

The Double-Edged Sword of *Disaster Volunteerism*: A Study of New Orleans Rebirth Movement Participants

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We examine the political and personal effects of disaster volunteerism with participants of the New Orleans Rebirth Movement (NORM) using four waves of pre- and postsurveys and qualitative analysis of participant journals. Significant increases are found in internal political efficacy, desire to be active in politics, and value placed on social justice issues, but disaster volunteerism also dramatically increases cynicism and emotional distress. Nearly every NORM participant in the study experienced emotional stress, and 1-in-5 self-medicated as a coping strategy upon one's return. Disaster volunteerism holds the potential to rapidly accelerate social justice consciousness and activism, even among those already inclined to be active, but the cost is high. Further research on this unique and increasingly popular type of community-based learning is needed.

Keywords college-age students, community-based learning, disaster volunteerism, Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans, New Orleans Rebirth Movement (NORM), political efficacy, social movements

Introduction

Hurricane Katrina ravaged the Gulf Coast on August 29, 2005, permanently displacing over 100,000 residents and costing a total of \$149 billion in property damage (Hallegate 2008). Over a million people have migrated to the Gulf Coast to engage in short-term volunteering since 2005 (Corporation for National and Community Service 2010). “From Liberal Christians to young anarchists, white volunteers have deluged New Orleans, offering assistance, services, and advice” (Luft 2006, 1). The sheer numbers of people who have come to the region to work, and the growing popularity of young people relocating to New Orleans

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postgraduation (nicknamed YURPS – young urban rebuilding professionals; Egger 2007), constitute a new national movement (Wallace 2008) that we term the New Orleans Rebirth Movement (NORM).¹

Hundreds of thousands of college students have traveled to New Orleans to participate in NORM activities, including “mucking” and “gutting” houses,² rebuilding homes, clearing debris, and replanting the wetlands. In the years immediately following the storm, this work was performed in a disaster zone, and in parts of the city (e.g., the Lower Ninth Ward), the devastation is still evident and will be for many years in the form of empty neighborhoods and concrete slabs in place of homes. These conditions make the student volunteer experience in New Orleans somewhat unique — an activity we term *disaster volunteerism*.³

This article examines how NORM participants are affected by their *disaster volunteerism*. More specifically, we test whether *disaster volunteerism* significantly boosts political efficacy amongst those already inclined to be active and, if so, at what cost? Political scientists have long sought to explain political participation through differences in individuals’ beliefs and sense of political efficacy. However, less research has analyzed the causal effect of participation on forming these political beliefs. Using pre-post surveys, a follow-up survey, and participant journals, we investigate the relationship between engaging in grassroots political activism and political efficacy. We find a large and significant increase in internal political efficacy among NORM college student participants that persists for years, but this positive shift is coupled with heightened cynicism and unavoidable emotional problems.

Although volunteerism has been studied in a variety of fields, our study is the first to analytically examine student participants of *disaster volunteerism*. Civic engagement has positive benefits that extend well beyond the college years (Astin, Sax, and Avalos 1999), but literature on professionals working in disaster zones finds persistent, negative personal outcomes in terms of happiness and relationships. We also further the community-based learning (CBL) and political science literature by documenting the sizable political effects of *disaster volunteerism* and the process whereby political efficacy improves. Additionally, this study is the first to systematically examine participants of NORM, a contribution to the literature on social movements through identification and description of this new movement.

We begin this article with an overview of existing literature on student volunteerism, social movements, and disaster-zone work. We then discuss our sample and methods and describe the typical NORM experience. Next, we present and test our five hypotheses — three involving positive effects and two involving negative effects. Lastly, we explore the implications of our findings and propose New Orleans as a somewhat unique setting for CBL in the United States.

Existing Literature

Student Volunteerism

Colleges and universities in the United States have been promoting greater volunteer opportunities for undergraduates since the early 1990s given its positive academic, political, social, and personal outcomes (Campus Compact 2000). Students who engage in volunteering while in college earn higher grades, have higher retention levels, seek postgraduate degrees at a higher rate than other students (Astin and Sax 1998; Balazadeh 1996; Knee 1999) and have higher graduation rates (Roose

et al. 1997). Moreover, students who volunteer in college develop more advanced life skills than other students as a result of their work (Fenzel and Leary 1997; Oliver 1997).

Volunteering during college is positively correlated with greater social responsibility (Hamilton and Fenzel 1988), participation in community actions (Astin and Sax 1998), and increased political efficacy or the confidence that one can bring about change in the political sphere (Eyler and Giles 1999; Astin, Sax, and Avalos 1999; Gorman 1994). Student volunteers also have increased sensitivity to issues of race, inequality, and social justice, are less likely to hold racial stereotypes, and to exhibit greater cultural and racial understanding (Bringle and Kremer 1993; Dalton and Petrie 1997; Hones 1997).

Positive emotional and health benefits have also been associated with volunteer work. Volunteering improves happiness, self-esteem, life satisfaction, physical health (Thoits and Hewitt 2001) and leads to lower rates of depression (Wilson 2000). Sax, Astin, and Avalos (1999) analyze the long-term effects of volunteering with 12,000 graduates and found the same results nearly a decade after college.

The New Orleans Rebirth Movement

New Orleans is a unique setting for volunteering because students see themselves as part of a larger political project — the New Orleans Rebirth Movement. NORM has been virtually ignored in existing literature on social movements and political participation. While there is little agreement on the precise definition of “social movement” (McAdam 1999), four major components can be distilled from the literature: (1) joint action on the same side of a social conflict; (2) a call for institutional change; (3) redefinition of personal/group identity; and (4) the use of non-institutional tactics (Diani 2000,156). Assessing the first criterion, many NORM participants see themselves as being on one side of a battle to restore New Orleans in economically, politically, and socially just ways, with callous government officials and disaster profiteering corporations on the other side. The overarching NORM goal of restoring the Gulf Coast in a socially just fashion is pursued through various means: home rebuilding, community gardens, educational programs, wetlands restoration and other “green” initiatives, new social service organizations to serve the poor, etc. The second criterion—calls for institutional change—is evident in organized activities aimed at reforming the New Orleans Police Department, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), Housing and Urban Development, and other institutions. The third criterion— a shift in personal/group identity as a result of participation in the movement—is best demonstrated by the measurable change in personal identity that results from volunteering in New Orleans for just a short period of time. Most NORM participants studied here report profound shifts in how they view the world and their place in it. The last criterion — use of noninstitutional tactics — is a defining feature of NORM. Movement activists have organized scores of unconventional actions, including a sleep-in to protest the curfew in the Lower Ninth Ward, “bodies between bulldozers” in the Lower Ninth Ward, sit-ins and marches to reopen public housing, and marches and demonstrations in response to post-Katrina police brutality to name a few. The activities of over one million volunteers who have visited the Gulf Coast since Hurricane Katrina clearly constitute a social movement, and one that has altered the make-up and social/political fabric of the city in ways that require further attention from scholars.⁴

Postdisaster Work

There are clear positive results of students engaging in standard volunteerism outside of the classroom, but *disaster volunteerism* entails unique costs. NORM volunteers often come into contact with parts of New Orleans that are still devastated and may be exposed to emotionally traumatizing situations — blocks of empty lots in the Lower Ninth Ward, stories from local residents reliving the events of the storm, etc. Student *disaster volunteerism* has yet to be examined in the literature, but studies on disaster-zone work more generally offer some applicable findings. North, Tivis, and McMillen (2002) studied the psychological effects on the firefighters who responded to the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing and found high rates of Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), which led to reduced job satisfaction, marital disruption, and increased self-medication as measured by alcohol consumption. Application of these findings to student volunteering years after a disaster might seem like a stretch, but a spate of studies find that nonfirst-responder relief workers suffer high rates of vicarious or secondary PTSD when working in disaster zones, especially those who have contact with survivors and their stories (Zimering, Munroe, and Gulliver 2003). Research on secondary PTSD typically focuses on mental health professionals who are trained to cope with the stories they encounter, and students certainly have less ability to cope with traumatic stories and the tangible evidence of disaster that surrounds them in New Orleans. Indeed, a 2006 study of student volunteers in New Orleans found high levels of stress, and students who worked in New Orleans for less than three weeks exhibited the same levels of stress as students who volunteered in the region longer than three weeks (Hochstetler, Rutan, and Sharpe 2006). We, therefore, expect the positive effects of volunteering to be tempered by the emotional stress of the experience.

Sample and Methods

We assess the effects of *disaster volunteerism* using pre-post surveys, follow-up surveys, and student journals from four waves of participants from two Southern California liberal arts colleges. The first wave volunteered during spring break in March of 2006, and the second wave went down for one week during the summer that same year. The third and fourth waves worked in New Orleans for just over three weeks during winter break in December/January of 2007 and 2008, respectively. All four waves worked with Common Ground Relief, a grassroots organization that was founded a week after Hurricane Katrina. The first three waves lived in a gutted out school in the Upper Ninth Ward, and the last wave was housed in a gutted out, two-story house next to the levee in the Lower Ninth Ward.

Pre- and postsurveys were administered to students in each of the four waves. Presurveys were administered at the first informational session for each group, prior to disseminating readings or discussing Hurricane Katrina. Postsurveys were administered within a week of returning from New Orleans. Both surveys included questions about governmental handling of the crisis, general political attitudes and beliefs, ideas about race and class, life plans, and a standard battery of demographic questions. The postsurvey included additional questions about students' emotional state. Nearly 70% of students completed both a pre- and postsurvey for a total sample size of 113. A *t*-test analysis showed no significant demographic difference between the pre- and postsurvey samples. However, we suspect that students who

did not complete a postsurvey were less connected to the group upon their return, either because they were dealing with more severe emotional difficulties, or because they did not connect as much with the experience/group while in New Orleans. So students who were the most and least affected by the experience were the least likely to complete a postsurvey. While these data were gathered over a span of approximately two years, responses to all 35 questions were consistent across waves with an exception in the fourth wave. This group was significantly more likely to think that victim race was an important factor in delayed governmental response to Katrina in the presurvey. Follow-up surveys were also administered—one to three years after respondents' first trip to the Crescent City—to determine if effects persist over time.

The students in our study self-selected to volunteer in New Orleans and are distinct in several ways. First, all four waves report strong liberal leanings with 98.2% disapproving of the way President Bush responded to Hurricane Katrina in presurveys. Participants are mostly female (67%) and white (66.1%) with an annual household income over \$70,000 (51.4%). Fresh and sophomores comprise 60.2% of the sample. These statistics reflect broader volunteer trends: women are more likely to volunteer than men; white students have the highest volunteer rate by race; and higher income levels and volunteerism are positively correlated (Astin and Sax 1998; Wilson 2000).

Qualitative analysis of 52 student journals from the four class trips is also included. Students were required to journal during the trip and for two weeks following the trip. Some journal entries were responses to specific questions (e.g., what are your initial impressions of New Orleans?), but for most entries, students wrote on topics of their choosing. Over half of the students who worked in New Orleans decided to not submit their journals for analysis, and the group that did was significantly more white (70.5% compared to 66.1%) and more male (40.3% compared to 33%) than the broader pool of participants. Each journal was read cover-to-cover by the first author, and content was recorded from entries mentioning topics related to our five hypotheses (presented below).

Students in our study had a short curriculum to complement their lived experiences as disaster relief workers, which may limit applicability of the findings to other NORM participants, even other college students. However, given the universality of NORM critiques “on the ground” from participants of various backgrounds, and the commonality of volunteer work experiences over time, our findings can be cautiously applied more broadly to NORM participants.

Typical NORM Experiences

Students in each wave engaged in a wide range of tasks—planting in the wetlands, tutoring children, working with residents in local women's shelters, debris removal, etc. In terms of manual labor, the first three waves mostly performed mucking and gutting work, while the fourth wave engaged in more rebuilding work (e.g., dry walling, painting). This work brought them into contact with local residents who had been affected by the flooding of New Orleans on a daily basis. Each wave was also encouraged to get involved with the numerous NORM political actions offered. Students attended protests and sit-ins with former public housing residents, local homeless individuals, domestic violence survivors, and displaced residents. They observed community organizing workshops, antiracism working groups, and talks

by local NORM activists. Students also took tours of the Lower Ninth Ward, the levee system, and the Bayou from local residents.

The curriculum emphasized that the disaster was human-made, foreseeable, and avoidable. Students learned about political decisions that led to levees breaches (e.g., public officials allowing the oil industry to carve up the natural buffer of the bayou, extension of the Mississippi River Gulf Outlet that increased the storm surge in the Lower Ninth Ward, lack of funding to maintain the levees), recent budget cuts for FEMA and the Army Corps of Engineers, and the 2004 Hurricane Pam simulation that predicted the destruction of Katrina.

Students also learned about events during the storm: delays from officials; lack of a workable evacuation plan in place for those without cars; Mayor Nagin waiting a full day to call for a mandatory evacuation to make sure the city would not be sued by local businesses; local officials not using hundreds of school buses and available Amtrak trains to evacuate residents; exaggerated reports of looting and violence that played upon stereotypes of black people as criminals; and Governor Blanco issuing a “shoot to kill” order that described looters in specifically raced terms (“hoodlums”) in response to exaggerated claims of violence (U.S. House of Representatives 2006).

Emphasis was also placed on the atrocities that occurred right after the storm: the Gretna Bridge incident where local law enforcement officials forcefully stopped evacuees at the Orleans/Jefferson Parish border; the Danziger Bridge shooting where police officers open fired on six locals crossing the bridge to get to the Winn-Dixie, killing two people; the closure of public housing units that were only minimally damaged⁵; and roving groups of white vigilantes that killed at least 11 residents in Algiers Point (Thompson 2008).

Students also learned about political decisions that were made after the storm that worked against equitable rebuilding in the region, including the suspension of affirmative action requirements for contractors, temporary suspension of the prevailing wages in the region, and what Naomi Klein (2008) has termed *disaster capitalism* or the granting of no-bid contracts to politically well-connected companies during times of crisis.

The question of what it means to engage in solidarity versus charity work is one of the defining aspects of the curriculum. Students were encouraged to examine why they chose to volunteer in New Orleans versus engaging in poverty work back home; how they benefit from volunteering in the region; the ethics of coming to the region when residents cannot afford to return home; how the money spent on their trip might be better spent directly helping residents; the power dynamics inherent in privileged, mostly white students coming to “help” poor, mostly black residents; how their privilege colors their engagement with the community and residents; why some local residents may not trust them; and other questions regarding power and privilege in relief work.

During their time in New Orleans, students were offered a sometimes jarring perspective on life in the United States. As mostly socioeconomically privileged students, few had experienced severe discrimination or witnessed overt racism. As one student noted in her journal:

After less than a day, the city’s embedded racism became frighteningly clear, the extreme segregation of the neighborhoods, the concentration of poverty among black citizens, the city’s attempt to seize homes from the residents of the Lower Ninth Ward. (White female 2006)

Many students met survivors of the storm who shared their experiences of being left behind, evacuated at gunpoint, and mistreated by law enforcement officials. Students heard firsthand accounts of neighborhoods patrolled by vigilantes who openly claim responsibility for the murders of black men in the days following the storm. Students gutted houses filled with ruined possessions such as pictures, family portraits, and diplomas, sometimes knowing that the original owner died in the flooding, as noted in these journal entries:

This marker happens to be the one that was on the house that my group gutted today. Two people died in that house. New Orleans is a major head-trip because death is written all over the city...I don't think I imagined anything as grim and surreal as this. (Black male 2007)

The first time I saw a [marker on a house] that didn't have a "0" on the bottom, I felt a shiver followed by a mix of emotions, starting with grief and finishing with rage. That person who died in their house is simply a statistic now. (Asian/Pacific Islander male 2008)

Even small tasks took on significance in this disaster setting:

During trash removal I kept running across a calendar left open to August. All the boxes were checked off and had scribbles up until Katrina hit. That was an overwhelming moment for me as I realized my calendar would look exactly the same following an event like Katrina in my life. (White female 2007)

Students spent time with residents who were "visiting" the city but could not afford to move back. They went into FEMA trailers with high levels of formaldehyde that were housing elderly residents and children. During some trips, students participated in protests against the demolition of public housing units and met residents who had tried to return, only to be forced out of their undamaged homes at gunpoint by officials. They met families unable to receive funds through the Road Home program and weeded and mowed the now empty plots of land belonging to residents who did not have the means to return and were therefore in danger of losing their property under what was originally called the "Good Neighbor" program.

Some students witnessed police violence against local black residents, watched a stream of cars driving by a homeless man who had been hit by a car and served hot food to cold individuals who lived in a homeless encampment. Students were frequently harassed by law enforcement about their presence in certain neighborhoods. While the experience of each student varied widely in terms of the type of work they performed, the number of local residents they met, and their observations of injustice, they universally left the region with broken hearts and confusion about their place in the world. A Latina student from the 2007 trip wrote, "I'm going back. NOLA [New Orleans, Louisiana] is not a place you can visit and never think about visiting again. If you adjust to it, it becomes a part of you that you never want to forget." This common reaction to first-time participation in the NORM is likely the driving force behind so many YURPS relocating to New Orleans upon graduation.

Participants were informed about emotional stress of the experience through lecture and readings prior to going to the region. On the ground, they journaled and

participated in art therapy, meditation, yoga, and martial arts as stress relievers. Upon return to campus, students were encouraged to attend informal support group meetings, to seek professional counseling, to work with other students to educate the community about what they witnessed, and to plan activism through a class Facebook group. An average of two students from each wave returned home prematurely from emotional turmoil.

Hypotheses

We test five hypotheses involving the effects of participating in NORM based on existing CBL and disaster-zone literature in order to fully explicate the positive and negative benefits of *disaster volunteerism*. On the positive side, we expect to find an increase in political efficacy, the desire to be politically active, and a shift in life goals toward social justice work. On the negative side, we anticipate heightened cynicism and emotional unrest as a result of NORM experiences.

Our first hypothesis involves political efficacy, an indication of citizens' faith and trust in government, and belief that one can influence political outcomes. Students in the sample enjoyed relatively high rates of political efficacy prior to departure, as is generally the case with people who choose to engage in volunteer activities (Wu 2003). However, given the intensity of the *disaster volunteerism* as compared to other volunteer experiences, we anticipate that

H₁: Students' political efficacy will increase significantly after their NORM experience.

This hypothesis is tested using a standard 7-point political efficacy scale. Respondents place themselves on a 5-point Likert scale that taps either internal or external efficacy.⁶ This hypothesis is also tested using qualitative analysis of student journals.

We also expect that our self-selected, already socially conscious students will report heightened desire to be politically engaged after their *disaster volunteerism* experience. Our second hypothesis is:

H₂: A majority of students will report increased desire to be politically engaged after their NORM experience.

This hypothesis is tested using three different measures: (1) pre- to postsurvey analysis of willingness to make personal sacrifices to address social injustices, (2) postsurvey self-reported increases/decreases in the desire to be active in politics, to help others, and to work actively to address social justice issues,⁷ and (3) qualitative analysis of journal entries about future plans for political activism.

We expect to find major shifts in life goals given the intense *disaster volunteerism* experience of NORM that might logically lead to a reprioritization of personal values and life goals more oriented toward social justice work. We therefore expect to find that

H₃: A majority of students will report a major shift in their life plans/goals as a result of their NORM experience.

This hypothesis will be analyzed using self-reported changes in life goals on the postsurvey⁸ and qualitative analysis of journal entries mentioning shifts in personal values and life goals.

Our fourth hypothesis tests for an increase in cynicism from *disaster volunteerism*. We expect to find that the same experiences that produce positive shifts — immersion in grassroots activism in a disaster zone where the consequences of social injustice are stark—will also produce some very negative reactions. We hypothesize that

H₄: A majority of students will report an increase in cynicism after their NORM experience.

We test this hypothesis using a self-reported measure of shifts in cynicism “as a result of your recent trip to New Orleans” from the postsurvey, journal entries mentioning cynicism, and analysis of postsurvey variables we believe drive cynicism.

Lastly, given the emotional stress unique to *disaster volunteerism*, we anticipate finding that

H₅: A majority of students will report negative emotional effects as a result of their NORM experience.

We test this hypothesis with an index of eight self-reported emotional problems. Participants were asked, Since you returned from your recent visit to New Orleans, have you experienced an *increase* in any of the following as the result of the trip? (1) problems sleeping, (2) increased sadness, (3) increased irritability, (4) lack of energy, (5) increased anger, (6) lack of focus, (7) self-medicating through drugs and/or alcohol, and (8) difficulty completing everyday tasks. We also test this hypothesis with mentions of emotional problems in journal entries upon a student’s return to campus. If a majority of students report negative emotional reactions after their NORM experience, we will accept our fifth hypothesis.

Analysis and Findings

Our first hypothesis—that rates of political efficacy will increase as a result of the *disaster volunteerism* NORM experience—is tested by analyzing pre- to postsurvey shifts on the standard internal and external political efficacy scales. Overall political efficacy increased significantly from a mean score of 17.2 to 18.7 on a 0–30 scale ($p = .027$). However, this increase is due solely to an increase in internal political efficacy as external efficacy did not shift significantly from pre to post. In other words, students who volunteered in New Orleans became more confident in their own ability to participate in politics, but their belief that government will respond to citizen demands did not budge. Students also journaled about their improved internal political efficacy:

Prior to this trip, I felt that things were far too big for me to make a difference. I also felt that I was unqualified for activism as I wasn’t as politically educated as my poli-sci peers (I’m a lit. major). Challenging a culture of racism and classism is still a daunting and seemingly impossible task, but I’ve now realized that each individual can make a palpable difference. (Black male 2006)

I learned so much in New Orleans, both about the world and myself. I can't yet articulate most of it. I do know that issues of race and class matter to me much more than they did then . . . I also learned what I am capable of. Action no longer seems futile to me. (White male 2008)

I am changed by this experience—more aware, more sensitive, more motivated to make a change. (White female 2007)

The double-edged sword theme also emerged in the journal entries on overcoming the difficulty of the experience to become better activists:

Right now I need to make sure my spirits aren't completely shot. I need to not let this defeat me. I need to use this to be a more effective activist. (White female 2009)

I have to defeat injustice instead of letting this experience defeat me. (White female 2009)

I feel pretty crappy right now, but it's a good kind of crappy because it's one that is aware of the true state of the world. . . .I'm glad that I am motivated to make changes and learn more and that I am made to feel physically sick if I don't do anything differently. (White female 2007)

Given the relatively large and statistically significant shift in reported political efficacy, and journal narratives confirming this shift, we accept H_1 .

Our second hypothesis involves a desire to be more politically active after the trip. Our first measure involves a pre- to postassessment of participants' willingness to make personal sacrifices for social justice as an indicator of deepened commitment to activism. Significantly more participants reported willingness to make major personal sacrifices to further social justice after their NORM experience—a jump from 39.8% to 60% ($p = .000$).

Our second measure of H_2 is self-reported desire to follow and participate in politics and social justice issues after their NORM experience. As Figure 1 indicates, 87% say they are more interested in helping others, while 83.3% say they will be more active in issues of social justice as a result of their NORM experience. Three fourths say their work in New Orleans made them more interested in following politics, while 69.2% plan to be more active in politics. Notably, only 1.3% of respondents reported a decrease in their desire to be active in politics and issues of social justice, and no respondents indicated a decrease in their desire to help others. Social desirability is no doubt inflating these numbers, but given the size of the increase, we conclude that an actual shift did take place for many NORM participants. This shift comes into focus through participants' journal entries regarding plans for future political activism back home:

The trip opens our eyes to new experiences and directs our attention to social changes that still need to take place. By becoming involved with the public housing movement in NOLA, it makes us think about poverty in California and opens us up to new possibilities of "helping" causes in our area. (White female 2007)

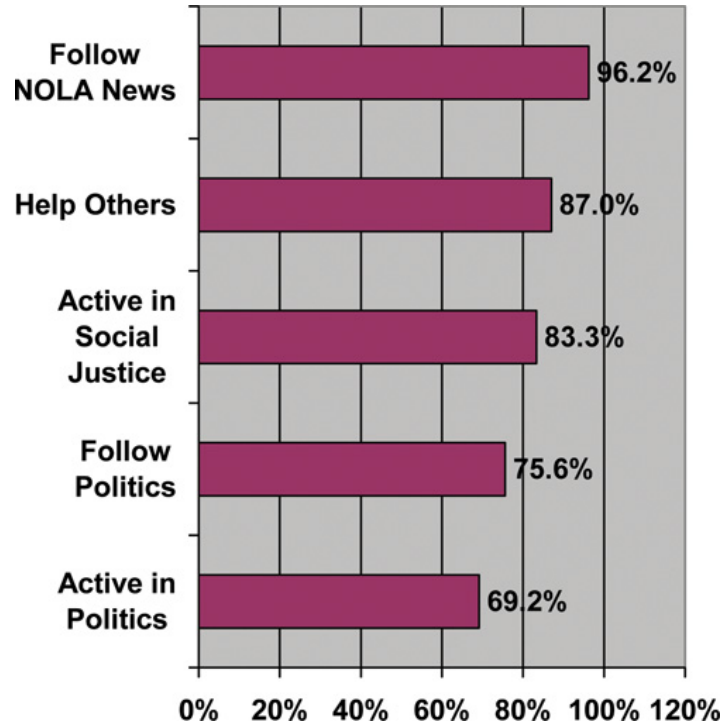


Figure 1. Self-report political intentions (color figure available online).

When I get back I hope to become a more active member of my community . . . I have learned so much and I am forever indebted to this city. I want to continue and pursue activities that help to improve my immediate community. I know I have the skill sets to organize community projects and now it's just a matter of doing it. This experience has also made me want to focus much more on my academics. I want to be the most effective agent of change I can be. (Latina female 2008)

Our most important role in New Orleans is our ability to take the knowledge we have learned here and bring it back to our home communities—being able to communicate first-hand experience back to numbers greater than ourselves. (White male 2007)

Given the significant shift in willingness to make personal sacrifices for social justice, an overwhelming majority of students reporting increased desire to be politically engaged in various ways, and journal entries that indicate plans for future political activism, we accept H_2 .⁹

Our third hypothesis is that students will report a major shift in their values/life goals after the trip. Indeed, three in five (57.5%) reported that the NORM experience prompted a major shift in their life plans. Journal entries explicate these shifts in greater detail:

I have never had all my priorities challenged in such an intense manner. I'm leaving in pieces, changed, but I only hope that when I put myself back together, I am a substantially improved person. . . . I want to be much

more than I ever dreamed of being. My idea of success is shattered, but I couldn't be more thankful. (Latina female 2009)

To be part of this community, to do something substantive and meaningful...it is like breathing for the first time. How many unimportant material possessions and trivialities appear in this environment?... Being here has brought my life into perspective. I am privileged, but what good are privileges unless they are used to a) improve the lives of others and b) deconstruct the very system that makes these traits "desirable." (White male 2006)

When I return home, I plan on becoming involved in various community projects, hopefully a youth mentor program of some sort. Despite my realization concerning my own abilities as a catalysts for change, perhaps more importantly, my experience in New Orleans has drastically changed my mindset concerning my own priorities in life...the significant of friendships, relationships, and community...Human disregard for other human's problems given their present stability is something I am determined not to fall into. (Middle Eastern Female 2008)

I think this experience has kind of changed the purpose of my life, which sounds fairly cliché, but I finally think I am doing something of worth. My experiences here in NOLA have/will give me a greater level of strength and commitment to the challenges I will face when teaching next year. (White female 2007)

Many students also journaled about value shifts involving education:

I think this trip will shape not only my extra-curricular activities while at [college], but also my academics. I want to learn as much as I can so I can use that knowledge to help bring more justice to the USA. I don't know how I'll do this, but that's what the next 3.5 years—and the rest of my life are for. (White female 2008)

Being at school right now isn't an obligation or a chore like it used to be, it's a gift and an opportunity. (White male 2007)

Lastly, confusion about life goals was a common theme in the journals:

The emotional weight of this trip is so much greater [than other academic trips] and I feel like this reality is going to affect my life outside of New Orleans... Coming here has fundamentally changed me, identity crisis... I won't be able to ever see things in black and white terms again. I don't really know who I am as a person or what I want in the future now. (White female 2007)

Overall, a majority of students expressed a shift in their priorities and values on the postsurvey, and journal entries explicate the substance of these shifts. Therefore, we accept H_3 .

The NORM experience clearly increased political efficacy and desire to be engaged, but 56% of participants also reported an increase in cynicism and distrust in government “as a result of your recent trip to New Orleans.” This statistic is the basis for accepting H₄. This seemingly contradictory finding—that students are simultaneously less trusting of political institutions but intend to be more politically active—can be explained by the unique nature of the NORM *disaster volunteerism* experience. We suspect that the shock of witnessing racism and dramatic socioeconomic disparity in a disaster zone will lead students to different conclusions about these various aspects of government. Participants are confronted with “broken” political systems but are then immersed in grassroots activism that advances their skill sets and confidence to maneuver in the political world. While students are simultaneously becoming aware of and active in grassroots politics, they are also increasingly disenchanted with the U.S. political establishment. The intensity of the experience appears to propel both anger and action.

Further analysis shows that beliefs about government, democracy, and race relations are at the core of increased cynicism.¹⁰ A majority of students expressed less faith in American democracy (50.7%) and a decrease in trust in government (82.1%), and their perceptions of the disaster shifted significantly from the pre- to postsurvey. Participants were significantly more likely to blame delayed response on bad management on the part of federal (66.7% to 85.3%, $p = .000$), state (46.7% to 60.5%, $p = .032$), and local (33.3% to 64.1%, $p = .000$) officials. When asked “Which best describes your feelings about the way things are going in the rebuilding of New Orleans and the Gulf Coast?”, the percentage of NORM participants reporting “angry” rose from 31.8% to 81.6% ($p = .000$).

When asked to describe the specific changes in their view of government, students described increased skepticism, disillusionment, and even outrage. One student stated that, as a result of working in New Orleans, she had become “even more convinced that the Government does a horrible job of serving the public, and I increasingly feel it is on purpose.” Other students echoed this position, “I find there is no hope in believing in our govt. and relying on it for any support whatsoever;” “It [government] is more corrupt than I thought.” Government criticism also came up in many journal entries:

I’ve never felt so close to hell. What happened to people’s rights and liberties? What happened to private property rights? Their homes were stolen from them by the government. (Latino male 2008)

While I think I will continue to piece myself back together for years, New Orleans became my own reconstruction. People who lost everything, who were abandoned by the government that supposedly derives its power from its citizens, taught me about love and survival. (White female 2006)

For the entirety of my life, I felt that government/federal authorities were the most morally upright and has the general public’s best interest in mind. Sadly, I learned that this is untrue. I cannot believe the utter neglect on behalf of authority to the citizens of New Orleans. (White male 2007)

Similar responses were given in assessing U.S. democracy after the NORM experience in an open-ended question on the postsurvey. A general theme that

emerged was the contention that American democracy is an illusion. One respondent stated, “[democracy] is selective in who it includes,” while others posited that

- “To many in America, [democracy is] really nonexistent.”
- “[Democracy] is a joke.”
- “It is only a democracy for the wealthy.”
- “It is a “pseudo-democracy.”

Journal entries echoed these sentiments. One participant wrote “Our democracy is sick” (White male 2009), while another participant (White female 2009) wrote a critical poem excerpted here:

America, I found your soul today
Covered in cobwebs
Gasping for air
Too many babies left to die
Too many mothers left to cry

When asked an open-ended question about how their views of white Americans had shifted, many students responded with statements concerning guilt and recognition of their privilege:

- “I no longer have an immediate kinship to other whites.”
- “This was the single biggest change—I was very much in the colorblind privileged cocoon and now I see what a cop out that is.”

In explaining how their perspectives on Black Americans had shifted, students cited a new or better understanding of how racism functions in the United States, and their personal role in it:

- “I better understand the everyday struggles black Americans face that I never have to think about.”
- “I was not aware of profound racism.”
- “New Orleans increased awareness of the effects of historical disenfranchisement in the modern day.”
- “I did and sometimes do hold stereotypes, and New Orleans taught me the error in my thoughts.”

Racism and classism were also popular topics in journal entries:

I am just reminded how much is left to do. Racism is not over, and realistically, I don’t think it ever will be. (White female 2008)

Racial segregation is still alive and breathing. I am not here to help, but to be part of the liberation—in New Orleans, Los Angeles, everywhere. Perhaps I had to come to New Orleans just to see it. Why didn’t I see it before? (White female 2008)

I have only been here for a couple of weeks and I have already seen how race and socioeconomic status have played a factor in the reconstruction of the city. (Latina female 2006)

I've always liked to consider myself aware of issues of race and class, but I've also always thought that awareness meant I was part of the solution. I am just now realizing what everything I've been handed my whole life means and why I've been handed it and that I don't necessary deserve it... Now I'm beginning to realize how the system works. (White female 2007)

The experience shows us how racism persists in America point blankly. (White female 2007)

I will no longer limit possibilities by being afraid of knowing people. I might have to really open my eyes to the privilege I do have. I just don't want guilt. I want more love. (Black female 2009)

After their *disaster volunteerism* NORM experience, participants were far more critical of how government and democracy function and were more likely to think that racism is a major issue in the United States. We believe these shifts explain heightened cynicism from the experience.

Our last hypothesis that a majority of students will report negative emotional effects as a result of their experience in New Orleans is supported by the data. Overall, 89.7% of students experienced at least one negative emotional symptom. As Figure 2 indicates, the most commonly reported problems are lack of focus, sadness, and irritability. Over half of the students in the sample report a lack of energy and increased anger upon their return from New Orleans.

Four in 10 students experienced difficulty completing everyday tasks, a serious problem for students who are expected to perform immediately upon their return for the new semester. One in five students coping through self-medicating likely

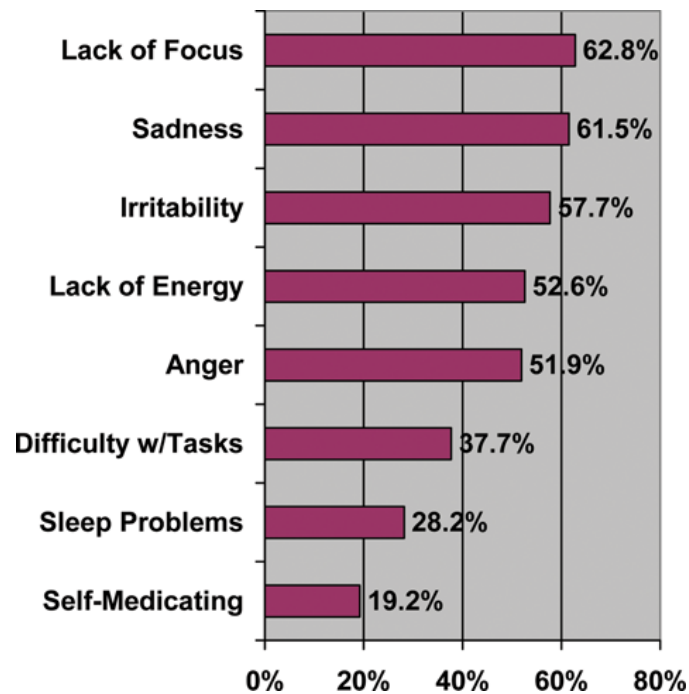


Figure 2. Percentage reporting emotional symptoms (color figure available online).

compound this problem. The student rate of self-medication after the NORM experience matches the rate of drinking and drug use among firefighter first responders to the Oklahoma City bombing.

Beyond self-report of emotional difficulties, students also report unusual activities in their journals that reflect emotional unrest: avoiding friends and family; avoiding people who didn't go to New Orleans; breaking up with girl/boyfriends; wearing the same piece of clothing day after day because they wore the article in New Orleans; and intentional deprivation that mirrored the deprivation of living in New Orleans (e.g., sleeping inside a tent set up the living room, taking only cold showers). One student journaled, "When I got home, the toilets in our house weren't working, but I had no problem going outside—which now looking back seems a little weird" (White female 2007).

Journal entries documented intense emotional turmoil:

I feel pain, depressed, angry, hurt, dark, alone, frustrated, cold, sad, fatigued. (White female 2007)

Generally I cry a lot. I didn't cry at all in NOLA. (White female 2009)

When we talked about problems sleeping as an after effect of being in New Orleans, I had only thought of a lack of sleep, not sleeping 12 hours a night. (White female 2007)

I find myself being emotionally affected by this experience and I'm so confused as to what is going on with me. So many emotions flowing into my mind and it is hard to process. I feel so confused, happy, depressed, exhausted, angry. (White male 2006)

I came back and showed some of my quadmates the photos from the trip, and even explaining it was really emotionally overwhelming. I hadn't cried that much when I was in NOLA. (Latina female 2006)

Many students noted a desire to hold onto their pain after the trip:

I want the pain of witnessing the injustices and experiences of this trip to stay with me to inform my decisions. (White male 2009)

I don't want to heal from this. I want to feel it all the time. Why should I get to feel happy and comfy all the time because of my privilege? (White male 2008)

Depression, guilt, and anger were common themes upon returning to campus:

I dream of gutting. I wake up with the same feeling as when I'd stand on the dirty, bowing floors and hold moldy blankets and teddy bears under the collapsing roof. I wake up feeling like a thief, a traitor, an interloper. I wake up wondering why them, why not me, why not me. (White female 2009)

I hate that I can leave. I hate that I can have my own room. I hate that I can complain, and I hate that I do complain. (White female 2008)

I think about going back to school and doing things like taking a warm shower and sleeping in a bed when so many people can't even find a place to live and their homes are still in a horrible condition. (White male 2006)

Given that a majority of students experienced emotional problems as a result of their work on the postsurvey and the disturbed emotional state of some participants as documented in their journals, we accept H₅.

In summary, we find support for all of our hypotheses. These findings did not vary significantly by wave, college, number of days spent in New Orleans, or demographic variables. On the positive side, participants report increases in internal political efficacy, a desire to be active in politics, and a value shift toward social justice—surprisingly dramatic for a self-selected group already inclined toward social justice work. We attribute these findings to the intensity of the *disaster volunteerism* experience.

Persistence of Effects

We re-administered postsurveys to all waves of study participants in 2009—one to three years after respondents' first trip to the Crescent City—to determine if the effects persisted over time. The follow-up survey was administered online via e-mail and Facebook in February and March of 2009 to all previous respondents who could be located (96%). With repeated reminders, only 49 respondents completed a follow-up survey. Despite this 46% drop in response rate from the postsurvey group, the follow-up sample did not vary significantly from the larger sample in terms of demographic characteristics.

The effects reported above persisted over time, and some even grew more pronounced. Posttest findings of heightened political engagement and shifts in political beliefs held up in the follow-up analysis. However, students grew less angry about the slow rebuilding process as they moved further away from their New Orleans

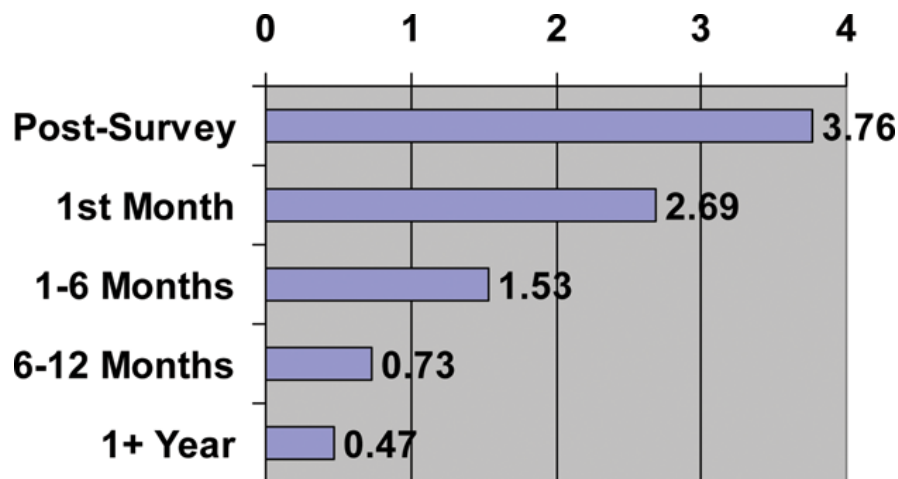


Figure 3. Average number of emotional symptoms over time (color figure available online).

experience ($p = .002$). In terms of pronounced effects, a greater proportion of respondents reported changes in their views of black and white Americans in the follow-up survey than the postsurvey ($p = .059$), suggesting that they continued to mentally process this experience after returning home. Most notably, internal political efficacy scores significantly increased from the postsurvey to the follow-up ($p = .028$), while the external score remained constant. We speculate that this further increase may be due to increased political engagement after the NORM experience given that the relationship between efficacy and participation is reciprocal (Finkel 1985). In other words, an increase in political efficacy from the NORM experience led to an increase in other political activities that further propelled political efficacy.

The follow-up survey also measured long-term emotional effects from *disaster volunteerism* in New Orleans by asking respondents to self-report emotional problems since their experience, using the postsurvey index of problems. As Figure 3 indicates, the average number of emotional problems rapidly diminishes over time. Students average 3.76 different emotional problems immediately after their NORM experience, a number that falls to 1.53 problems within six months. A year after the initial NORM experience, only 11% of respondents report any emotional symptoms from the trip.

Implications

Disaster volunteerism is becoming more popular with colleges across the United States as students increasingly participate in “alternative” spring break and summer break activities.¹¹ This type of volunteerism differs from the typical CBL experience in the magnitude of its political and emotional effects—both positive and negative. A few weeks participating in the NORM causes considerable reassessment of personal values and improves internal political efficacy and desire to be politically active. But these constructive civic outcomes come at the cost of greater cynicism and short-term but severe emotional disruption. More *disaster volunteerism* research is needed to generate best practices for minimizing negative effects on participants.

Another implication of our research is the uniqueness of New Orleans as a setting for *disaster volunteerism* work. A colleague recently asked whether students can get a similar experience working in Los Angeles or another urban area with concentrated poverty. We think not. We argue that the disaster-zone setting is driving significant participant effects because students are confronted with tangible outcomes of injustice. Putting up drywall with a resident in a home in the desolate Lower Ninth Ward where over a thousand people died forces students to “experience” the deadly consequences of poverty in a way that only a disaster can. And disasters occur in many places with varying social, economic, and political systems—the earthquake in Haiti, the tsunami in Japan, flooding in Nashville, etc. But New Orleans provides a unique setting for student volunteerism that is unparalleled in the United States.

First, the presence of the NORM—a loose affiliation of people and organizations working toward similar goals—gives students a heightened sense of urgency. New Orleans has been framed as “ground zero” for social justice work in the United States, and whether or not this is accurate, students get the sense that they are part of something larger than themselves and their college group. Secondly, New Orleans has the second highest rate of concentrated poverty in major U.S. cities (Katz 2009), and the “color lines” are stark given the small size of the city. Students quickly

learn to identify these obvious lines, and each group invariably reports police “patrolling” of these lines, either by harassing black residents in “white neighborhoods,” or questioning white students about why they are in “black neighborhoods.” Each wave experienced the same routine, and we consider it to be one of the more effective teaching tools “on the ground.” Norms of Southern hospitality is the last element that we believe makes New Orleans somewhat unique as a learning location. New Orleanians are generally friendlier than people in other cities and are comparatively willing to talk with strangers. Some students wrote about this in their journals:

One of the first things that struck me was the kindness of the people... Overall, the trip to New Orleans made me fall in love with the city and its people. Everyone I spoke to had hope despite the desperation of their situation. (Black male 2006)

New Orleans seems to be filled with extremely friendly people. The warmth and concern from locals permeates from me asking simple questions, and the maternal nature of some of the conversations that I’ve had with the locals are genuine. (API female 2007)

This openness makes New Orleans a somewhat unique setting for a CBL experience.

Nearly every student from the four waves intends to return to New Orleans, and many already have. Approximately 30% of students who have worked in the region return there for an extended period of time—a summer or longer after graduation. Why does New Orleans alter the lives of so many privileged, mostly white volunteers who congregate there with the gutter punks, religious groups, anarchists, and hippies? We speculate that the experience disrupts conceptions of a fair and just world, and students are drawn back with the idea that, if they can just “fix” New Orleans, the world will be alright again. One recent graduate who moved to the Crescent City describes her work as “seeking her own salvation.” Another student characterizes his work as “working off his debt” to the people of New Orleans for not truly caring about the city prior to going there. Whatever their motivation, it is clear that the doubled-edged sword of *disaster volunteering* with the New Orleans Rebirth Movement has a profound effect on participants:

It was amazing, it was terrible, and I can’t think of a better way to have spent three weeks. (White female 2007)

Notes

1. The term “rebirth” has multiple meanings in this context—physical rebuilding, spiritual rejuvenation. “Rebirth” is a common New Orleans term that appears on bumper stickers and t-shirts, and the Rebirth Brass Band is the most popular such band in the city.

2. “Mucking” a house refers to removing waterlogged furniture, appliances, and other belongings, and “gutting” a house describes the process of removing damaged ceilings, walls, and floors to ready the house for rebuilding.

3. We define “disaster zone” as any location where the physical remnants of a disaster are present. The abundance of abandoned, flooded houses and blocks and blocks of “empty”

lots dotted by foundations and stairs leading to nowhere mean that New Orleans fits the definition of “disaster zone” many years after Hurricane Katrina and the human-caused flooding of the city.

4. Something as simple as introduction of the first bike lane in New Orleans (on busy St. Claude Street) is a reflection of the influence of NORM participants who lobbied for this long overdue safety measure.

5. In response to the mass closure of public housing in New Orleans, Richard Baker (R-Baton Rouge) stated, “We finally cleaned up public housing in New Orleans. We couldn’t do it, but God did.”

6. Political efficacy measures, “I consider myself to be well qualified to participate in politics”; “I feel that I have a pretty good understanding of the important political issues facing the country”; “I feel that I could do as good a job in public office as other people”; “I think that I am better informed about politics and government than other people”; “Public officials don’t care much about what people like me think”; “People like me don’t have any say about what the government does”; “Sometimes politics and government seem so complicated that a person like me can’t understand what’s going on.”

7. The following questions were asked on the postsurvey: Have you experienced an *increase* or *decrease* in any of the following attitudes, beliefs, or desires as a result of your recent trip to New Orleans?: desire to be active in politics; desire to help others; desire to be active in issues of social justice.

8. Participants were asked, “Did your recent trip to New Orleans change your personal values or life goals?”

9. It is worth mentioning that NORM participants garnered the reputation of being politically active on campus. Two NORM participants went on to become student body president, and many NORM participants have served as student senators, representatives, and club leaders. It is beyond the scope of this study to determine whether this rash of activism is the result of NORM.

10. The following close-ended questions were asked on the postsurvey: Have you experienced an *increase* or *decrease* in any of the following attitudes, beliefs, or desires as a result of your recent trip to New Orleans? : Trust in government; Belief that racism is a major issue in the United States; Cynicism.

11. “Alternative spring breaks” are becoming increasingly popular (Montanari 2010). Many colleges and universities sent student groups to assist with flooding in the Midwest in 2008, the 2010 Haiti earthquake, the 2011 flooding in Nashville, and other natural disasters in recent years.

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