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Statement of Research/Scholarly Accomplishments and Future Goals

As a new tenure-track assistant professor in the Sociology Department in August 2005, I was interested in social organization, community and political economy having studied and worked in these areas for a decade in Italy. Since I was not a European Union citizen, I was not eligible for full-time academic positions in that country and was therefore employed in related occupations conducting research, teaching part-time and implementing economic development policy. When I returned to the U.S. in 2002 it was to take an administrative position in international education that did not encourage the cultivation of my early research interests. As a result, I began to seek opportunities to move into a full-time academic position in sociology, applied for the job at Sam Houston State University (SHSU), and was hired to begin in August 2005.

Just weeks into my first semester at SHSU, Hurricanes Katrina and Rita hit the Gulf Coast. The Huntsville area was faced with significant numbers of evacuees from these two events. As a sociologist I was fascinated as I watched and participated in the community’s response efforts. Those formative months have shaped my research agenda for the past five years and continue to do so today. Using qualitative methods (typically a mix of semi-structured interviews, participant observation, field work and content analysis of secondary sources), I explore how communities respond to disasters and environmental hazards. My main research question is: when faced with disaster, why are some communities better able to respond effectively and recover quickly than others?

Answering this question is crucial to understanding disasters, how to safeguard against them, prepare for them when they threaten, and recover from them when they occur. Even as the frequency and intensity of disasters is increasing, many of the scholars (including venerated sociologists) who founded the field of disaster studies have retired or will soon retire. The field of disaster studies is rapidly expanding as is the emergency management profession, particularly since the 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. As the field of disaster studies grows and becomes more professional, there is increased need for sociologists to ensure that research, planning, policy and training is informed by knowledge of social structure and social forces.

My work connects the study of disasters to broader sociological concepts in several ways. Most recently, with Robert Antonio and Alessandro Bonanno, I examine the social consequences when economic policy limits disaster mitigation, planning and recovery, in a case study of Hurricane Ike’s impact on the greater Houston area. The latent social control inherent in disaster recovery after Hurricane Katrina is revealed in an article that looks at long-term struggles of survivors through a lens of social control. Furthermore, changes to emergency management plans after Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, and before Hurricane Ike, revealed evidence of a more collective conceptualization of resources necessary to effectively respond to disasters. This trend is outlined in an article with colleague Karen Douglas.
Additionally, there are several specific aspects of disasters that have been relatively understudied. I also contribute to the literature in several specific areas of disaster research. The first is a focus on community response. Although this was one of the main themes of early disaster literature, it has been addressed much less frequently in recent years. I reexamine community response with a particular emphasis on how rural communities deal with disaster. Another specific area of study is off-site convergence: the movement of people and resources to locations outside of the disaster impact area for safety (evacuation and sheltering) and to stage response and recovery initiatives. This displacement affects the people who are uprooted and the receiving communities. The 2005 hurricanes led to work on the community reception of evacuees. Most recently, my work looks at how social capital in small communities, particularly rural communities, is or is not able to be mobilized to face environmental threats.

Each project is briefly described below. In sum, my research activity while at SHSU includes:

- 21 research presentations at academic conferences
- 6 articles
- 2 book chapters
- 1 monograph – policy “white paper”
- 1 encyclopedia entry
- 4 grants
- Reviewer for Children, Youth & Environments Special Issue on Children and Disasters and Natural Hazards Review
- Guest assistant editorship at Natural Hazards Review

Underway (to be completed in the next three months) are:

- 1 book chapter
- 1 article
- 1 grant application
- ASA session organization
- Assistant Editorship of Rural Sociology beginning in January 2011

Research at SHSU

My first project at SHSU, “Collective Disaster Responses to Katrina and Rita: Exploring Therapeutic Community, Social Capital and Social Control,” (2007) explored how the concept of social capital could help understand the strengths and weaknesses of the community’s response to the two hurricanes: in one case the reception of evacuees and the other the reception of evacuees plus the direct effects of the storm. Its publication in a Special Issue on Communities and Disasters of Southern Rural Sociology established a foundation for my work on rural responses to disasters. This project benefitted from a grant from the Bill Blackwood Law Enforcement Management Institute of Texas - LEMIT.
As I learned about county and city emergency response plans and interviewed community leaders about Hurricane response, I was also beginning to hear of people doing similar work on Hurricane Katrina across the U.S. I was invited to participate in the Research Network on Persons Displaced by Hurricane Katrina organized and sponsored by the Social Science Research Council. This network met six times from 2006-2010 and has resulted in multiple conference presentations at the national level. In 2008, this work led to a grant from the Social Science Research Council to study the long-term community impact of people displaced to rural East Texas due to Hurricane Katrina. This research project and resulting presentations culminated in a forthcoming collaborative volume on the diaspora created by Hurricane Katrina. My two chapters, “Katrina Evacuee Reception in Rural East Texas: Rethinking Disaster ‘Recovery’” and “Receiving Communities and Persons Displaced by Hurricane Katrina” have been accepted for publication in *Displaced: Voices from the Katrina Diaspora*, edited by Lynn Weber and Lori Peek and forthcoming from the University of Texas Press.

Drawing on my community response research, social capital and innovation in disaster response and recovery was the topic of a paper I gave in 2007 at the University of Ferrara in Italy. It is the basis for the article “‘Cooperazione e Capitale Sociale nei Disastri’ (Cooperation and Social Capital in Disasters)” written in Italian and published in 2008 in Italy’s leading journal on cooperation and the cooperative movement, *Rivista della Cooperazione*.

Also in 2007, with colleagues from Eastern Illinois University and the University of Colorado, I applied for a Quick Response Grant from the Natural Hazards Center at the University of Colorado. We were awarded the grant to study off-site evacuation in the project entitled “Exploring the Social Impact of Off-Site Disaster Convergence.” We did not mobilize during the year of the grant award since events in the U.S. during the grant timeline did not meet our project parameters or were not logistically feasible with our limited budget.

The article “Controlling Disasters: Recognizing Latent Goals in Katrina’s Aftermath” emerged as a theme from the research on people affected by Hurricane Katrina who were still suffering loss and uncertainty years after the hurricane. This article’s forthcoming publication in *Disasters: The Journal of Disaster Studies, Policy and Management*, one of the most prestigious journals in the field of disaster studies, will give me and the SHSU Sociology Department added international visibility.

More general considerations about how conceptualizations of safety, emergency management, planning and land uses have changed between Hurricanes Katrina in 2005 and Hurricane Ike in 2008 were the focus of the work I have done with SHSU colleague Karen Douglas. We have presented this work in several venues and have produced a paper entitled “Safety as a Community Resource: Lessons from Hurricanes Katrina, Rita and Ike” currently under review at *City & Community*.

In 2009, I was asked to be a Guest Assistant Editor of *Natural Hazards Review*, published by the Natural Hazards Center at the University of Colorado and I continue to serve in this capacity.

Hurricane Ike’s impact left the greater Houston area without power for weeks. The slow restoration of power and subsequent claims by utility companies taught the local area about the dangers of hyper capitalism and it’s resistance to long-term investments in infrastructure that exacerbate losses during
major storms. These issues are explored in the article “Hazards of Neoliberalism: Delayed Electric Power Restoration after Hurricane Ike” written with Robert Antonio (University of Kansas) and Alessandro Bonanno (Sam Houston State University) and under revision at the British Journal of Sociology.

In the last two years, I have extended my work to examine technological, or man-made, disasters; specifically environmental disasters and hazards. While most work in this area has focused on high-impact events like the Exxon-Valdez oil spill, I am interested in how rural communities respond to environmental hazards. In 2008 I was awarded an SHSU Faculty Enhancement Grant for Professional Development to study “Social Capital and Community Response to Toxic Hazards.” This research has resulted in a paper presentation at the Midwest Sociological Society, a poster presentation at the SHSU College of Humanities and Social Sciences Research Conference, and a paper presented at the International Sociological Association World Congress in Gothenburg, Sweden in July 2010. The first paper from this work is under revision with the Journal of Southern Rural Social Sciences.

Illustrative of my interest in Public Sociology, I act as an informal advisor to grassroots community organizations working on environmental hazards in Texas. Included in my publications is a “White Paper on Class I Non-Hazardous Injection Wells” that I spearheaded and co-authored. It has been distributed to congressional committees working on the sunset review of the Texas Commission of Environmental Quality and state and local environmental activist organizations. While not an academic publication, its visibility to communities, activists and lawmakers, and potential impact on environmental policy, are significant.

Current projects

A book chapter on risk perception in rural communities stemming from the project on toxic hazards presented at the International Sociological Association is underway for the volume Risk and Social Theory in Environmental Management (forthcoming 2011), edited by Stuart Lockie and Tom Measham.

Also underway is an article with SHSU colleague Mary Ann Davis entitled “Where Do Babies Go? Post-Disaster Adoptions and Foster Care Placements after Hurricane Katrina and the 2010 Haitian Earthquake.” This has been submitted for presentation at the 2011 Midwest Sociological Society meetings in St. Louis.

With colleagues at Texas A&M’s School of Rural Public Health and the U.S. Center for Disabilities, I have developed a project exploring rural emergency service provision to people with functional disabilities. We are currently revising a grant entitled “Rural Community Resilience: Supporting Individuals with Functional Needs in Emergencies” for resubmission to the National Science Foundation (Infrastructure Management and Extreme Events Program).

In October 2010 I was invited by the program committee of the 2011 Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Association to organize a paper session on “Risk.”

Beginning in January 2011 I will be the Assistant Editor of Rural Sociology.
Research Goals

I am hopeful that the project on rural emergency service provision to people with functional needs will be funded and will proceed. If it does, it will be a major research focus from 2011-2013.

During the summer of 2011 I plan to develop a proposal for a book on technological disasters in Texas. Introductory chapters will frame incidents in the historical, socio-political and cultural contexts of the state’s pro-business and anti-regulation policies and explore factors shaping community perceptions of risk. Several case studies will follow. Conclusions will underline how the state’s neoliberal policy regime threatens mitigation efforts and creates unsafe environments.