

Ties that Bond, Ties that Build: Social Capital and Governments in Post Disaster Recovery

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Emily Chamlee-Wright's book *The Cultural and Political Economy of Recovery: Social Learning in a post-disaster environment* is a critical and important step forward in our understanding of how neighborhoods and societies respond after crises. Based on extensive fieldwork in New Orleans following Hurricane Katrina, her theoretical framework and qualitative methods set up a new research agenda for scholars interested in resilience and recovery and push scholars in the field to revisit old assumptions (Chamlee-Wright 2010). This article first reviews her main arguments, suggests three areas where further refinements may strengthen her approach, and concludes with broader arguments about the fields of disaster policy and research.

Chamlee-Wright sets forth three core, interlocking arguments. First, she envisions post-disaster situations as collective action problems – that is, as situations in which many people have strong motivation to act, but may not do so because of free riding, incomplete information, or coordination problems. Mancur Olson's classic work (1965) laid out this dilemma from the economic perspective, underscoring the difficulties in providing public goods where many consumers and individuals have strong reasons to withhold their own contributions. From a rational choice perspective, there is little reason for an individual to undertake a costly activity such as voting, active participation in voluntary groups, and so forth, when he/she can take advantage of the investments of others and gain the same benefits without the work.

Post-disaster situations require survivors, government agencies, and NGOs to contribute resources, take financial and health gambles, and to coordinate their activities. All these activities involve risk and costs. Chamlee-Wright's framework underscores that evacuees may desire to return to their homes, but may adopt a "wait and see" approach until information about local

institutions such as schools, religious organizations, and child care centers becomes available. Residents may want confirmation that they will not be the only ones living in homes on the block and that their neighbors, friends, rabbis, priests, and grocers will also return. Further, without a sufficient number of clients, businesses may hesitate to re-open, while at the same time local residents may not want to return to a neighborhood with no food stores, gas stations, pharmacies, and hardware outlets. In this way, hesitant residents may “free ride” on the work of the initial pioneers who return first to damaged areas, but their continued absence itself generates negative outcomes for the recovery process. Getting beyond this Catch-22 and coordinating the return of survivors to a neighborhood may be impossible if refugees, scattered in other cities and states, cannot contact each other and exchange information. Many areas within New Orleans to this day are plagued by the “jack-o-lantern” problem, where blocks may hold only one or two inhabited houses, and the rest are empty lots, debris-filled dumps, or abandoned homes.

Next, she argues that communities have a number of social institutions and socially embedded institutions which interact to provide norms, tools, and networks to survivors. Depending on the norms and resources available, residents may be better able to overcome the aforementioned collective action problems and coordinate their recovery activities (cf. Aldrich 2010b). Chamlee-Wright labels this approach to recovery as one investigating “cultural economy,” which “recognizes a reciprocal relationship between the institutional rules of the game and cultural processes” (Chamlee-Wright 2010: 16). This refreshing and innovative approach to rebuilding sees economic conditions, damage from the storm, and regional or national leadership as factors which may play only minor roles in the process of recovery. All too often stories of disaster, whether from academic or popular media perspectives, focus on these factors as the critical ones in recovery. Instead, Chamlee-Wright suggests, the neighborhood’s reservoirs of social capital may be essential engines of recovery (see Aldrich and Crook 2008; Aldrich forthcoming a). Areas with less trust, fewer norms of reciprocity, and irregular citizen interaction may be unable to overcome collective action problems, and hence are forced to rely on government intervention for assistance. Alternatively, neighborhoods with high expectations, high levels of trust, and mobilization are the ones where self-initiated recovery will be more common, and resilience more obvious (Aldrich forthcoming b).

Finally, Chamlee-Wright argues that the “political rules of the game are critical to determining the market’s ability to send the right signals” (2010: 130). She argues that various planning and management policies post-Katrina have made it more difficult for would-be residents to understand the actual

conditions on the ground in their neighborhoods. Evacuees seek information on the well-being of their homes, the viability of their neighborhoods, and the long term trajectories of the businesses and schools in the area. One early-returning community activist I spoke to told me that he sent so many emails after the storm to keep up with the demand for information from refugees scattered across the country, AOL shut his account down. Administrators at America Online (AOL) assumed he must be spamming (sending unsolicited messages in bulk) because of the hundreds of recipients of his daily messages (Aldrich 2010c).

Contradictory pronouncements from the Mayor's Office, overlapping and unclear regulations from various redevelopment plans, bureaucratic red tape from FEMA and other federal agencies, and the demolition of blighted homes without sufficient warning have all drowned out critical information necessary for decision making. She calls this distortion and uncertainty "signal noise" (132) and argues that it may be broadly responsible for the slow pace of recovery in the Big Easy.

Beyond the distortions of non-price information (such as the recovery arc of the neighborhood), other institutions, such as the National Flood Insurance Program (NFIP), have distorted price signals in local markets in New Orleans. The NFIP provides heavily subsidized insurance for residents of flood plains and ended up crowding out private insurance alternatives and eliminating comprehensive coverage with a single insurer (Chamlee-Wright 2010: 140). Survivors of Hurricane Katrina must then fight with private insurers to establish whether damage was from wind, water, looting, or other events. Other government policies have distorted the labor and housing markets, crowding out private employees through premium wage policies and raising the rents to new heights because of restrictions on building. Her argument that government policies may themselves disturb the recovery process is well-taken, and I have argued as much elsewhere (Aldrich 2010a, 2011).

These propositions are important steps forward for the field of the study of disaster recovery. There are several ways that Chamlee-Wright's ideas could be refined in order to strengthen their use in future research.

To begin, while Chamlee-Wright regularly references social capital, a more nuanced approach to social networks might be able to more fully explain the empirical variation she uncovers across the four neighborhoods (Lower Ninth Ward, Mary Queen of Vietnam, Broadmoor, and St. Bernard Parish) in her case studies. She defines social capital broadly, including "both the resources embedded within social networks and the generalized norms that emerge from them" (Chamlee-Wright 2010: 21), but this overlooks recent work which more exactly categorizes social resources according to both social and

administrative distance. Rather than seeing all connections as “social capital,” these networks can be separated into three distinct types.

Social bonds within and between family, kin, and ethnic group members epitomize bonding social capital. Many observers may see such connections as intrusive and “pre modern” in that they assume high levels of familiarity and involve a willingness to forgo some degree of privacy. Putnam (2000: 22) sees bonding social capital as “undergirding specific reciprocity and mobilizing solidarity” among homogeneous individuals and Woolcock (2002: 26) similarly defines it in terms of relations between “family members, close friends, and neighbors.” In contrast, bridging social capital connects members of the group or network to extra-local networks, crossing ethnic, racial, religious cleavages. Where bonding social capital facilitates cooperation among members of the same family or neighborhood, bridging capital involves “linkage to external assets” and generates “broader identities” (Putnam 2000: 23). Bridging activities and organizations can bring together individuals from different neighborhoods, racial and ethnic identities, and language groups (Schuller, Baron, and Field 2000). In India, for example, research showed how cross-ethnic bridges which joined Muslims and Hindus reduced conflict between the communities (Varshney 2001).

The third form of social capital is linking social capital, which is made up of “networks of trusting relationships between people who are interacting across explicit, formal or institutionalized power or authority gradients in society” (Szreter and Woolcock 2004: 655). Whereas bonding and bridging social capital primarily connect individuals of the same status – whether neighbors and kin with bonding social capital, or cross-town acquaintances from another ethnic group with bridging social capital – this form takes into account vertical distance as well. Figure 1 below lays out these three types of social connections in context.

Differentiating between bonding, bridging, and linking social capital can shed more light on the fact that almost all of the New Orleans neighborhoods under study in Chamlee-Wright’s book had very strong local networks – whether through church groups, schools, or other formal institutions, or through interpersonal relationships and regular neighborhood interactions – yet not all displayed resilience following Hurricane Katrina. In the Lower Ninth Ward, for example, she describes how strong family and network connections were often maintained through outdoor social events like barbecues (Chamlee-Wright 2010: 109), while in St. Bernard Parish “the density of family relationships featured prominently in how people described their community” (ibid. p. 83). In fact, the parish council’s disastrous banning of housing rentals to non-blood relatives in St. Bernard Parish signaled the strength of the

imagined community constituted by family in the area (ibid. 100). Historian Douglas Brinkley (2007: 257-258) similarly describes how in Lower Ninth Ward, “everybody knew everybody, and engaged in the neighborhood rituals: sharing big pots of red beans and rice or playing dominoes on old-time porches or walking to the ‘snowball’ stand at dusk.” Yet both communities had lackluster recoveries, especially in comparison with Mary Queen of Vietnam (MQVN), which had very high levels of trust and extended norms of reciprocity.

The variation in recovery, I would argue, is a function of the quality and quantity of multiple types of social connections and the fact that resilience requires more than just bonding social capital. Quantitative and qualitative studies have shown that, following disasters, areas with both bonding and linking resources fare better than villages and neighborhoods which have only bonding social capital (Aldrich 2010b). In similarly damaged coastal villages on the southeast Indian coast, communities which had both strong internal connections along with ties to translocal institutions had better recovery outcomes than areas with strong reservoirs only of bonding ties (Aldrich 2011). Connections to individuals outside damaged areas provided survivors with critical resources such as tools, food, accommodations, and information at a time when typical providers (stores, transportation networks, housing providers, government service agencies) were shut down. Further, linking social capital enabled residents to make clear their needs and to extricate aid from resource-wealthy organizations such as domestic and international NGOs. Communities with only bonding social capital lacked the ability to extract such assistance.

Similarly, in a comparison of the Lakeview and Lower Ninth Ward neighborhoods using interviews with 175 residents, researchers found that Lower Ninth Ward respondents had fewer translocal bridging ties which could assist them in the post-disaster stage (Elliott, Haney, and Sams-Abiodun 2010). This lack of extralocal connections meant that survivors had fewer resources with which to navigate the treacherous waters of post-Katrina recovery.¹ Chamlee-Wright herself suggests that a combination of government policies (preventing residents from seeing their homes) and damage (due to the breaking of the levee) nearby were responsible for the “slower recovery” (Chamlee-Wright 2010: 103) in the Lower Ninth Ward. However, the Mary Queen of Vietnam (MQVN) community in Village de L’Est experienced some of the worst flooding (ibid. p. 154), and a number of other survivors have reported that they were prevented from visiting their homes for extended periods of time. Instead, empirical evidence (Elliott, Haney, and Sams-Abiodun 2010) and this nuanced approach to social capital suggest that residents in the Lower Ninth Ward lacked the translocal, linking and bridging resources which facilitated the recovery of communities like MQVN. Future

research could be refocused to better capture the different types of social connections between and across social groups and the resulting variation in outcomes.

Next, the government's role post-disaster may be more critical than Chamlee-Wright allows, given research showing a strong interactive effect between social networks and governance systems. Rieko Kage (2011) has shown how the combination of strong regional civil society and allocated resources from the national government in Japan led to speedier rebuilding post-World War II. Her quantitative investigation traces patterns of interaction between Japanese prefectures (similar in function to American states) and the government; where they coordinated, recovery outcomes improved. Similarly, work on the corrupt kleptocracy in the West Bank has illuminated how civil society organizations strongly mimic the government under which they operate (Jamal 2007). Associations in the West Bank engage in clientalism and corruption precisely because of their strong connections to the government – that is, there is a strong interaction between the two. Some of Chamlee-Wright's own case studies underscore ways in which local and federal government activities (or lack thereof) have interacted with the cultural economy to create new norms and narratives (Chamlee-Wright and Storr 2009). For example, shared mental models of the “forgotten neighborhood” or “neglected community” in St. Bernard Parish may be a result of their (seemingly negative) interactions with city government officials (Chamlee-Wright 2010: 85). Rather than encouraging the government to merely deliver goods and stand back, or to promise little and deliver quickly (*ibid.* 171), disaster researchers might consider the ways in which mechanisms for public goods delivery themselves create, reinforce, or damage local norms and attitudes.

Finally, and on a related note, if social resources, norms, and trust are critical resources for recovery, what policies can be enacted which not only avoid weakening them or interfering with their signals (as Chamlee-Wright suggests), but actually strengthen them? That is, given that damage and wealth do not correlate strongly with recovery outcomes, and that social resources do, what can citizens, NGOs, and government decision makers do to assist vulnerable communities in preparing for and recovering from crises? Research in resource-poor, post-conflict areas such as Nicaragua and South Africa has shown that through interventions and mechanisms such as focus groups, social capital can be deepened over time (Pronyk et al. 2008; Brune and Bossert 2009). Through regular meetings, even poor citizens still reeling from the effects of long time conflict can build up their levels of trust and expectations of reciprocity, the building blocks for social networks. Additionally, a number of

quantitative studies have shown that simple mechanisms which encourage volunteerism – such as community currencies, local scrip, and time banks which are given to individuals engaging in altruistic activities and can only be exchanged locally – create higher levels of trust, civic participation, and interaction (Doteuchi 2002; Lietaer 2004). Given the growing evidence that social capital serves as a core component in recovery, increasing stocks of it in vulnerable communities, such as the Gulf Coast of the United States and rural fishing villages in India (Aldrich 2010a), may prove to be a more efficient use of private and public sector resources.

Chamlee-Wright has written an important book and set out a research agenda for future research on disasters. Moving beyond traditional frameworks which remain fixated on factors external to the communities – such as the damage wrought by the disaster, aid provided by outside agencies, and regional or national leadership – she has pushed us to focus on the social, not physical, infrastructure in post-disaster situations. Communities bound together by norms which share high levels of trust and reciprocity may be best able to recover after catastrophe, whether in the Gulf Coast, rural India, or the heart of Africa. By re-envisioning recovery as a coordination problem, Chamlee-Wright has forced us to focus on the ways in which social institutions create expectations and narratives about recovery. Building on her accomplishments, future research should better differentiate between types of social capital, shed light on the interaction between government activities and local cultures, and seek to provide policy makers with clear recommendations about policies which can prepare vulnerable communities for disasters. With this strong theoretical foundation, researchers of disaster can provide what Peter Haas called “usable knowledge” about disasters - knowledge that is accurate, salient, and politically tractable (Haas 2004: 572).

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Notes

¹ See Beggs, Haines, and Hurlbert 1996 for an additional discussion of extralocal resources.

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Figure 1: Bonding, Bridging, and Linking Social Capital (adapted from Aldrich, forthcoming b)

