Portraiture Method to Study Individual Disasters

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Abstract

With impending natural and unnatural disasters, it has become increasingly difficult to study such events with quantifiable measures or formulaic methods that we learn in research methods courses. In 2005, I joined the ranks of those who immediately after Hurricanes Katrina and Rita stepped in to assist the evacuees in their recovery efforts. It quickly became apparent that many organizations and groups applied a prescribed form of assistance, without consideration for cultural relevance of those on the receiving end. A pilot study conducted in the largest Federal Emergency Management Agency trailer park, Renaissance Village, portrayed how programs may ensure their sustainability if cultural elements are included in the program design, development, and delivery of services and may help in reinstating one's own identity. A methodology that allowed to comprehensively reveal the evolution of the educational and cultural setting was portraiture. This methodology stems not only from aesthetic but also from educational research literature. It brings various social nuances to the already complicated nature of disaster response to the forefront. As a result, a ‘case study tableau’ can be painted to depict post-disaster complexities by bringing seemingly disjointed elements and events together through the use of thick description.

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this case, students will be able to

- Identify key aspects of portraiture in post-disaster research
- Critically determine the advantages and disadvantages of using portraiture methodology in post-disaster research
- Understand the role a researcher must assume in post-disaster research
- Consider the ethical implications of post-disaster research

Portraiture Method to Study Individual Disasters: Introduction

Drawing is drawing out; it is extraction of what the subject matter has to say in particular to the painter in his integrated experience. Because the painting is a unity of interrelated parts, every designation of a particular figure has, more over, to be drawn into a relation of mutual reinforcement with all other plastic means—color, light, the spatial planes and the placing of other parts. (Dewey, 1934, p. 96)

My fascination with the context of disaster began long before my career in academia. As a product of a diplomatic family, I got a unique opportunity to explore the world and gain perspective on human resiliency. By the time I reached university level and graduate school, it became apparent to me that traditional forms of observations and analysis are insufficient when faced with post-disaster circumstances. I entered my
graduate program in Louisiana in 2005, 2 weeks before Hurricane Katrina made landfall along the Gulf Coast of the United States and quickly followed by Hurricane Rita. Because of my experience of being in constant state of displacement, this was nothing new to me. However, what followed immediately after became my area of interest and a long-term commitment.

For almost 4.5 years, I worked at a trailer park, called Renaissance Village (RV), where evacuees from New Orleans, Louisiana, were temporarily settled while they collected pieces of their lives and prepared to move on. In the midst of all the chaos and complexities surrounding individuals' ability to restart their lives, many non-for-profit research and charitable organizations came in to provide their services and help. Through my university, I was one of the first individuals allowed to implement an educational program for children and youth, who did not enroll in school or who needed supplemental help. In the effort to build a sustainable program, the residents were asked to participate in the creation of the program and to ensure cultural appropriateness and level of responsiveness. However, upon questioning the residents about their perspective on the disaster responses, they all claimed, ‘It's all so surreal’ (Smoleń Santana, 2012). It was at that point that a new idea organically burgeoned of how to view and/or explain the phenomenon of chaos and complexity taking place at RV.

I turned to art education, aesthetics in art, and aesthetic research methodologies, and surrealism in particular, as a lens to help understand the post-disaster circumstances and what elements contributed to the survival of the educational program that I helped design and run for over 4 years. It was important to first contextualize the disaster and understand the underlying social nuances that influenced responses and reactions of those working in a service capacity and those on the receiving end. Because I intended for this study to include the voices of children, their families, and university students, institutional review board (IRB) approval through the university was sought.

Contextualizing Disaster and Design

Each post-disaster locale is unique, differing in geographical location, type of disaster (natural or unnatural), affected populations, cultural complexities, and temporal lengths. Because of these differences, disasters need to be studied and analyzed as individual and distinct case studies. Similarly, artists' paintings may be classified within a genre (i.e. classic, neoclassic, impressionist, cubist, or surrealist), yet are distinct from one work of art, or oeuvre, to the next. Artists view their subjects in a particularly complex way at any particular time. In other words, it is impossible for an artist to see their subject the same way twice since they bring forth contextual elements at that particular time frame to construct a representation or interpretation of reality and subconscious elements. Artists acknowledge the fluidity of human nature and social environs (Ballengee-Morris & Stuhr, 2001). To capture the essence of the events that transpired at RV during the 4.5-year existence of the program and how the educational milieu developed at the site, a case study research design seemed an appropriate fit for such research design because it encapsulated that fluidity in a form that I called ‘case study tableau’ (Smoleń Santana, 2012).
Robert Stake (1995) suggests several roles that a researcher can assume when conducting case study research, among them is the role of an interpreter. He purports that ‘research is not just the domain of scientists, it is the domain of craftspersons and artists as well’ (p. 97). By looking at René Magritte and his work, Stake was able to build a case study focused on how an artist interprets the realities around him, how they translate onto canvas, as well as how his interpretations translate into understanding by audiences of his work. Seeing a researcher as an artist with an assumed role of interpreter allows for the researcher to serve a new role of an ‘agent of new interpretation’ (Stake, 1995, p. 99), bringing to light ‘juxtaposition of the unrelated to juxtaposition of associates’ (Stake, 1995, p. 99). The circumstances surrounding the complex nature of RV, its residents, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), and other existing elements seemed rather disjointed at the time. These entities seemed to be viable by themselves; however, when brought together, their interactions began to influence each other’s behaviors. With this in mind, one cannot but wonder how these elements—a temporary facility, such as RV, brought in by a federal organization meant to keep displaced residents safe (and from whom or from what was left to interpretation), the New Orleans residents displaced to an area that used to be a cow pasture, and then university educational efforts in that milieu—were going to fit on this metaphorical canvas of my study. However, with an assumed role of an artist and interpreter, I ‘painted’ an oeuvre, or work of art, to understand and make sense of what transpired via embedded case study design (Yin, 2003).

To be more precise, the purpose was to write a surrealist case study tableau depicting the extent of cultural responsiveness of our educational efforts, while looking at fluidity of events affecting the RV residents and those involved in the educational program. By examining several different participants and sources at a single site, the study sought to identify commonalities and relationships that could have been undetected or dismissed if another form of qualitative method and design were chosen. In the end, the final product does not include a pictorial depiction of a post-disaster response, rather renders a narrative de-mystifying (Foucault, 1973), in our case, the element of culturally relevant response which contributed to the survival of the educational program at a particular site; furthermore, it provides a narrative blueprint of culturally responsive best practices for post-disaster settings and how they can be woven into educational efforts. Once I chose the case study design, I needed to find a methodology that would equally capture the essence of this site and keep with the metaphor of ‘surrealism’; hence, I looked into art education and interdisciplinary methods.

Method

Portraiture draws from two research traditions wherein contexts are the foci of the human experience:

Portraiture is a method framed by the traditions and values of the phenomenological paradigm, sharing many of the techniques, standards, and goals of ethnography. But it pushes against the constraints of those traditions and practices in its effort to combine empirical and aesthetic description, in its focus on the convergence of narrative and analysis, in its goal of speaking
to broader audiences beyond the academy (thus linking inquiry to public discourse and social transformation), in its standard of authenticity rather than reliability and validity (the traditional standards of quantitative and qualitative inquiry), and in its explicit recognition of the use of the self as the primary research instrument for documenting and interpreting the perspectives and experiences of the people and the cultures being studied. (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, pp. 13–14)

The portraiture method requires thorough descriptions of participants, interactions, reactions, and context in order to project a sense of reality to the audience. Similarly, ‘an artistic relationship between color, light, and space in a portrait is not only more enjoyable than is an outline stencil but it says more’ (Dewey, 1934, p. 95). With this in mind, an extensive amount of descriptive narrative and creativity is necessary. According to Clifford Geertz (1973), imagination is a crucial ingredient in the drawing of cultures, and it is rich description that allows those on the outside to understand living on the inside of a culture. Geertz links imagination and interpretation in his depiction of what he calls ‘thick description’ (p. 214). By providing such extensive narrative, it is then possible to triangulate participants' stories and help the audience visualize the scenes and stories. Portraiture considers participants' senses and reactions to events, as well as those of the researcher. Presenting these pieces narratively allows for the triangulation of data to emerge.

Furthermore, to provide a better understanding of individual perspectives, a researcher needs to consider that a set of distinct barriers, constraints, and borders exist between those observing and being observed (Geertz, 1973; Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997; Shirley, 2005). For this reason, I followed Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot and Jessica Davis's (1997) model that differentiated between four forms of context: internal context, historical context, aesthetic features, and personal context. All these forms were necessary to ensure all differences were acknowledged and included in each unit of analysis while creating the tableau.

**Internal Context**

The internal context refers to the physical setting or rather the ecological surroundings (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). To understand the circumstances of RV's residents, it is necessary to place RV in a contextual macrosphere. Its uniqueness stems from its placement in Baker, Louisiana, on a national scale and, finally, within an international arena (Smoleń Santana, 2012). Placing a disaster in this context is crucial to setting the ‘background colors’ in the tableau.

**Historical Context**

Historical context refers to the depictions of history, culture, and ideology of a particular site. These elements would be in the fore plan of the tableau and should be presented with care. In the surrealist movement, these would be the first pieces the audience would view and begin to question. ‘The portraittist should always be alert to the convergence (and contrast) between the external signs of the physical environment and the interior culture, noting the synchrony and the dissonance’ (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 52). This
includes description of institutional culture and history; in this case, description of RV's overall culture and its historical evolution. New Orleans residents share a very rich history full of colonial disputes; however, displacing them into a rural cow pasture and expecting them to succeed in rebuilding their lives seemed a little more complex to comprehend and more nuanced in its creation.

**Aesthetic Context**

This particular form of context requires literary tools to be applied to truly capture the spirit of portraiture and the art within the research. For the tableau, these are the connections and details that tie presented pieces together. This was the place to bring in the metaphor of surrealism, where my goal was to expose overarching themes and nuanced elements that normally could be missed or overlooked. This keeps intact with the surrealist art movement—to bring forth the social nuances as focal points as opposed to background noise. According to Zygmunt Bauman (1998), metaphors are a perfect mode for imagination to find its place in any literary piece when all other forms have fallen short of capturing the essence of what the author wants the readers to understand. Furthermore, Geertz (1973) points out that metaphors allow for better visualization of complex cultural and historical phenomena but at the same time help the narrator to organize material and ensure its cohesion.

With this in mind, the idea of a portrait and its organization need to be discussed further:

> The outer edges of the canvas on which the artist paints physically and psychologically frame an aesthetic space that is separate from the world at large. What occurs within the parameters of that frame is set off from everyday reality and evokes a response that is different from the response evoked by objects and events in the everyday world. Within the boundaries that frame the aesthetic space, the artist seeks to achieve a visual order through the interrelationship of elements of the composition around the center of the work. (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 33)

Here, the aesthetic context allows for many units of analysis to coexist, such as reactions and responses of program participants to the changing educational milieu, university students' perceptions of program development, analysis of artifacts (e.g. pictures and newspaper articles), and international perspectives of responses to Hurricane Katrina. Each unit of analysis was added to the RV tableau while bearing in mind their own unique structures and oftentimes porous boundaries and outlines. However, a researcher needs to understand and acknowledge that despite this context, one will still be unable to mention every facet of human experience. The tableau is a written snapshot of events and perspectives, not an attempt to lay claim to understand the entire human experience.

**Personal Context of Researcher’s Role**

The personal context refers to the Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) perception of the researcher's role: ‘The researcher is the stranger, the one who must experience the newness, the awkwardness, the
tentativeness that comes with approaching something unfamiliar, and must use the actors in the setting as
guides, as authorities, as knowledge bearers’ (p. 43). I entered the RV premises as a graduate assistant from
Poland, who knew very little about New Orleans, Louisiana, the United States, and its people and who was in
a slightly better position than that of those affected. My perception of various individuals at the site was that
they viewed me through various lenses as well. In this step, the researcher has to acknowledge the various
reflections and refractions they may represent (Dixson, Chapman, & Hill, 2005).

‘Working in context, the researcher, then, has to be alert to surprises and inconsistencies and improvise
conceptual and methodological responses that match the reality she is observing. The researcher’s stance
becomes a dance of vigilance and improvisation’ (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 43). Rather than
considering results as statistics or excluding these anomalies from the data, portraiture demands authenticity,
capturing the essence of the experience that was described in detail within its particular context. Moreover,
it places the researcher in the middle of the story. As Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) insist, ‘portraiture
admits the central and creative role for the self of the portraitist’ (p. 13); furthermore, ‘the self of the portraitist
emerges as an instrument of inquiry, an eye on perspective-taking, an ear that discerns nuances, and a voice
that speaks and offers insights’ (p. 13). This methodology allows for the inclusion of the researcher as an
active participant, rather than omitting or distancing oneself from the research topic at hand. Rather than
choosing to do an autoethnographic study to have one’s voice heard, this method is a multi-method approach
that is more encompassing of the researcher and the researched.

Data Collection

Data collection involved collecting from multidisciplinary areas. In-depth interviews with program participants
(university students, parents, and children); anecdotal data; and artifacts proved to be the most useful
resources when crafting this tableau. Artifacts that represented post-disaster educative elements, such as
footage of the site and children (both video and photographs) and newspaper articles that depict significant
RV events, were collected as well. These sources of information were added to the overall embodiment of
RV residents' lifestyles and evidence of cultural displacement, and struggles (Smoleń Santana, 2012). All of
these served as pieces added to both historical and aesthetic contexts in the tableau.

Participant Selection

Within the disaster context, due to the ever-changing nature of disaster and its aftermath, one cannot be
expected to have the luxury of finding willing participants, much less those that will persist throughout the
duration of the study. Hence, it is the researcher’s role to explain, through thick description, the back story
of each participant, reasons for their participation in the study, and how the circumstances of disaster have
impacted their ability to process the events surrounding their lives. Understanding these components for each
participant helps to eliminate some of the bias from this type of sampling. The thick description provides
a milieu for explanation rather than presenting fluid numbers, which could distract from understanding the
nature of the site. In my study, the program began with 20 children ranging in age from 2 to 18 years. In the course of 3 months, it decreased to 5, then increased again to 40 for a few months after that and varied from month to month. Most of the children were not the same ones each time, due to the families attempting to move back to New Orleans, some successfully, whereas others returned to RV or moved to the Baton Rouge area and came back to RV to participate in the program itself. For the purposes of my study, I chose to use interview data from those participants who stayed with us the longest, which in the end turned out to be three children. Furthermore, the program evolved to also serve adult and parent residents, and the same criteria were used (their length of participation), which rendered a purposeful sample of three participants. Moreover, the program was attached to a university elective course that could be taken up to three times (or three semesters). Four students took the course three times and, therefore, were included as their own unit of study.

Analysis

A post-disaster context requires the use of a methodology that can adapt to uncertainty. The fluidity of circumstances demanded constant adaptation to new service providers, new FEMA rules, and to the fact that most of our participants constantly had to juggle between all of these factors and the existence of a university-led education program. For many RV residents, this was the first time, they came across university folks and had a hard time understanding how the program fit into their new surroundings and how they could benefit from it. The residents by then had been used to programs coming in, performing their prescribed programs and, upon completion, leaving. However, our program remained in place, adjusted to the needs of the residents, and over time gained their trust that the program would continue despite constant pushbacks and rule changes.

In my research, understanding the development of such events and why certain programmatic tactics and modes of operation had to change could only made sense through chronological explanation and analysis. The interviews, artifacts, and reexamination of existing data were coded according to a particular time frame. In the end, three major time frames were depicted, which I called triptychs, in reference to an art mode of presentation, which is a set of three parts that are to be viewed as one.

The first triptych identified the creation efforts of the program, which lasted for about 4 months. During this time, the idea of an adaptable program and what would look like with the current resources was needed. Data for this unit of analysis included field notes from university students and staff and interview data from RV parents. Consequently, the major themes that emerged from these data were (a) need for a culturally relevant program and (b) responsive versus reactive post-disaster efforts.

The second triptych was determined by unification of efforts between the university program and other educational agencies. This time frame lasted for 3 years, during which time data from university students who took the course were gathered and analyzed, as well as their field notes and personal journal. Artifacts such as photographs of the site and newspaper articles were also gathered and coded. Some of the major themes
that emerged from this triptych included (a) new roles a program needed to assume, (b) lack of cultural responsiveness, and (c) differences in the perceptions of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita.

The final triptych came from the last year of the university presence at the site until RV’s closure. Same types of artifacts were gathered and used to determine changes to the RV site, program location, and potential future of the program. Furthermore, field notes and personal journal entries were analyzed and the following themes emerged: (a) looming displacement, (b) transient roles of educational programs, and (c) intra-agencies competition for data and results.

This triptych portrayed three major evolutionary points in the existence of the program; however, it is up to the author to decide the length of each time frame based on the major turning points. All the while, although, it is vital to gather data. But with the data collection and organization came ethical questions to mind as well, especially because of the delicate nature of the post-disaster context.

| Ethical Implications of Doing Research on Vulnerable Population |

Any time one intends to conduct research in an area where a disaster took place, it is imperative to consider the ethical implications of doing the research, when to do it, and whether the process of research might harm the individuals involved. Furthermore, when is it appropriate to approach an individual who has been affected by the disaster to pursue academic or organizational research goals? Is there a predetermined time frame that is deemed sufficient after which it is safe to ask questions (Smoleń Santana, 2012)? The university processes in place provide a few answers; however, for the remainder, we as researchers are left to our own moral compass.

While conducting my research, I came across several instances that made me question ethical boundaries between the researcher and participants. Considering the exposed circumstance of the affected population, especially post-disaster, how likely is it for potential participants to sign an informed consent form truthfully and with requisite knowledge of what their signatures entail? Because one of the main prerequisites for participation is to be in a sound psychological state (per IRB requirements for a study), how can a researcher determine whether a disaster-affected individual is capable of providing sound responses and consent for conducting research about them? Thus, it is essential for the researcher to clearly state their role in this post-disaster context and to make sure that potential study participants understand what that entails. Although the IRB procedures state this, it is imperative that this particular point is explained thoroughly.

After Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, numerous individuals came to the New Orleans area and offered various types of help to evacuees, often overwhelming them, but others were in search of their stories. Therefore, stating and restating what the purpose of the study is and what the participants could gain from participation is crucial. For example, I came to the RV site as a graduate student and was perceived as a representative of my university that assumingly had limitless resources to share. Therefore, many evacuees believed that if they participated in my study, they would have an ‘in’ into university resources or potentially have access to
other networks that could help them with relocation. This was not the case, and I had to repeatedly correct the RV residents regarding my role at the site. Yet, I have seen other researchers come into RV and offer rides to a local store or give out a gift card upon filling out a questionnaire for their study. This made me question, how likely was it that the residents participated in those studies because they needed the incentives, and more importantly, how likely were the findings or data valid? Although these questions were not answered in my study, the intention here is to raise awareness that with new research contexts come new sets of ethical questions that are not easily answered and that a researcher needs to be cognizant of.

Conclusion

Disasters are complex to deal with, whether you are the one affected, an observer, or a service provider. One consistent consternation as a researcher is to find the right methodology to relay the events that took place and provide valid findings to the community at large. Portraiture provides a means for the researcher, the participants, and all relevant contexts to be featured. However, this can be placed only in a case study format, due to the adaptable nature of such research design. The triangulation of various sources is key to providing details that in the end will ‘paint the picture’ of reality to the readers. Clearly, this demands an extensive amount of descriptive writing that allows for a research question to be investigated from various facets in each context. The case study tableau brings forth seemingly disjointed elements and/or nuances that ultimately help answer the research question of whether the inclusion of culturally relevant educational components contributed to the longevity of an educational program at a unique post-disaster site and provide a ‘written snapshot’ of events that took place at RV. In the end, the final product aimed to establish a blueprint for implementing culturally relevant post-disaster programming for other contexts with practices that may or may not be replicated and suggested elements that cannot be omitted.

Exercises and Discussion Questions

1. How does portraiture differ from other qualitative methodologies?
2. What are the advantages and disadvantages of using a case study tableau as a research design for disaster circumstance?
3. What are some ethical implications when conducting post-disaster research?

Further Reading


References


