid in the context of disaster relief involves rejecting emotional detachment. Disasters are epicenters of loss. For Common Ground and Occupy Sandy volunteers a willingness to emotionally engage survivors was sometimes a necessary component to offering them meaningful assistance.

Bork: She cried and so did I (di Santis, 2007, p. 88).

Kim: I had to hold back my tears... It nearly broke my heart (di Santis, 2007, p. 93).

Randeep: My heart is gonna break forth like a New Orleans Levee (di Santis, 2007, p 172).

Kyla: There is no physical labor I can do with bleached clean rafters I can see and straining muscles that will pull the pain out of my brain (di Santis, 2007 p. 193).

#209: It was painful reality hitting me right in the heart (di Santis, 2007, p. 247).

Sally: Some kinda gasket opened up in me and I just started crying and crying and crying (di Santis, 2007, p. 248).

Morgan: It was so heart-breaking (di Santis, 2007, p. 253).

#227: My heart sank… I started bawling in my respirator (di Santis, 2007, p. 267).


Andrea: I started crying (Superstorm Research lab, 2013c).

These comments paint a clear picture of shared vulnerability and a deeper connection than a mere client – consumer relationship. The importance of this capacity to be
moved is mirrored in Black Flags and Windmills wherein, Scott Crow, cofounder of Common Ground, defines solidarity as “relations of support that bind people to one another” (Crow, 2011, p. 81).

The intense environment of a disaster zone, combined with unity of purpose and the closeness with which people interacted fostered a strong sense of belonging and comradeship.

Pauly: It wasn’t long before I knew this was a family that had been waiting to happen for a long time (di Santis, 2007, p.104).

#254: I found a new family in New Orleans called Common Ground (di Santis, 2007, p. 296).

Elaine: We still have a ways to go, but there’s good being done, but for me, the best part is getting to know the people. It’s so great to really feel like you are a part of something (di Santis, 2011, p. 341).

Sonia: Only here… A place that enrages me as much as it amazes me. A place that I’m leaving tomorrow. And I’m not sure if I’ll be able to feel like I belong anywhere else in the world (di Santis, 2011, p. 353).

This sense of togetherness was, at least in some instances, inclusive of survivors impacted by Hurricane Katrina:

B: I told myself I would volunteer @ the clinic one day a week, while I worked otherwise to rebuild my own life, re-connect with my own scattered community, [and] replace jobs I had lost. What I did, instead was find another community to bring into my life… Algiers and the Common Ground Health Clinic are my second home (di Santis, 2007, p. 120).

Occupy Sandy volunteers as well note the sense of belonging that came with their involvement.

Chapelle: It felt like a community…You can feel it’s easy to fit in. You seem more as brothers and sisters (Radywyl, 2014).
Participation

Participation of impacted individuals and communities, as predicted, was an important component in first-hand accounts of Common Ground and Occupy Sandy volunteers. As mentioned earlier, Common Ground’s mission statement included the words “working with” communities and “people working together to rebuild their lives” (Common Ground Relief, 2006, p. 2). Another grassroots organization formed in response to Hurricane Katrina, People’s Hurricane Relief, repurposed a slogan from the disability rights movement that eloquently and articulately sums up this sentiment: “Nothing about us, without us, is for us” (People’s Hurricane Relief Fund, 2006). This emphasis on partnership is also reflected in self-written narratives.

Ayotunde: I have personally decided to continue building New Orleans alongside with Mrs. Eunice & every willing force!! (di Santis, 2007, p. 260).

#227: They thanked us for our care of their things then donated them to Common Ground for ‘people who need them.’ We go back for the last time tomorrow. I’ll be working to honor the home and family that have captured my heart and in so many ways become my neighbors (di Santis, 2007, p. 267).

Reuben: Herbert had evacuated, but came back. December 1st, 2005, the first day he was allowed to come to his house. He cleaned up his house with the help of Common Ground and has stayed there since. Our job was to help Herbert clean up his front yard. He wanted the grass to grow back so that he could have a beautiful lawn. He wanted his home to look wonderful for the day he and his wife of sixty-seven years (who is in Wisconsin) will be able to be together once again (di Santis, 2007, p. 297).

Scott: We didn’t see them as faceless or helpless victims. We saw them as active participants in the struggle to make their lives better (Crow, 2011, p. 99).

Justin: We didn’t descend on communities, we emerged from within them and these are our neighbors, these are our friends, these are our family members (Superstorm Research Lab, 2013b).
People, who, under a more traditional relief effort would have been simply passive recipients of aid, became active participants in the recovery process. New Orleans residents offered cold water, home-cooked food, labor, as well as churches, businesses, and homes that could then be used as bases of operation or distribution centers (Wolff, 2012, p. 36; Tobocman, 2006, p. 6-7).

In The Post-Katrina Portraits, both volunteers (di Santis, 2007, p. 143) and residents recount stories of locals offering volunteers the use of houses and buildings that became vital parts of the relief effort and how these structures were improved in the process.

#156: I was steward of an old building named the ArtEgg that was badly damaged by Katrina and Rita. The roof was blown off, the interior saturated and assaulted by mold, and the adjacent land was contaminated. After the storms the building was wounded, abandoned, and lonely… which is how I felt too. Then came Common Ground, who adapted the ArtEgg as a site for visiting students to live and serve the community. Outdoor showers were built, a field kitchen was set up, the building was cleaned, and the land was bioremediated… The building was soon alive with youth and idealism, laughter and music. Hope pervaded all. Thanks to Common Ground, the healing had begun… for the building… for my spirit (di Santis, 2007, p.194).

Given this partnership, it was not out of the ordinary for the traditional lines between service provider and service user to be blurred or disappear completely.

#274: I went over to look at my house. I already gutted it out. I am just waiting to put new sheetrock up. I sent an email to my wife from the House of Excellence on that computer at Common Ground. I like to help out and volunteer. They already made me the maintenance man there (St. Mary’s of the Angels). I like to help out. I’m doing the plumbing, painting, security, at night. I love it. I am a resident at St. Mary’s. I thinking about quitting my other jobs and just working here (di Santis, p. 332).

Aleks, a volunteer with Occupy Sandy, also highlighted the point that many volunteers were also people from the community who needed assistance as well.
Needing assistance did not bar one from having the capacity to offer assistance. One important role of Occupy Sandy was thus to “mobilize existing energy and include all who want to contribute.” (Jaleel, 2013).

This participatory approach offered empowering roles to those impacted and helped survivors cope with the disaster.

Bobby: More than anything, what Occupy Sandy did best was empower people to help others and themselves. When FEMA, the Red Cross and the city of New York told people they had it under control and to leave the relief work to the experts we told people that that was a flat out lie. We documented that these large institutions were in fact absent from whole neighborhoods entirely, they were not helping thousands of people in need and did not have it under control. We told people that they were needed, we documented that and let them know that the best thing they could do would be to come down to the recovering areas and meet the people there, ask how to help, and to share their resources and abilities. Moreover, we helped empower people living in the recovering areas by insisting that they were the experts (B. Cooper, personal communication, February 7, 2016).

Anonymous: Helping others became a major coping mechanism for many people. It’s much better to have them empowered rather than having these people stand in a line to beg for aid (Ambinder et al., 2013).

Naomi Klein, in her book Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism echoes these sentiments:

The universal experience of living through a great shock is the feeling of being completely powerless: in the face of awesome forces, parents lose the ability to save their children, spouses are separated, homes – places of protection – become death traps. The best way to recover from helplessness turns out to be helping – having a right to be part of a communal recovery. (Klein, 2007, p. 589)

A critical factor in the participation of affected individuals and communities is a simple, but profound act: listening.

#95: Come to greet the peops and give them an inkling of hope and a bleach jug and a mold mask and some water and our ears and helping hands (di Santis, 2007, p.125).
Eric: “That’s their fight over there [in Iraq]. They couldn’t threaten me to get me over there. This is my war. This is my battleground right here. Getting my neighborhood back up.” These words were spoken by a Lower 9th Ward resident who had just returned to find his house obliterated. He had lost his family in the tragedy. Those of us listening to his story outside the Blue House that morning could only listen in somber silence and regret. These words shook me and stood as another reminder that as a volunteer, my purpose is to be a completely selfless support for the community, to listen and be present (di Santis, 2011, p. 204).

The same focus on listening was overheard in a sensitivity training held by Occupy Sandy: “We’re here to listen and be human” (Feuer, 2012).

Participation in the context of mutual aid and solidarity-based disaster relief in New Orleans and New York also meant sharing decision-making power with those they were attempting to help.

Eric: As a volunteer, my purpose is to be a completely selfless support for the community. To listen and be present... do and be exactly what this beautiful city needs (di Santis, 2011, p. 204).

MLC: Ultimately, the residents will decide. Surely they will lose their homes if they do not return, and surely Common Ground can help them come back (di Santis, 2011, p. 246).

#261: This is really a long-term, in my mind, um, campaign to rebuild the city completely along a... cooperative, multi-cultural direct democracy sort of fashion where the residents call the shots about what’s gonna happen (di Santis, 2011, p. 303).

#287: I like all volunteers, am here to be a tool for residents. How they choose to use our presence in their community is just that – their choice, not ours (di Santis, 2011, p. 346).

In The Fight for Home: How (parts of) New Orleans Came Back, Daniel Wolff quotes a female Common Ground volunteer as saying, “What we’re looking to do is not to be leading so much as join with community members... and have them lead and have us support them.” (Wolff, 2012, p. 24). Scott Crow, in his memoir about Common Ground, explains further,
One of the practices at Common Ground to counter this [misconception that black New Orleans residents were one homogenous community] was to ask questions of many different people in each neighborhood to find out who they were and what they needed. This community organizing approach [was] based on the Zapatista idea of ‘leading by obeying’. (Crow, 2011, p. 113)

Again highlighting the importance of shared power and the self-determination and agency of those impacted by disaster, Scott Crow writes:

Charity and solidarity are not mutually exclusive ideas. It ultimately comes down to the practice: how you administer programs, how much power and agency affected communities have in them, and how an organization sees itself. (Crow, 2011, p. 98)

This concept is elsewhere referred to by an Occupy Sandy volunteer as accepting government or other sources of aid, but not “getting caught in the strings” and thus being forced to dictate to rather than respect survivors (Occupy Sandy, 2012).

Common Ground Collective volunteers knocked on doors, and again and again responded to the self-determined needs of residents. “Swamp Rat Jack” needed his asthma checked at home, and Common Ground Clinic workers were flexible enough to accommodate his needs (Garcia, 2005). Confederate flag toting “Mike” was brought to tears when Suncere Ali Shakur showed up at his house asking if he needed anything (Wolff, 2012, p. 37). Mike later felt comfortable enough to provide suggestions on improvements in how the volunteers organized their house gutting operation and was surprised when his suggestions for the relief workers was not only listened to, but followed (Wolff, 2012, p. 39).

Suncere, a Common Ground organizer who opened the distribution center in St. Bernard Parish, remembers learning from residents that there were no supermarkets open and so instituted a grocery shopping program for residents who did not have their
own transportation (Wolff, 2012, p. 35). Other volunteers operated mobile distribution units to deliver water, food, and other much needed supplies to people who did not have the ability to drive to a distribution center (Ryan & Warison, 2006). As Scott Crow again explains, “We ‘lead by asking’ as much as possible” (Crow, 2011, p.179).

This capacity to respond to self-determined needs allowed for a flexibility and responsiveness that was readily apparent to individuals in other more rigid and hierarchical organizations. An anonymous Occupy Sandy volunteer explains:

The night before Christmas, FEMA guys called requesting that someone go to a house of an older woman that had no power, heat, etc. They thought it was life or death but wanted Occupy Sandy to help because they said they did not have the ability to. Five Occupy Sandy members came to winterize her house, and were able to get the heat running. (Ambinder et al., 2013)

Top-down institutions are straight-jacketed by red-tape and bureaucracy. Even when individuals within these organizations wish to respond to the self-determined needs of survivors, as the FEMA employees above did, their organization’s policies, culture, risk-aversion, and top-down structure doesn’t make this possible.

Bobby: We distributed hundreds of expensive generators to families in need. And we did it fast. It would have been much more complicated for any of those stalwart organizations to accept and distribute a generator. They would have had to track where it went and so on. The tax system alone in this country cripples many organizations from doing good. Or scares them into not taking risks (B. Cooper, personal communication, February 7, 2016).

Doris Hicks was a local principal of an elementary school in the lower 9th ward, a historically African American neighborhood. She was told it would take three to five years to re-open the school (Rible, 2007). Common Ground volunteers, translating the wishes of the community into action, successfully organized hundreds of volunteers on
spring break to clean the school in defiance of local authorities and risking arrest (Ritea, 2006; Rible, 2007).

Meghan: The residents want the school reopened so they can move back with their children, but the state seems to have other priorities. Our plan was to work on the school despite 'The Man'… We cleaned the courtyard, hallways, & auditorium. When carrying out wheelbarrows full of rubble you would be greeted by cheering & chanting (di Santis, 2007, p. 291).

This example combines elements from all three themes: disaster relief seen in the context of social struggle, mutuality, and meaningful, authentic participation involving respecting the voices and the self-determined needs of those impacted by the storm and its aftermath.

A: I told Wanda, from my cot bed as volunteers looked up sleepily, that I was doing everything I could to make sure schools would be open for her sons. I went to the school board meeting in her place. I committed my first act of civil disobedience in her place. I did inventory for room #117 in her place. I volunteered for you, Wanda, because you called me back that night. Because you invited me to dinner in your toxic shambled house. Because I care about you and this city more than anything or anyone, so quickly forgotten (di Santis, 2007, p. 294).

The Martin Luther King School was subsequently reopened.

A similar listening and action-oriented, collaborative approach example uniting all three overarching themes by Common Ground volunteers occurred at St. Augustine Parish in Treme (Parekh, 2009). Church officials attempted to close down a small, poor Catholic parish with a black priest and merge it with a larger, richer church with a white priest. This church was historic for a number of reasons, not least of which being that it was the first Catholic Church in the United States where free people of color, white people, and slaves worshipped together (Ledoux, 2011). After losing so much from the storm, residents of Treme were devastated at the thought of losing their spiritual community as well (Ledoux, 2011). Parishioners wrote letters and engaged in other
actions attempting to change the Archbishop’s decision to close the church but without success.

The day St. Augustine Parish’s priest, Father Ledoux, was forced to leave, Common Ground volunteers barricaded themselves in the Catholic Church’s rectory accompanied by two parishioners.

Jimmy: Following the parishioners’ urging, me and a handful of friends decided to take direct action to save the church and barricaded ourselves within the church’s rectory. We were met with unlimited kindness by the community members, each of us growing at least a few extra pounds from all the food they gave us (di Santis, p. 336).

This brought national attention to the Treme spiritual community’s efforts to save their historic parish. After three weeks of occupation, the action culminated in visits by Al Sharpton, Jesse Jackson, Fred Hampton Jr. and, ultimately, an agreement reached between the church hierarchy and parishioners that allowed for the continuation of the oldest predominately African-American Catholic Parish in the country (Ledoux, 2011; Entell, 2007; Parekh, 2009).

Leadership and taking initiative, were traits that blossomed, given the non-traditional organizational structures and loose network organizing that were hallmarks of this approach.

Jimmy: Another example of what can and does happen when people stop asking permission or waiting for others to do something, follow their hearts, and refuse to believe that any injustice is ‘divinely sanctioned’ or ‘just the way the world is (di Santis, 2007, p. 336).

Justin: We’re not waiting for FEMA, we’re not waiting for the mayor’s office, we’re not waiting for the Red Cross or for Wall Street or for anybody to come and save us. The cavalry isn’t coming, the cavalry is us (Superstorm Research Lab, 2013b).

Seth: The government does not care. We the people must help each other! (Tobocman, 2006).
Malik: We ain’t waiting on Washington. If we was waiting on Washington in the aftermath of Katrina, we’d had been dead (Rahim, 2015).

Bobby: One thing that cannot be left behind is our own agency. We all need to foster stronger community ties and build resiliency and not fall into the trap that just because you pay taxes or because they say so, that these institutions will help. Because in fact they might only hinder. More and more it's up to individuals and communities to empower each other to become stronger together and reject these false saviors (B. Cooper, personal communication, February 7, 2016).

Illustrative of how leadership is integrated into these themes and helped foster participation, Bork recounts a story in The Post Katrina Portraits of intervening and preventing the arrest of a woman who was found sleeping in a portable toilet, an action—cop-watching—rooted in social movement modes of organizing and indicative of contextualizing disaster relief work as social justice work.

Bork: I discovered that she wasn’t indigent. Before the storm, she was a waitress and she still had 700 dollars in cash with her from her last paychecks. But she told me that the local motels were all booked. I drove her to several to make sure. The motels had many empty rooms but they informed me that government contractors, agencies, and large relief groups had paid for those rooms ‘just in case’ they needed them (di Santis, 2007, p.88).

Bork listened and was emotionally affected by the experience. And, in the face of inaction by others, Bork took it upon herself to help solve the crisis in a way that respected the agency and self-determination of the person she was assisting.

Bork: I then took her to the finally opened fema center for relief and they said the only help they could give was a case of water and a single tarp. Red Cross wouldn’t authorize a local bed in one of their tents, despite that they had hundreds of empty ones-designated for relief workers only. And she wouldn’t leave because her job was about to re-open and her 16 y. old son still lived near by. No one in any degree of power cared about this woman. After spending the whole day going with her to dozens of supposed aid groups, I finally gave her my own small tent that I wasn’t using and I found her a place to pitch it. She cried and so did I (di Santis, 2007, p. 88).
Hai Au Huynh describes a scenario in which she saw the Red Cross distribute macaroni and cheese to the Vietnamese community (di Santis, 2007, p. 252). Au says, “But 98% of the Asian community is lactose intolerant” (di Santis, 2007, p. 252). In response, she instituted an effort to distribute culturally sensitive supplies, another example of listening and responding to the self-determined needs of those impacted by Katrina and responsive leadership.

Listening itself is not an apolitical act because it involves recognizing the “other” and is a prerequisite to respecting their needs. It can have far-reaching effects. Later, this same Vietnamese community with support from Common Ground legal clinic volunteers, blockaded roads, preventing a waste facility from being made in their community (di Santis, 2007, p. 382; Krupa and Russell, 2011).

Speaking from the steps of St. Augustine Church in New Orleans where Common Ground volunteers were assisting the residents of Treme in defense of their church, Jerome Smith, eloquently articulates, a key component of why Common Ground and Occupy Sandy won the hearts and minds of disaster survivors: their desire to be treated as an equal despite being a victim of disaster.

Jerome: I dare him to call the children that visit to service our town the outsiders. This is not physical geography. This is not physical geography. This is a spiritual collective. When I went to Mississippi, and they beat us in McComb, and they jailed us in Parchman, and they dogged us but in Alabama, they said we was outsiders. When we were freedom riders and sitting in across the country with John Lewis and others they said we was outsiders. Now something else is gonna happen here. They may leave. But I’mma go in there and I’mma ask those people who are goodwill throughout America who marched with us in all these different towns, let’s come back here. Let’s make New Orleans the Mississippi summer. We are not helpless. We are not helpless. We are not helpless (Entell, 2007).
CHAPTER 5
DISCUSSION

I don't believe in charity. I believe in solidarity. Charity is so vertical. It goes from the top to the bottom. Solidarity is horizontal. It respects the other person. I have a lot to learn from other people.
—Eduardo Galeano

Louder Than Bombs: Interviews from The Progressive Magazine

Solidarity vs. Charity

These often quoted words of writer and journalist Eduardo Galeano act as a distillation of one of the primary ways Common Ground and Occupy Sandy’s grassroots disaster relief work is distinctive. Mutual aid disaster relief is mutual because participation is transformative for both the disaster relief volunteer and the survivor of disaster.

In sheer numbers, the amount of people larger organizations such as the American Red Cross assists far overshadows smaller grassroots community organizations like Common Ground or Occupy Sandy. What prevents these large institutions from responding to people’s needs in the way grassroots organizations like Common Ground or Occupy Sandy does is their incapacity or unwillingness to: 1) ground their disaster relief work in socio-economic realities of oppression and inequality and resistance to these realities, 2) adopt a culture of mutuality, including listening to survivors of disaster, being affected, and blurring the dividing line between service providers and service recipients, and 3) work to include survivors of disasters as equals, which necessitates sharing power.

Common Ground had roots in the global justice movement and black power movement. Occupy Sandy was an outgrowth of the occupy movement, that itself was a continuation of the global justice movement, which was influenced heavily by the
Zapatista uprising (Hayduk, 2013; Routledge & Cumbers, 2009). These social movement roots gave these disaster relief organizations an intimate familiarity with inequality and injustice and a willingness to challenge them. Common Ground and Occupy Sandy understood disaster in a wider context. To them, disaster was “different in degree, not in kind, from the ongoing experience of social inequality for many in the United States” (Luft, 2009). Their disaster relief work was part of their social justice work. This interdependent frame of reference—an understanding that they too, just like those they were assisting, were exploited by capitalism and the state—created the conditions for partnership, solidarity and mutual aid to arise. This movement experience further led these grassroots organizations to prioritize asking, listening, learning, working with, and sharing power with impacted individuals and communities, largely eliminating bureaucracy in the process.

We live in a world contextualized by race, class and numerous other structural inequalities. Thus, impartiality and neutrality to issues of marginalization and oppression translates into complicity (Delgado, 2012). As Paulo Freire notes, “Washing one’s hands of the conflict between the powerful and the powerless means to side with the powerful, not to be neutral” (Freire, 1985, p. 122). Neutrality is even more impossible when grounded in the reality that disasters simply unmask the social injustice and fault lines that pre-existed before the catastrophic event (Erikson, 1995; Hoffman & Smith, 2002). This broader context of ongoing U.S. social and economic injustice made New Orleans and New York economic and social disaster zones long before Katrina and Sandy made landfall. Hence the term “unnatural disaster” (Barnshaw, 2006; Hartman & Squires, 2006; Reed & Reed, 2006). In order to respond effectively to the needs of disaster
survivors, disaster relief organizations must carry an awareness of the social inequalities that cause certain groups of people to be most vulnerable during a crisis. Successful disaster relief organizations must have the willingness to act on this awareness, addressing people’s needs, which means addressing power, powerlessness, and structural inequality. This is a political act. Furthermore, to choose not to do this is just as much a political act as well, all notions of “neutrality” aside.

Hierarchical relationships, based on class and race, forced into light by a disaster, are only reinforced by charitable institutions unless they address privilege and power. Self-determination and agency are critical in this process. If disaster relief organizations refuse to align themselves with the populations they are serving and fail to share power with those they are purportedly helping, those relief groups in effect collude with and perpetuate oppression, human rights abuses, and reinforce a sense of powerlessness. It is patronizing, selfish, creates a sharp dividing line between those who have and those who do not, solidifies disaster survivor’s position as needy, helpless victims, and further entrenches the existing socio-economic order. These charitable organizations’ self-proclaimed neutrality, and their position of superiority furthers the continuation of oppressed peoples’ marginalization. And their vertical model is not effectively responsive to the self-determined needs of the people it serves. Although at times filling necessary functions, these large institutions nevertheless become tools of oppression by defining individuals and communities’ needs for them, rather than listening and responding to the self-determined needs of disaster impacted individuals and communities.
Charity does not question existing unjust relationships in society. It takes them for granted, and in fact, it reinforces them by perpetuating a sense of superiority among those who give aid and a sense of inferiority among those who receive it. Although in close proximity, these two groups exist in worlds apart. Given an elevated position of power, those who engage in charity have no accountability to disaster survivors, which leads them to invalidate the needs of those they are supposed to serve, ignore the knowledge, skills, capabilities and resources of survivors, and even undermine the organization’s own mission. This has a profoundly disempowering effect on those these institutions are purportedly helping, increasing their marginalization and vulnerability.

People impacted by disasters have more of a stake in their own survival and well-being than well-intentioned paternalistic givers of charity, and these people will firmly grasp the tools to participate in a communal recovery given the chance. Survivors of disasters look for accomplices who can assist them in achieving this communal recovery without imposing the stigma of receiving worn-out clothes and pitying looks that accompanies many charitable institution’s offers of assistance.

In contrast, Common Ground and Occupy Sandy adopted a mutual aid, solidarity-based approach. One component of this approach was a self-awareness of the role that they played in perpetuating relationships of inequality and a willingness to attempt to use the social rewards of being part of an oppressor class to spread power and resources more equitably. Those impacted by Katrina or Sandy were not seen as passive consumers of assistance, empty vessels to be filled with water or blankets. They were seen as powerful actors with their own desires and their own skills and
resources, but oppressed by disaster capitalism and aloof, unresponsive, or deliberately antagonistic state power.

Furthermore, it is not only the actions that are taken, but the way in which they are taken that matters. Common Ground and Occupy Sandy attempted to operate horizontally, subverting traditional power imbalances between the givers and receivers of aid. Rather than be content in their powerful role as givers of philanthropy and set themselves apart from or superior to those they were helping, Common Ground and Occupy Sandy volunteers worked to overturn this arrangement. Everybody who was capable gave, and everybody who needed received. These intentions broke down the boundaries that divided the two from each other, allowing connections to be formed that went beyond a superficial staff and client relationship. This enhanced relationship included, for some, the sometimes painful, but ultimately rewarding and transformative experience of opening up to others’ suffering.

Common Ground and Occupy Sandy responded in a flexible, responsive and extremely effective manner by not assuming everybody’s needs are the same or that they know best what a community needs, but instead acting humbly, asking, listening, and responding. To Common Ground and Occupy Sandy, disaster victims and survivors had a right to be part of a communal recovery. They recognized survivors’ rights to have a say in what their needs were and how best others could assist them. These factors led even usual enemies to nevertheless concede that this mutual aid, solidarity-based approach works.

In a Department of Homeland Security prepared report, highlighting the array of programs, volunteers, responsiveness, inclusiveness and effectiveness of Occupy
Sandy, these authors praised Occupy Sandy’s approach saying: “Unlike traditional disaster response organizations, there were no appointed leaders, no bureaucracy, no regulations to follow, no pre-defined mission, charter, or strategic plan. There was just relief” (Ambinder et al., 2013, p. 1). According to the Homeland Security report, there were five key factors that contributed to Occupy Sandy’s notable success. These factors included its non-hierarchical structure, use of social media, leverage of Occupy Wall Street networks, utilization of community’s existing resources, and transparency (Ambinder et al., 2013). Thus, the effectiveness of mutual aid disaster relief ultimately led an organization whose task is often to monitor and crush social movement organizing, to nevertheless conclude: “We can learn lessons from Occupy Sandy’s successes to ensure a ready and resilient nation” (Ambinder et al., 2013, p. 2).

**Beyond Protest**

Common Ground and Occupy Sandy bred a togetherness and sense of camaraderie between what before were mostly strangers. The spell of isolation was broken, even if only temporarily. Just as other scholars have noted previously, intimate involvement in disaster relief strengthens social capital (Onstad et al., 2012). Some of these relationships lasted, others did not. It was not just those Common Ground and Occupy Sandy assisted who were being empowered. Both Common Ground and Occupy Sandy created the conditions for intimate bonding of like-minded souls in the relief efforts and promoted the bridging of individuals from diverse backgrounds. Finding each other, acting directly and acting in concert with people affected to achieve their survival and other needs, gave locals, Common Ground participants, and Occupy Sandy participants a strong sense of inner power and fertilized their imagination with
new possibilities. Key to this felt belonging was the coordination by equals for radical ends while engaging in tangible, practical work to meet people’s self-determined needs. On the one hand, white radicals and volunteers did not enter into relationships of superiority, where they dictated how best people of color or other locals should organize themselves or resist. On the other hand, black radicals did not foster a one-sided, uncritical, dependent relationship in which white activists did not have autonomy. Instead, they worked side by side, and sided with those they were assisting. In advocating for respecting the self-determination and agency of those impacted by disaster, they did not neglect their own self-determination and agency. Thus, on multiple fronts, Common Ground and Occupy Sandy broke dividing lines between “us” and “them.”

Nonviolent civil disobedience was always on the table as a tactic to support marginalized and oppressed individuals and communities. But regardless of whether defying laws or not, Common Ground and Occupy Sandy’s tactics consisted overwhelmingly of different forms of direct action, in which rather than attempt to convince the government or other powerful actors to make decisions and take action that would positively affect disaster impacted individuals and communities, they broke the inertia of symbolic actions. When residents’ needs were the continuation of their spiritual community, Common Ground volunteers sought out their voices, and responded to help residents keep their church. When residents’ needs were schools for their children, Common Ground volunteers listened to their voices, and risked arrest to open an elementary school. From housing defense, to culturally sensitive supplies, to mobile distribution, and in dozens of different ways, Common Ground and Occupy
Sandy achieved the concrete goals these individuals and communities needed directly, abandoning the far more common tactic of appealing to traditional power structures.

**Challenges**

Common Ground and Occupy Sandy were not activist utopias. Despite anti-oppression trainings and other attempts at stemming oppressive behavior, racism and sexism still were present (Luft, 2008). In addition, one early leader of Common Ground Relief, Brandon Darby, who later was revealed to be an FBI informant and agent provocateur, alienated a number of female volunteers by his domineering macho tendencies, harassment, and sexual violence (Morris, 2010). Although not in the purview of this study, given Brandon Darby’s outing as an informant and his irregular theme of militant posturing in The Post-Katrina Portraits, it is perhaps grounds for further research to explore the possible correlation between militant posturing and being an infiltrating agent of the state.

Confrontational tactics, familiar to those involved in social movement organizing, can be used to advance disaster survivors’ interests, but it is not appropriate for all occasions. To insist on confrontation at all times, even when disaster survivors do not wish it, is not radical and is in fact just as imperialistic as insisting on no confrontation when disaster survivors are needing and requesting allies for radical action. It takes a constant organizational self-awareness and willingness to critically reflect in order to not fall back into the trap of colonial modes within our solidarity efforts.

Common Ground can be thought of as a mediating organization linking the traditional revolutionary organizing style of the Black Panthers and the diffuse leadership or horizontalism of Occupy Sandy. All three didn't share decision-making
power within their organizations equally, but all three did share power with the communities they were in support of, listening, asking, and responding to people’s needs, while articulating support for radical social change.

These examples of Common Ground not living up to its ideals should not be glossed over or ignored. At the same time, it does not undo the critical, groundbreaking disaster relief solidarity work that Common Ground pioneered, and Occupy Sandy extended. It is not a matter of whether manifestations of hierarchical power arise in our social movements and organizations, but when. When this does happen, it is critical to name it for what it is, and that this power be contested.

**In the Nonprofit Industrial Complex, but not of It**

During and immediately after disasters, the powerful recognize the vulnerability of poverty as something that needs to be addressed, at least temporarily. Addressing vulnerability is key to advancing resilience. It needs to be addressed, irrespective of whether or not there is a disaster. But there is a window of opportunity wherein people’s needs, especially those most vulnerable or exploited, are on the conscience and the agenda of those with access to power and resources. Under normal circumstances in our society, impoverished people, especially impoverished Black people, are beaten or shot to prevent their acquisition of needed or desired resources, as in the case of looting. However, in the context of a disaster, the authorities are willing and eager to distribute needed goods to volunteers who then distribute these needed goods to impoverished people. For those of us who seek to stand in solidarity with poor and oppressed individuals and communities, why not enthusiastically, graciously, and humbly, accept this mediating role, provided it does not come with regulations that limit
our ability to side with those we are supporting? This was essentially the practice of Common Ground and Occupy Sandy, whether or not it was professed. This approach essentially gained the same material ends people might have achieved through looting—the redistribution of goods from the state, corporations or wealthy donors into the hands of the poor and oppressed—but with consent and more perceived legitimacy. Common Ground and Occupy Sandy were boundary organizations, enabling those impacted by disasters to access the resources of large institutions such as FEMA and the Red Cross, while simultaneously shielding survivors, at least somewhat, from the disempowering and stigmatizing experience of being a passive recipient of charitable assistance from these organizations.

The non-profit industrial complex is a term which describes how non-profit organizations are wedded to sources of power and money and larger systems which have no desire to advance, and might hinder or undermine, movements for social change (Incite! Women of color against violence, 2007). It is an act of power to allocate. One decides who is worthy and unworthy, based on chosen criteria. Wealthy donors decide what and how much to give to foundations. Foundations do the same to nonprofits. And nonprofits generally do the same to impacted individuals. In each step, the organization can be subservient to its funder and hold power over those to whom they are giving.

While existing in this overall context, Occupy Sandy and Common Ground nevertheless were content receiving only what others were freely willing to give them, but not be beholden to any funders. With this freedom, they were able to side wholly with those they were assisting. These mutual aid disaster relief organizations rejected
the role of gatekeeper and the unspoken rule of parceling out power and resources, but instead chose to share freely without restrictions. In the nonviolent martial art of Aikido, the movements change, but the consistent strategy is to stay just outside an opponent’s sphere of action, while staying balanced and rooted and drawing the opponent into one’s own sphere of action (Ueshiba, 2002). Common Ground and Occupy Sandy achieved this on a macro-level. Through this principled stance, existing within yet against the nonprofit industrial complex, Common Ground and Occupy Sandy both gained the respect of those they assisted and, surprisingly, funders as well.

Contrary to what some might have assumed, this principled solidarity was found to be not just financially viable, but actually highly desirable to funders, many who had grown tired of the charity social service model and craved a more meaningful and authentic relationship and impact. In doing mutual aid disaster relief, and even vocally and unashamedly siding with those impacted by disasters, especially those most marginalized, there was no shortage of people, some even wealthy, who felt an affinity for Common Ground and Occupy Sandy’s modes of organizing, tactics, vision, and long-term goals. For example, Michael Moore supported Common Ground financially with tens of thousands of dollars (Holm, 2006), as did The Body Shop founder, Anita Roddick.

This all works, provided those involved do not become too comfortable, and are able to continue to reject the temptation of power. If, however, in order to achieve funding or maintain a superior position as givers of aid, mutual aid disaster relief organizations find themselves dictating the priorities or needs of impacted individuals and communities, rather than encouraging and responding to their self-determination,
then it is clear that they need to re-center their priorities. Over years, Common Ground, still in operation in New Orleans, slowly evolved into a more traditional non-profit organization (Crow, 2011). Occupy Sandy, slowly dissipated and used its remaining resources and funds to advance other organizations and people’s recovery projects with whom they felt an affinity (B. Cooper, personal communication, February 7, 2016).

Power will always be offering the opportunity for comfort and complacency, stature, and prestige. Mutual aid disaster relief opens up avenues of power, but we should be wary of who our elbows are rubbing next to, lest we lose our urgency and fighting spirit. If mutual aid disaster relief organizations are to become longer-lasting, they must show that they are immune to the allures of co-optation. And once this is made clear, prepare for and weather the discrediting campaign or other repression that will likely follow this realization (Moore, 1981; Churchill & Vander Hall, 2002; Cunningham, 2003; Earl, 2005).

**Movement Building**

A mutual aid, solidarity-based, grassroots model of disaster relief, in addition to meeting the self-determined needs of disaster survivors more effectively, has the added benefit of building bridges, serving to unite disparate elements of social justice and liberation movements and build power from below. People as ideologically far apart as well-known liberal documentarian Michael Moore and radical insurrectionary anarchist authors of The Coming Insurrection in France both highlight Common Ground and the work this organization was able to accomplish as worth supporting and replicating. The insurrectionary anarchists described the array of grassroots programs of Common Ground and claimed in New Orleans after Katrina, “forgotten forms are reborn,” and
“reconnecting with such gestures, buried under years of normalized life, is the only practicable means of not sinking down with the world, while we dream of an age that is equal to our passions” (Invisible Committee, 2008 p. 83-84). Common Ground, the name these grassroots organizers chose, becomes even more fitting with hindsight. The Occupy Movement, similarly gained new respect and attracted new energy and enthusiasm through its disaster relief work.

Through mutual aid, solidarity-based disaster relief, not only did Common Ground and Occupy Sandy volunteers do the revolutionary work of finding each other and building real and lasting bonds, they also built up capacity to continue advocating for a radical transformation of society. A New Orleans Women’s Health Clinic, Women’s Health and Justice Initiative, Safe Streets – Strong Communities, and the New Orleans Workers’ Center for Racial Justice all trace their ancestry back to grassroots responses to Katrina (Luft, 2009). The Common Ground Clinic also played a role in the formation and growth of the People’s Organization of Community Acupuncture, a co-op network of now over 140 clinics providing affordable community acupuncture (Lindstrom & Rohleder, 2014). This is in addition to the Common Ground projects that are still in operation, that although not as broad-based as the original disaster relief work, nevertheless continue to perform positive community-oriented work. Occupy Sandy helped make possible long-term recovery organizations in Staten Island, Brooklyn, Lower East Side, and the Rockaways.

Black Panther Programs, as mentioned earlier an ideological ancestor of Common Ground, aimed to, in the words of Black Panther Party Chief of Staff David Hilliard, “satisfy the immediate needs of the people while simultaneously raising their
level of consciousness” (Chideya, 1995, p. 83). Grassroots responses to Katrina and Sandy did the same. As all these ripple effects demonstrate, meeting people’s urgent, immediate needs has the potential to further collective movements advocating for deep, structural change. Regardless of the long-term effects of mutual aid, solidarity based, participatory disaster relief, the shared-power and decision-making with impacted individuals and communities is a perfect example of what Breines (1989) and Sitrin (2007) refer to as “prefigurative politics” or embodying in current actions the future society one wants to create.

Disasters, in addition to being fertile ground to merge social movement theory and praxis, are also opportunities for the rich and powerful to consolidate power and to take advantage of shocks in order to institute economic reforms that further reinforce their privileged status (Klein, 2007). We do not have to look far to see examples of this. One of the examples Naomi Klein uses in her book Shock Doctrine to illustrate this exact point is the privatization of the New Orleans public school system after Hurricane Katrina (Klein, 2007). Disasters thus can become fertile ground for entrenching political, social, and economic disparities and more hopelessness, or they can become fertile ground for building power from below and rekindling hope. Which possibility is realized, depends on the choices we make.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

This research examines an alternative approach to disaster relief. One that I have intimate experience with. I, as a researcher lay no claims to impartiality or neutrality. This subjectivity, including my personal experiences with the subject matter, influenced the conclusions I reached. The data were subject to my interpretations.
However, I, and my interpretations were also subject to the data, meticulously coding, and reevaluating my assumptions in pursuit of emergent themes. In addition, I included as many voices of Common Ground and Occupy Sandy volunteers as possible from as many diverse sources as possible. I also provided drafts of the results and discussion to others affiliated with Common Ground and Occupy Sandy in order to authenticate my investigation, further strengthening the validity and reliability of the findings.

Further research is needed to establish whether there is a quantitative difference between top-down traditional relief agencies propensity to allow for participation and shared power and grassroots, mutual aid disaster relief’s propensity to allow for participation and shared power. In addition, other avenues for further research include exploring the importance of youth and generational cultural impacts to disaster response, exploring the role mutuality plays in the short and long term effects of emotional stress and fatigue associated with responding to extreme events, examining whether differences exist in propensity to allow for participation and shared power between paid staff and volunteers of the same organization, exploring the effect of catalysts in the process of the creation of mutual aid disaster relief organizations, as well as investigating the importance of new technology and social media to new approaches to disaster relief.

**Conclusion**

I have learned that a mutual aid, solidarity-based approach is more nuanced than I first imagined. Social justice context, shared power and mutuality were all important components of this approach, substantiating my personal experiences in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. I too, interpreted my disaster relief work as social justice work.
When I came to deliver truckloads of water, residents would see that I was focused on assisting others and largely neglecting myself. These residents would offer me ice cold water, reminding me that we were all taking care of each other and supporting each other the best we could. Many others also experienced this two-way exchange. I, like others, engaged in nonviolent civil disobedience prompted by the self-determined needs of disaster survivors, first by going past checkpoints in order to deliver supplies and later by participating in the occupation of St. Augustine Church.

However, there were elements of this mutual aid disaster relief approach that I originally glossed over. Looking back, I experienced these subthemes as well, but only in diving into the perspectives of others was I made conscious of these element’s importance. For example, I knew I was affected immensely by the suffering, loss, and justifiable anger of those impacted and, largely abandoned after Katrina. I remember the heart-break I felt. But only in reading again and again in other volunteers’ accounts did I realize that this openness, vulnerability and willingness to emotionally engage with survivors of disaster was an important component to Common Ground and Occupy Sandy’s approach. Rather than a single thread accounting for the distinctiveness of this approach, mutual aid disaster relief was a large and rich tapestry, with many interrelated elements combining to offer a dynamic alternative to traditional top-down charitable approaches to responding to disasters.

This model furthered movements for systemic societal change at the same time that it provided direct services to those in need in a way that respected their self-determination, thereby decreasing vulnerability and increasing empowerment and resilience of both individuals and communities. It built power from below, while
contesting systems of domination and exploitation. Grassroots, mutual aid, solidarity-based disaster relief, in short, is effective disaster relief and has the potential to truly build resilient, more connected, and more empowered communities. With the looming threat of climate change, we come face to face with our vulnerability. But not all populations will suffer from the effects of climate change and the extreme weather it creates, equally. Disaster vulnerability and societal inequalities and injustices cannot be separated. If there is to be effective disaster relief wherein authentic, meaningful participation is allowed to exist, it must take into account the self-determined needs of the populations they are supposed to serve. And it must not divorce itself from the current and historic socio-economic contexts that these needs derive from. Effective disaster relief organizations must listen to and develop relationships that break down the hierarchical divisions between themselves and the people they aim to support.

Whether future disasters become focal points for the powerful to further entrench policies that uphold their privilege or whether they become opportunities to build more empowered and resilient individuals and communities and strengthen our movements for radical social change remains to be seen. Regardless of what the future holds, mutual aid from below, grounded in anti-oppression struggles, with meaningful participation and shared power as key elements, is now part of our collective toolbox.

This model should be expanded for future disasters, with a focus on organizational or network sustainability and continuity without becoming too institutionalized or rigid so as to offer the many benefits of a mutual aid disaster relief approach to more individuals and communities impacted by disasters. This approach can be replicated in non-disaster settings as well. Addressing poverty and other
injustices and including those affected as co-decision makers decreases vulnerability and increases social capital and resilience. Connected, empowered, and conscious community members are the best line of defense against both powerful anti-democratic political and economic interests and extreme weather events. As far as large relief organizations and governments are concerned, they would do well to renounce their top-down approaches, heed the tide and transition from a business/consumer or charitable social service model to a model based on respectful partnership with those impacted by disasters.

Creating resilient communities cannot be left to city planners, scholars, and other experts. If it is, it will remain just a buzzword. To truly build empowered and resilient individuals and communities, we must look to our own capacity to self-organize in a spirit of mutual aid and solidarity, and prioritize sharing power with those impacted by disasters. Without this, participation too remains a buzzword, lacking any real substance. Participation without partnership, without sharing control and direction is just a democratic façade. When authentic, meaningful participation is present, in the form of shared power between so called “service provider” and “service user”, ultimately breaking down these distinctions, this is breeding ground for existing systems of domination in the larger society to be challenged. Democracy is not comfortable for the powerful. We see this in The Post-Katrina Portraits with the examples of the Martin Luther King School, St. Augustine Church, and the Vietnamese community successfully keeping their community from becoming another environmental racism statistic.

Through primary source documents written by relief workers and Katrina survivors, supported by additional interviews, newspaper articles and other sources, this
new horizon of participatory disaster relief is clearly conveyed by the people who experienced it. This approach 1) contextualizes disaster relief work as social justice work whose larger aim is to achieve liberation from oppression, 2) breaks down the borders between volunteers and those impacted by disasters via a two way mutual exchange that involves mutual giving, mutual gratitude, listening, being affected, and recognizing others as similar to oneself, 3) offers opportunities for meaningful, authentic participation to disaster survivors, which necessitates sharing power and leads to a responsiveness to the self-determined needs of survivors. This model was not perfect and had its own internal contradictions and challenges, but simultaneously met the self-determined needs of disaster survivors, contributed to their empowerment and resilience, undermined false notions of superiority and inferiority among givers and receivers of aid, and strengthened movements for social change. Common Ground and Occupy Sandy existed in the context of a nonprofit system that often times reinforces the existing social order rather than fundamentally challenging it, but simultaneously rebelled against that system. Common Ground and Occupy Sandy both positioned themselves wholly on the side of those impacted by disasters, especially those most marginalized. This alignment offered disaster survivors a dignified path towards a communal recovery supported by allies and accomplices.

Participatory horizons can mean two diametrically opposed realities that are both coexisting currently. On the one hand, horizons means the limits of a person’s perception or experience. In this way, it is representative of the limit of the naïve view that involvement alone is enough. How far can participation without sharing power take us? If the past is any indication, it will only take us to the familiar dead ends we have
known so well. On the other hand, as Common Ground and Occupy Sandy exemplify, if we have the courage to truly value the voices and lives of disaster survivors, as equals, which means respecting their needs as they define them for themselves, there is the sun of a new day waiting to rise where the ocean meets the sky – a radical new approach to disaster relief and to social movement organizing, come just in time for the storm clouds that even now are threatening in the distance.
## APPENDIX
**COMPLETE POST-KATRINA PORTRAIT CODES AND FREQUENCY**

### Table A-1. Complete Post-Katrina Portrait codes and frequency

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Codes</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Autobiographical narrative</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Receiving from experience</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being affected</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critique of government</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working with</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critique of capitalism</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Militant posturing</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Movement Roots</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Civil disobedience</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listening</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shared decision-making power</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overwhelmed</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recounting military/police violence</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race consciousness</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Context of revolution</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sense of belonging</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critique of large charities</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loss</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taking initiative</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critique of fellow volunteers</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expression of gratitude</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>See self in others</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Critique of FEMA</td>
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<tr>
<td>Environmental consciousness</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fear of locals</td>
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<tr>
<td>Religious reference</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health concern</td>
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<tr>
<td>Recounting vigilante violence</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critique of media</td>
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</table>
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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

James Dunson was a member of Common Ground Collective and Common Ground Relief. He graduated magna cum laude in 2013 from the University of South Florida with a Bachelor of Arts Degree in interdisciplinary social sciences with concentrations in social work and international studies. At the University of South Florida he was awarded the Martin Luther King Jr. Award for Social Justice. In May of 2016, James graduated from the University of Florida with a degree of Master of Science in family, youth and community sciences with a concentration in nonprofit organization development. He was also awarded the Outstanding Graduate & Professional Student Impact Award by University of Florida’s Center for Leadership and Service.