

Study: Culture strongly influences coping behaviors after natural disasters

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Social work professors Tara M. Powell, left, and Kate M. Wegmann found in a recent study that demographic and cultural characteristics are strong influences on adolescents' coping styles and behaviors after natural disasters. Credit: L. Brian Stauffer

Demographic and cultural differences strongly influence the coping

styles young people use when they're affected by a natural disaster, and these disparities should be taken into account when providing services to help them recover from these traumatic experiences, a new study found.

University of Illinois social work professors Tara M. Powell and Kate M. Wegmann led the study, which utilized a new method of assessing coping among disaster-affected youths to address the limitations of a commonly used survey called Kidcope.

"We know that the way a kid copes after a disaster determines how well they're going to overcome the experience or whether they develop problems such as [post-traumatic stress disorder](#), depression or anxiety," Powell said. "However, one of the things that we don't know is the best measure that researchers and clinicians can use to assess young people's post-disaster coping methods."

The current study explored the coping strategies used by middle-class teen girls in St. Tammany Parish, an affluent area of New Orleans, after the area was damaged by Hurricane Katrina in 2005. Of the 650 girls in the study, about 82 percent reported that the hurricane forced their families to evacuate their homes.

Six months after Katrina, the girls completed an adapted version of the Kidcope assessment, a survey widely used by clinicians and researchers to examine children's and adolescents' use of behaviors such as distraction, social withdrawal and social support to handle major stressors, including natural [disasters](#).

However, one limitation of Kidcope is that it was designed for use in clinical settings to examine [young people](#)'s coping with serious illnesses and lengthy hospitalizations—contexts that differ from natural disasters, the researchers wrote.

When used in prior studies to assess coping among hurricane-affected youths, Kidcope's structural modeling was variable and unstable, according to Powell and Wegmann. To address these inconsistencies, they and co-author Stacy Overstreet of Tulane University tested three different structural models to find the best fit with their study population of young hurricane survivors.

They found that the coping strategies utilized by the girls in St. Tammany Parish resembled a four-factor structural model, which included positive coping behaviors along with less healthy externalizing behaviors such as blame and anger, wishful thinking and social withdrawal.

In comparing these girls' coping behaviors with those used by a sample of low-income, predominantly African-American peers who also survived Hurricane Katrina, the researchers found few similarities.

Instead, the St. Tammany Parish girls' coping methods were consistent with those used by middle-class youths who were affected by a different natural disaster—Hurricane Andrew, which struck the Bahamas, Florida and Louisiana in 1992, Wegmann said.

"We found that culture really matters in terms of how adolescents respond to a disaster," Wegmann said. "Some of the cultural values that are associated with resilience, such as a focus on community and informal means of support, are less prominent among middle-class populations than lower income populations.

"Middle class and wealthier demographics' cultural values are more about individualism and personal responsibility, so the communalism that can help a person recover from a disaster just isn't there," Wegmann said.

By utilizing a data analysis technique called "exploratory structural equation modeling," the researchers found that the behavioral strategies the St. Tammany Parish girls used also had complex relationships with each other.

For example, the coping strategy of attempting to forget about the problem, which was associated primarily with [social withdrawal](#), also was associated with [wishful thinking](#), blame and anger, and positive coping.

Understanding how and why disaster victims utilize varying coping methods and the influences that demographic differences may have on their responses is hampered by the lack of consistent, reliable assessment tools, according to the authors.

Developing effective, well-validated measures that can be distributed easily and adapted for differing populations should become a research priority to better assist disaster survivors with recovery, Powell and Wegmann said.

More information: Tara M. Powell et al, Measuring Adolescent Coping Styles Following a Natural Disaster: An ESEM Analysis of the Kidcope, *School Mental Health* (2018). [DOI: 10.1007/s12310-018-9288-x](#)

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