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"THEY COULD SEE STARS FROM THEIR BEDS":  
THE PLIGHT OF THE RURAL POOR  
IN THE AFTERMATH OF HURRICANE HUGO

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"They Could See Stars from their Beds":  
The Plight of the Rural Poor in the Aftermath of Hurricane Hugo

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Charles Fritz (1961) once noted that disasters are natural laboratories for studying underlying social processes. In September of 1989, Hurricane Hugo swept upon the South Carolina coast, creating havoc for many who lived there. Following the devastation of that storm, many groups organized themselves around what they saw as significant problems produced by or aggravated by the storm. The purpose of this paper is to look at how certain groups came to define and own particular social problems and what the consequences of those definitions have been for action. More specifically, it argues that those groups who are in positions which are more visible and powerful are able to define, describe, and own social problems in ways convenient to their interests, goals, and/or underlying organizing ideologies.

Sociologists conceptualize social problems in at least two ways. Some see social problems as objective social conditions resulting either from value conflicts or social disorganization (cf. Waller, 1936; Fuller, 1937; Fuller and Myers, 1941; for more recent treatments see Merton, 1971; Manis, 1974; 1975), or from institutional arrangements of power (cf. Feagin, 1986). Other sociologists see social problems as "fundamentally products of a process of collective definition instead of existing independently as a set of objective social arrangements with an intrinsic makeup" (Blumer, 1971, p. 299). The "process of collective definition" implies that there are groups or social movements engaging in the defining process. Social problems, then, are not objective outcomes resulting from institutional arrangements but rather are "the activities of groups making assertions of grievances and claims with respect to some putative condition" (Kitsuse and Spector, 1973, p. 415). This approach recognizes that social problems can be points around which there can be competing interests, objectives and solutions. The more powerful and visible groups or movements will be most influential in defining whether something is problematic (Scarpitti and Andersen, 1992). Who makes the assertion, how it is made, and the content of the subsequent definition influences types of action and solutions taken (Schneider, 1985).

Conceptualizing social problems as products of collective definition allows researchers to recognize that conflicting meanings and definitions may arise, and that these allow for different kinds of action (for recent discussions, debates and attempts to reconcile the "objectivist" and "constructionist" approaches see Hazelrigg, 1986; Woolgar and Pawluch, 1985a; 1985b).

## METHODS

### Data Collection and Analysis.

This study draws on data collected for a larger Disaster Research Center project funded by the National Science Foundation to study housing, business, and government recovery from disaster events.<sup>1</sup> Two and three person field teams traveled to the Charleston area within a few days of the storm and again on five subsequent one week trips. Approximately seventy interviews were conducted and analyzed. Key government positions were contacted first; from there the field teams used a snowball sampling approach to locate additional housing and business organizations.

Our study is more narrow in focus and specifically analyzes the definitional processes, organizing ideologies and actions taken by those groups organized around the housing conditions of the rural poor located outside of Charleston, South Carolina. Specifically, these include three government organizations, five church based organizations and one for-profit organization. Additionally, the authors used field observations, newspaper articles, memos and reports generated by various organizations to supplement interview evidence.

### Community Context and Event.

Community Context. This study focuses on the population which resides in the rural isolated areas of a Tri-county Region of South Carolina; specifically, the East of the Cooper region (near McClellanville, Awendaw, Huger and the Francis Marion National forest) and the Sea Islands (primarily James, John's, and Wadmalaw Islands). There is little census data available; what follows are characterizations by key informants.

Most of this population is Black and elderly, although some are younger, single and unemployed working poor or single welfare mothers. Many are related to each other through extended kin networks. Some are handicapped and many are illiterate.

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<sup>1</sup> This project is a comparative study of disaster impacts and initial community recovery activities in Charleston County, South Carolina and Santa Cruz County, California. The objectives of the study are to (1) document disaster impacts and early recovery issues and activities in the two communities; (2) develop a set of socio-economic indicators that can be used to chart disaster recovery, and begin collecting data on those indicators; and (3) conduct comparative analyses and develop hypotheses concerning factors that explain outcomes in the recovery period.

Although most people own their houses, the living conditions are still very poor. One outreach worker describes the situation this way:

We've identified 40 families that have no plumbing and have never had it in their whole life. Many of them do not have electricity either.

Another adds:

We just found a house that had absolutely no windows in it. There are people that have no water, no sewer systems in their homes. They can't afford to repair their homes, they can't afford to heat their homes, they can't afford to buy food.

Still another worker recalled:

I think of [this old lady's house--it] was a fire trap...she had a kerosene stove...and she would bring in these jugs full of kerosene for the stove with all these [electric] wires across this thing and the fact that she didn't blow herself up was a miracle....

Finally one worker sums the situation this way:

These were people in shacks. I don't know if you would classify that as a substandard unit, but some of them looked at the stars at night in their beds.

In the South, in general, the different classes and races are not residentially segregated. The poor are often hidden beside their wealthier neighbors, rendering them invisible. For example, an island outreach worker commented:

James Island is much more upper-middle class except that the pockets of area that we serve are real poverty, people that lived there all their lives, same old houses and you may have one of them in the backyard of a very very well to do person and they're hidden, so unless you know where to go, it's out there. People without plumbing next to people that have three or four cars.

The situation is similar on John's Island and the East of the Cooper area where many poor houses are interspersed with well-kept historic homes.

Because both poorer and wealthier people lived interspersed with each other, as one outreach worker expressed, "people [don't]

realize what the situation really [is]. As you ride down the street, there is a facade of adequacy. The homes look substantial. You can't see [these shacks] from the street." Furthermore, few social service, church, or county organizations knew these people existed or what their living conditions were before the hurricane.

In addition to being invisible, many people are isolated. There were few roads, especially paved roads, connecting people with each other. One worker underscores this point

Some of these dirt roads, you know, you don't even bother to go down them, there might be ten houses there down one of these dirt roads. ...people down these dirt roads would call the centers and say I live on Turkey Pen road. Where the heck is Turkey Pen Road. I never heard of Turkey Pen Road. Its a dirt road off a major thoroughfare. Never heard of it before, I went down Turkey Pen Road, they're about five houses down there that needed food.

Additionally, most rural poor did not have cars, and the bus system available is inadequate to meet transportation needs. One worker noted that the elderly rarely collected food stamps because it was just too much hassle to get to the downtown area for what never usually amounted to much more than ten dollars a month.

In sum, the rural poor of the Charleston area are an isolated, invisible population who rarely interface with outsiders, including county, social service, or church organizations.

#### The Effects of Hugo.

The first hurricane winds slammed into Charleston at 11:30 p.m. Winds reached 135 miles per hour and tides of 12.9 feet crashed over the seawall. Francis Marion National Forest lost 75% of its trees. There was an estimated 213 million dollars in timber damage. When the storm passed, residents of South Carolina found that Hugo had left their homes flooded and covered with mud. In Charleston, 130,000 people were initially without power; 230,000 lost telephone service. Over 80% of the roofs were damaged. Twenty-seven people were killed in South Carolina. Officials estimated total damage at 3 billion dollars (Hurricane Hugo: Storm of the Century, 1989).

The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) estimated that approximately 2.6 billion dollars in federal disaster aid will be spent on Hugo related needs. Of that 1.19 billion dollars will be required to supplement the long term recovery needs of affected residents and businesses. They project that 725 million dollars will be spent on family grants and housing assistance and 446 million dollars spent in loans covering uninsured private and business property loses. Additionally, 15 million dollars will be

spent in unemployment payments and crisis counseling (Hazard Monthly, 1990).

By the first anniversary of Hugo, the number of people at 304,300 who sought federal aid was the most ever to register for presidentially declared major disaster as a result of a single incident. Of that total 144,713 residents obtained housing and 187,259 obtained grants for disaster related expenses. Additionally, 991 million dollars of federal funding was obligated to pay the costs for repairing public property.

Hurricane Hugo hit the Sea Islands and the East of the Cooper area hardest. In fact, Awendaw was almost washed away by the 19.4 foot tide, the highest of the century. Both areas sustained high wind damage, and the East of the Cooper area also bore the brunt of the storm surge. One county official describes the experience of some of the people:

I talked with one couple-- she was 69 and he was 67. They lived in a trailer, but they had kind of built it in so it looked like a house. They were in their home that night of the storm, and the water came in.

You have to visualize this--there was no electricity, the water was coming in, and they're standing on the counters and the water is up to their necks. The home is shaking and shuddering and coming off the foundations. Can you imagine the terror that those people felt that night?

I know lots of stories. One guy actually had to chop a hole through his roof and swim from his home to his brother-in-law's home, with his son tied to his back by a belt. The things these people had to go through

## **ANALYSIS**

After the storm, three types of groups responded to the situation of the rural poor: church-based outreach programs, community service programs of businesses, and government programs. No advocacy, grassroots or politically mobilized groups formed.

Each of the groups conceptually defined the problems of the rural poor differently. Particularly important to this conceptualization was the attention given to the underlying causes of the poor's living conditions. Specifically, the churches and the community service programs were relatively unconcerned with cause; they were simply concerned with addressing needs. On the other hand, the governments were very careful to respond only to those problems thought to be caused by Hugo.

## Church Groups.

Church groups became quite visible throughout the emergency response period. Since several of the church buildings were relatively undamaged by the storm, those churches were in a position to lend space for various relief activities. As a result, many supplies and volunteers converged on the churches. A church outreach worker describes the initial situation:

[Our outreach program] emerged from a little trailer right behind the Methodist church. It was the only Methodist church in the East Cooper area not damaged, so truckloads of things just came pouring in--I mean literally this whole grassy area was covered with trucks.

We have a large congregation--1200--and most of those people were not working because their businesses were closed. This church was just like a beehive--their were people everywhere.

And then within a few weeks, there is no way you can keep that frenzy up--you need some coordination--and so the conference decided to set up this office to deal with the area east of the Cooper--[this area] was hard hit--had wind damage, a tidal surge and lots of poor.

Another outreach worker from a different program spoke of the origins of his organization:

It was born out of the Hugo emergency, and the act of service is represented in [the pastor's] offering to let us use his home, which had one of the few phones that were working, we used as a communication point. I think it was that and his position as the director of [a] major church on the island that started this undertaking, to receive calls for help and tie together offers of assistance.

In another case, the solicitor general of the county approached a church organization and asked them to organize the distribution of food and wares at an abandoned grocery store. The group eventually built a coalition with other churches and acquired the building. Immediately after the storm churches became the focus for the relief effort.

Because of their high visibility, church groups became the most influential definers of the rural poor's housing situation. The church organizations involved with housing the rural poor saw their role as ministering to those in need. Thus, they organized

their activity around the relief of human suffering. One church worker stated simply, "If we go who's going to take care of these people in need?" Church volunteers occupied themselves wholeheartedly with building or repairing houses, providing food, transportation, and medical care to those who couldn't provide these for themselves. Another worker summed the charity sentiment:

The people that we reached, were genuinely touched and overwhelmed by any kind of assistance, especially as time went on. You know, they've long ago given up hope that anybody's going to be out there to help them. You know the letters and the phone calls, God bless you, if your weren't here I don't know what i'd do. You know, we would not have been able to eat.

Although these church groups initially saw the problem as Hugo-related damage, they quickly realized that the pre-storm conditions were as bad--though unknown to most of them-- as the post-storm conditions. One worker stated:

We paid some attention as to the line between the storm damage and the weakness before the storm. That line often becomes blurred. Obviously, you try and work with the most serious problems first.

His co-worker, in addition, stated:

It's really a sad thing, but Hugo brought a lot of changes to the people on James Island. There was poverty here all of the time, but after the storm I saw what I've been living around for 34 years.

Similarly, an outreach worker from another program stated:

I am still doing Hugo relief, but in all honesty, many of the things that we are doing are things that pre-existed. You cannot replace a roof on a wall that is rotted, and those types of things we ran into frequently because of the level of poverty.

Still another relates:

I try very hard not to call things Hugo that are not Hugo. That does not mean that we did not repair walls that were rotted, we had to do that; but I would flat out say to anybody you can call this Hugo, but most of it is really not Hugo.

Underlying causes of the conditions they observed were irrelevant to church volunteers. It was simply important to identify and address needs, regardless of cause.

In sum, because Hugo provided visibility, impetus and resources, the churches were in a strong position to dominate the conceptual shaping of the rural housing situation. They did not restrict their definition to Hugo-related damage only; however, neither did they address causes of problems. They simply provided charity to anyone in need.

#### Community Service Arm of the For-Profit Organization.

The community service arm of the local electric co-operative found itself involved in disaster response very quickly because the person who managed that department was well known in the community. Many people contacted this person with problems and needs, so the department started providing direct relief in a manner similar to the churches. The director of the program stated:

It just happened. I don't know how it happened--I can't sit here and say it was a job that was given to me. Right after Hugo, we just started pulling people in and getting out there to assist them and see what the needs were. We had volunteers that just came to be.

She continues:

It's kind of unique here--I'm well known. This is my home I worked in mental services before. They need aid to do certain things and I guess they figured from the past that I could be helpful now.

Although the bottom-line purpose of a business is profit, the community service arm operated more or less on a charity and public relations basis. The director stated of herself, "I'm going to have to label myself as an outreach worker, because that is what I do." Here, too, the underlying causes of the problems (whether storm related or pre-existing) meant little to them; if a family needed a house, they were there to provide one. She stated:

We're hoping to kind of phase [the Hugo concerns] out now because we're in a different phase. I'm trying to not identify problems with Hugo and go identify substandard living conditions.

#### Government.

Underlying cause, while irrelevant to church activity, was very important to the government organizations. Consequently, they defined the problem differently and participated in different action. Within a few weeks of the storm, the county government, which had been providing emergency relief to various communities around the Charleston area began realizing that they were not extending the same service to the rural areas. Because of the

almost total lack of pre-storm interface with the rural poor, emergency programs were not reaching these people. One county worker stated:

There were a lot of folks out in the community that just were not getting the help that they needed. In those areas dealing with things as basic as food and water, where you think everybody would be taken care of, there were a lot of people that weren't being taken care of.

Almost accidentally, a county employee stumbled across a starving family outside storm surged McClellanville and deduced that county storm relief programs were not getting to these people. He approached the county administrative office, and together they decided that because the rural population were illiterate, isolated and without transportation, they were not receiving county relief. Therefore, the county reasoned, since these people could not get to the aid, the government would bring the aid to them. The county subsequently opened the Hugo Assistance Centers (HACs), centers designed to get available relief programs to an otherwise immobile populace. As soon as Hugo damage was perceived to have been dealt with, however, the HACs shut down. One HAC coordinator explained:

Things tapered off as problems were solved. As we got further away from the storm, there was less and less for me to do. It got to the point where our biggest thing that we were dealing with was debris, and we felt that we couldn't justify staying open any longer just for that. I feel pretty confident that we dealt well with those problems.

It is clear that the HACs, as an extension of the county, were only concerned with the problems that Hugo created, and not pre-existing poverty.

Another county program, administrated by a member of the county administrator's staff and a staff member of community development, was designed to provide temporary roofing repairs to homes and small businesses throughout the entire Tri-county area. Support staff were funded through the governor's temporary employment program, a program administrated by the South Carolina Employment Security Commission under Title 9 and Title 3, Hurricane Recovery Assistance Program. The recipients of this program, however, tended to be the rural poor population. Like the county's HAC program, this program was also temporary, lasting only nine months. It was designed specifically to address Hugo-related needs.

Because the government bodies saw the problem as disaster relief and not pre-existing squalid living conditions, a major

dilemma for them was distinguishing what was and what was not Hugo related damage. One county worker stated:

We had a lot of things where you'd look at the homes and you couldn't tell if it was Hugo damage or not-- they were just shacks. You had to make some decisions there about whether or not they qualified for help.

Another worker's comments illustrate the county's determination to only give aid to those who suffered from Hugo damage and castigates those he sees as "free riders:"

There were a lot of people trying to get work done that was not Hugo-related... Not only were we reaching the people that needed work, we were reaching people that said, 'Well, if I could pass this off as Hugo damage, I can get it done free.' So we ran into that. I don't care what disaster you had, you're always going to have somebody that's going to try to get something for nothing

It was important that the government programs made these distinctions because, given their public disaster assistance organizing role, they could only identify and repair storm related damage.<sup>2</sup> Whether or not there were pre-existing substandard living conditions was irrelevant to their mission. They decided what was Hugo-related damage, and they attempted to fix that. As soon as Hugo's damage was perceived to have been dealt with, the government programs shut down. Defining the situation this way effectively kept the governments out of the business of providing relief for the problems of normal times.

## DISCUSSION

From the analysis, it is clear that all three entities-- the churches, the community service arm of the for-profit organization, and the government-- have both resources and personnel available to them to address the housing problems of the rural poor population. The government was able to commit time, personnel and material once they defined Hugo-related damage as salient. Likewise, the churches and the community service arm were able to garner and commit substantial resources for their charity-based programs. However, because these groups did not define the situation in ways

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<sup>2</sup> The Disaster Relief Act states that when a federally declared disaster occurs, the federal government makes a variety of programs available to communities. There are often requirements attached to these programs. For example, they often require proof that an applicant is a resident or substantiation that the monies requested are for disaster related damage only.

that address poverty or its underlying structural conditions, their actions are limited to charity and government relief in times of emergency. All three groups are limited to alleviating symptoms, but not finding solutions.

Like most governments, the county governments of the Charleston area have crowded agendas and limited resources. Addressing the problems of the rural poor simply is not a priority of this government. It wasn't even until Hugo that many government officials knew that a problem existed. Many had never traveled to the poverty stricken areas prior to Hugo. At the very least, the storm and the ensuing media presence forced the government to recognize responsibility in committing to relief efforts. Even this was a surprise to some:

I am a county employee [and] Charleston county really surprised me when Hugo hit. I never thought in a disaster situation that we, and I mean my employers, would really want to do anything for anybody, and I'm not trying to be facetious. It's very easy in government to draw the line in what you do.

Nonetheless, they were responsive enough to the poor's lack of transportation and literacy (a skill necessary to apply for assistance) to take government services to the population. However, they were careful to limit their response to Hugo related damage; they did not use the storm as an opportunity to address poverty. They were anxious to get back to the normal business of government, normal business that did not include addressing the issue of poverty.

Although the government defined the problem and acted as if its job was simply to provide disaster relief, it could have been forced to act otherwise. The problems of the poor have often been overlooked because they have few resources available to them to influence the government. There have been, however, a small number of cases where an organized rural poor have been able to force a government to be responsive even if it meant using disruptive tactics (cf. Wellstone, 1978).

More to the point here, there have been cases where an organized low-income group has been able to use the aftermath of a disaster to springboard organization around issues of housing. For example, in the aftermath of the Loma Prieta earthquake in Watsonville, California, another community DRC is studying, Latino groups were able to stage collective protests around the lack of affordable housing. Although it is difficult to say whether or not this action has had a direct effect on the government, the question of affordable housing has been a part of most policy discussions in the earthquake aftermath.

The actions of the churches, too, were circumscribed by their definition of the problem as need.<sup>3</sup> Actions of churches do not necessarily have to be limited to acts of charity. They can (and have, as in the case of Latin America) taken on advocacy roles on behalf of poor people. The churches in the Charleston area have already committed resources and personnel. However, with the exception of one church-based organization that accompanies poor people to welfare offices and another church who sponsors literacy programs, there is little activity empowering the poor. That is, there is little evidence that churches are making their resources available in such a way that the poor themselves can define and act on issues that are important to them. The point here is that if the churches had defined this problem as one of injustice and not need, they could have used the resources available to empower the rural poor. A conviction that certain existing conditions are unjust is common to mobilization for social change (Turner and Killian, 1987). Instead, churches responded to need and acted out of charity.

## CONCLUSION

The case of Charleston in the aftermath of Hurricane Hugo demonstrates how disaster situations can provide an opportunity to study on-going social processes. Rural poverty was clearly an existing condition prior to Hugo. For the most part, it was a condition ignored by governmental and church programs. Hugo simply rendered the problem more visible. It seems clear that the government and churches define the problem in ways that ignore the problem of poverty and its underlying structural conditions. The crucial next step for research is to ask why the governments and churches defined the conditions of the rural poor in the ways that they did. These kinds of definitions are not unique to the Charleston case alone. In fact, when governments are faced with decisions about who gets aid following disaster situations, they make distinctions between who deserves that aid and who does not. Researchers need to address the socio-political context in which these distinctions get made.

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<sup>3</sup>We include the community service arm with our discussion of the churches because it shares the same charity-based definition of the problem of the rural poor.

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