Risk, Vulnerability and Social Marginality:
Understanding Gaps in Expert-Public Disaster Perceptions

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In recent years, disaster researchers have discovered substantial gaps between the risk and vulnerability perceptions of experts (including scientists and policy makers) on the one side and the perceptions of ordinary people on the other (Gavin 2001; Peacock et al. 2005; Siegrist & Cvetkovich 2000; Slovic 2000; Wachinger et al. 2013). This divide is concerning because disaster perceptions and interpretations shape actions, such as evacuation, that can save or endanger human lives. As social constructionists argue, perceptions of reality become real in their consequences. Some "objectively" vulnerable populations may distrust and resist policy makers' assessments of themselves as being in need of assistance, leading to misunderstandings, frustrations, and possibly an increased exposure to hazards. Disaster perception gaps appear indicative of divergent worldviews, values, and material constraints (Garvin 2001) which are concentrated in urban areas yet exist beyond the boundaries of cities.

This paper is based on qualitative research conducted between 2008 and 2010 in four low-income communities on Florida's Gulf Coast in the Tampa Bay Metropolitan Region. I here investigate the self-perceptions of risk and vulnerability of people living in mobile homes communities, a housing and community type that is often stigmatized in mainstream American culture. In hurricane-prone Florida, based on their housing, mobile home residents are officially considered vulnerable, leading to special policies and procedures during disasters. Moreover, participants appear socially vulnerable, based on commonly used scientific indicators such as poverty, disability, high/low age of household members, and lack of transportation. However, study participants typically did not share the official views of high disaster risk and high physical and social vulnerability, and therefore many did not comply with official protocols for protection and evacuation. Instead, participants emphasized their personal protections, strengths, and resilience while showing considerable distrust of government and media experts. Mobile home dwellers have developed personal identities rooted in homeownership, middle class status, and moral respectability, thereby resisting and transgressing the cultural "trailer" stigma as well as public perceptions of being a vulnerable category of people.

The paper contributes to the literature on disaster perception gaps by linking them to transgressive place identities, in this case developed under conditions of social marginality. It also demonstrates the value and potential of using an interpretive theoretical lens in disasters studies. Some implications for urban disaster governance are discussed in the conclusion.

References

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