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# Lessons learned: the long view

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**Abstract:** The COVID-19 pandemic has substantially altered the fabric of life around the globe, raising crucial questions about the nature of language usage in person and online. But as researchers embark on new studies (or continuations of pre-COVID research), just as essential are considerations of what our responsibilities as researchers are to our participants now. In this article, we share our reflections upon the experience of conducting research in two different post-disaster contexts: after Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans, Louisiana, and after the Christchurch earthquakes in New Zealand. We describe the issues faced by researchers and participants alike in these locales and we recount the decisions that we made, as many of the same decision processes are being faced by researchers currently navigating data collection due to COVID-19 and its aftermath. These decisions are of course contextually dependent, though our examples draw from two very different situations, comparing and contrasting how various forces, timelines, and regionally specific issues may come into play for researchers in a context of upheaval. In this “long view” essay, we provide a retrospective account of practical tips and ethical considerations for researchers embarking on a similar track.

**Keywords:** climate change; COVID-19 pandemic; COVID-era sociolinguistics; data collection methods; disaster linguistics; ethics; sociolinguistics

## 1 Introduction

The editors of this special issue asked us to write a piece reflecting on our experiences of collecting interviews in the wake of a disaster. In what follows, we first give a brief summary of the two projects we have been involved in, outlining the disasters themselves and then the corpora that were collected in their wake. Next, we write about our experiences of wrangling with ethical considerations, and attempting to protect our wellbeing and the wellbeing of our participants while collecting and analyzing stories that sometimes included distressing experiences. Finally, we end with a miscellany of practical advice that may be useful for anyone embarking on collecting a corpus of disaster stories, the “things we wish we had known” list. While there are some similarities in our experiences, it does not follow that our experiences will necessarily be relevant to all other contexts. We hope that our reflections may be useful for researchers working in the context of COVID-19 stories, or other disaster stories, but researchers will need to consider carefully which lessons may be relevant to their work.

We wrote this piece by sharing our experiences of collecting narratives from people who had experienced the impacts of natural disasters. In much the same way as our participants shared stories with us, we note points of similarity and points of difference between our experiences, and collate them here. We indicate in the heading of each section where our reflections and examples come from. We hope that someone somewhere finds this useful.

## 2 Disasters and participants’ stories

The two projects represented here have collected stories of natural disasters, specifically stories from survivors of Hurricane Katrina (collected by Katie Carmichael) and the Christchurch earthquakes (collected by a team of researchers represented here by Jen Hay and Lynn Clark).

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## 2.1 Hurricane Katrina (New Orleans)

The city of New Orleans is no stranger to hurricanes, and situated below sea level, it has protective infrastructure to prevent major flooding. However, due to a combination of poor timing, human failure, and environmental factors, Hurricane Katrina flooded and devastated the city in August 2005. While it was originally projected to make a turn and avoid hitting New Orleans directly, unusually warm waters in the Gulf of Mexico meant that Hurricane Katrina instead built up to a Category 5 hurricane, and continued on a path toward the city, as seen in Figure 1. Mandatory evacuation of the city was ordered a mere two days before the hurricane made landfall as a Category 3 (Townsend 2006). For this reason, nearly 100,000 individuals remained in the city when Katrina hit, many of whom lined up outside the Superdome and the Convention Center, both identified as evacuation centers, and both of which featured unsanitary and unsafe conditions in the days following the storm (Levitt and Whitaker 2009). After the storm, the levee system that is designed to manage water overflow failed, flooding 80% of the city and 95% of downriver suburbs, with contaminated floodwaters rising up over the rooftops in some parts of the city (Gabe et al. 2005). Over 300,000 homes along the Gulf Coast were destroyed or rendered uninhabitable (Townsend 2006).

## 2.2 The Canterbury earthquakes (Christchurch)

On 4 September 2010, a magnitude 7.1 earthquake struck the city of Christchurch, the second most populous city in New Zealand and the largest city in the South Island. This caused widespread structural damage, but thankfully no fatalities. There was some sense of relief among the residents of Christchurch after this earthquake because although the city had been badly damaged, they had all survived. This earthquake was assumed to be “the big one”, the likes of which only happens once in a lifetime, and so it appeared unlikely that



**Figure 1:** National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration satellite image of Hurricane Katrina, taken on August 28, 2005. (Image: NOAA.)

residents would experience anything like it again. But the city continued to shake and six months later, on 22 February 2011, a magnitude 6.3 earthquake tore through central Christchurch at lunchtime, causing the deaths of 185 people and injury to many hundreds more, and destroying much of the infrastructure of the city. Over 10,000 houses had to be destroyed or relocated, and many households are still experiencing disruption and insurance complications, 10 years later.

### 2.3 Telling the story (New Orleans and Christchurch)

The research teams for these two projects have had the same experience of noticing that everyone who lived through these natural disasters had a “story” to tell. For instance, in Christchurch the stories followed a typical pattern: people would begin by talking about how they experienced the first big quake in September, then what happened to them during the deadly February quake, and subsequently during the very large aftershocks typically referred to as “June” and “December”. They described how their house was affected and what their insurance situation was. The “earthquake story” was a typical speech event at this time, and stories were frequently exchanged.

Similarly, in New Orleans, Katie was planning a study focused on a local variety of English when it became clear that there was no way to complete an analysis without engaging with the hurricane and its aftermath. Physical reminders, such as empty lots and closed shops, were visible throughout the field site, and phrases like “the new normal”, “the road home”, and “FEMA” (the Federal Emergency Management Agency) were part of everyday conversations, with time marked as being “before/after the storm”. That is, the disaster had become part of the community’s history and speakers’ individual histories. Though Katie was not planning to “study Katrina”, most participants saw the storm as the “research-worthy” event in their community, and thus steered conversation toward the storm in interviews.

In both cases, we recognized the importance of the stories told by our participants, both in their telling and in their preservation, and so we developed projects that could collect and archive them. In Canterbury, this was on a fairly large scale, a collaboration between the University of Canterbury’s CEISMIC – a digital archive developed to store information related to the earthquake and thus to help current and future communities recover from the disaster – and NZILBB (the New Zealand Institute of Language, Brain and Behaviour) – a research institute with an emphasis on understanding language variation. This led to the launch of the QuakeBox, a mobile shipping container that was set up as a recording studio and stationed at different locations around Christchurch (Figure 2), inviting members of the public to come and share their earthquake story (Figure 3; for more details, see Clark et al. 2016).



**Figure 2:** UC QuakeBox shipping container outside the New Brighton Library. (Photo: Wayne Williams. Licensed under Creative Commons BY-NC-ND, Wayne Williams Port Hills Productions.).



## Video of Michelle Durham's earthquake story

**Figure 3:** Michelle Durham sharing her story inside the UC QuakeBox shipping container at the New Brighton Library. (To view the full story in audio and video, see <https://quakestudies.canterbury.ac.nz/store/object/12676>.)

What was interesting to us as we discussed the motivations for our respective projects, and the ethics of collecting trauma stories, was how aware we all became that these stories were paramount. Jen recalls that in the case of the QuakeBox project, no members of the university, the public, the press, or the city ever questioned the value of the project. It was clear to everyone in Christchurch at the time that something extraordinary had happened, that many people wanted to talk about it, and that many people wanted their experiences archived somewhere accessible.

## 3 Ethical concerns

As many researchers have pointed out (e.g., Cameron et al. 1992; Leonard and Haynes 2010), the requirements put forth by institutional ethics boards are merely the bare minimum of ethical considerations that researchers ought to reflect upon before, during, and after working with participants. Below, we provide some examples of issues that might arise that are specific to a post-disaster context, reflecting upon our approaches in New Orleans and Christchurch.

### 3.1 Asking participants to retell a traumatic story (New Orleans and Christchurch)

A foundational concept within sociolinguistic interviews is the “danger of death” story (Labov 1972). Despite valid critiques of such approaches (e.g., Trechter 2013), we are all trained as junior sociolinguists to ask these

kinds of questions – and indeed, such narratives are common following a natural disaster, whether elicited or not. That said, as sociolinguistic researchers, we are not trained in how to manage participants' emotional trauma that might be triggered by such questions. During interviews in New Orleans, if participants were demonstrating evidence of emotional distress, Katie offered the option of taking a break, stopping the interview entirely, or changing the topic. One participant did opt to stop the interview, and Katie stayed with her, listening to her thoughts without the tape recorder running. In Christchurch, the team always made sure that there was a quiet recovery space available for storytellers who wanted to gather their thoughts before re-entering the world at large. They also had readily available information about how to seek professional help for anyone who felt they needed to access it. Indeed, these were recommendations that emerged through consultation with the Human Ethics Committee at the University of Canterbury.

The goal of sociolinguistic interviews is typically to collect narratives. In New Orleans and Christchurch, telling your Katrina or quake story is a consistent speech event in the community, which provides some methodological backing for examination of these narratives: this genre of storytelling exists in the community, whether a tape recorder is capturing it or not. But giving space for these stories to be told and recorded – since participants were all offered the recording of their interview – created an opportunity for these individuals to drive their own narrative, process by way of storytelling, and share their experiences outside their circle of friends. For many individuals, having an open ear to hear their stories and validate what they had been through appeared therapeutic. The vast majority of interviewees in both locales expressed enjoyment after their interview/story-retelling, and thanked us for giving them the opportunity to talk. In Christchurch, many participants expressed the catharsis they felt in a post-recording questionnaire; for example, “just to retell the story means someone is listening and interested to hear, this alone is a good feeling” and “It felt good to release these feelings and also, realize how grateful and lucky I am”. Quite aside from any therapeutic benefit that simply retelling the story might bring, there is a sense for the participants that being part of a bigger corpus of stories that (in the case of the QuakeBox corpus at least) is public-facing and that policymakers and researchers around the world can access might somehow be beneficial to someone. Retelling the stories can empower some participants during a time at which they have very little agency or control over their lives.

### 3.2 Missing voices (New Orleans and Christchurch)

In any disaster situation, the toll of the destruction is not spread evenly throughout society. In New Orleans, flooding hit low-lying portions of the city harder than higher land, which meant that the housing built on the least desirable tracts of land – those in which the poorest New Orleanians, disproportionately Black, lived – were those hardest hit. The poorest residents were also those with the largest barriers to evacuating. And indeed, Katrina-related mortality rates in Orleans Parish were 1.7–4 times higher for Black residents than for Whites (Brunkard et al. 2008). The devastation brought by Hurricane Katrina has also accelerated a long-standing process of gentrification, which in combination with post-Katrina upheaval has led to a “double displacement” for some residents. For example, neighborhoods historically inhabited by Black New Orleanians have become the sites of targeted “revitalization”, ultimately pricing out the pre-Katrina residents. So ethical considerations arise about defining the study population, and also what voices are not present, what stories are not being told. These are often the most marginalized voices.

In Christchurch, an effort was made to collect stories from a representative group of people by purposely positioning the QuakeBox recording studio in a range of places that were particularly affected by the earthquake, as well as in high-traffic locations such as at a shopping mall and an agricultural fair. This approach brought forward a wide range of people. Some particularly wanted to tell their stories, sought out the studio, and told long narratives. Others just happened to be passing by, and popped in to give a quick 5-min overview. However, it is still not a completely representative sample of participants, as only individuals who self-selected contributed to this project. The team did not actively try to recruit any particular sample of the population, though they would have liked ultimately to have a larger representation of Māori and Pacific/Pasifika contributors in their current longitudinal study, they are particularly focused on making sure to recontact and

re-record as many of the Māori participants as possible. To facilitate this, the team employs Māori research assistants to make the first contact with our Māori participants, to answer their questions, and – in some cases – to collect them and drive them to the recording session. In retrospect, the researchers wish they had tried harder to think about such representation from the outset. Also not captured are the people who left Christchurch. Stats NZ (2018) reports that between June 2010 and June 2012, the population of Christchurch city fell by 20,000, and that it was 2017 before the population returned to pre-quake levels. The people in this diaspora likely have particularly interesting earthquake stories, from which much could be learned, but they are not captured in the QuakeBox corpus.

Of course it is never possible to record everyone; what is needed is careful consideration of the range of potential voices, and which voices may be excluded by the recruitment process used. Ultimately, we can only ever record the people who wish to be heard.

### 3.3 Using the story in ways that are difficult for the participant to comprehend (Christchurch)

As linguists we often end up using stories in ways that our participants may not have foreseen. In using these stories for sociophonetic work, we have had to face the uncomfortable reality of needing to code the data phonetically while purposefully ignoring the wider context of the stories themselves. For instance, for Clark (2018), Lynn distinctly remembers working on medial /t/ variation in the QuakeBox corpus, listening to many hundreds of tokens of medial /t/ in the word *city* and attempting to code the variant of medial /t/ while purposefully ignoring the wider context in which the word was embedded (e.g., AP520\_Ursula: “when you go into the central city your heart kind of breaks all over again”). Perhaps this is simply the price we pay for working with this type of data – there must always be some part of ourselves that remains distanced, held back, objective. Indeed, perhaps this manner of distance from the data, which seems surreal at the time, is the best method for avoiding researcher burnout (discussed in Section 3.4).

Linguists in these contexts can perhaps address this issue by collaborating with researchers in other fields or by making the corpus of interviews available to other researchers who wish to complete a different type of analysis. Both of these have been done with the QuakeBox. For Lynn and Jen, they approached this problem by working with a schoolteacher to create a suite of QuakeBox resources that could be used in the English high school curriculum in NZ (see appendices in Clark et al. 2016). While uptake of the resources in schools has been very limited, the team believes it is still important to reach out and make the data available.

### 3.4 Researcher wellbeing and burnout (Christchurch)

One problem that was encountered in setting up the QuakeBox corpus was transcriber fatigue. In 2012–2013, when these stories were being transcribed, there was no automated speech recognition software available that was up to the task of accurately transcribing New Zealand English, and so they were transcribed entirely by hand. This necessarily involved employing a team of transcribers to do this work. As these stories were collected relatively quickly after the Christchurch earthquakes, many of the transcribers had their own earthquake stories (and some of them even ended up becoming part of the corpus). While everyone in Christchurch was used to hearing and sharing earthquake stories frequently, listening to these stories slowly and carefully in order to write them down is a more deliberate act of engagement with the stories, and for some, this was a very difficult thing to do. It is possible, though, that as the field moves toward using automated speech recognition systems to generate at least the first pass transcription of an interview or story, this will be less of an issue.

### 3.5 Research fatigue (New Orleans)

In a locale where life is shaped by a previous disaster, you can run into research fatigue, which occurs “when individuals and groups [from a research site] become tired of engaging with research” (Clark 2008: 955). As researchers from fields as wide-ranging as geology and gerontology rushed to understand the large-scale failures and study the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans became a field site for many. And with a smaller post-Katrina population due to all of the destruction, this meant that the weary Katrina survivors were targeted by a dizzying array of experts, journalists, and policymakers. One day, venturing into a public library in the Lower Ninth Ward, Katie recalls approaching a librarian to ask if she knew any residents who would be willing to participate in her study. The librarian yelled over to a woman on one of the public computers, “I got another one for you, honey!” It was clear that Katie was not the first researcher to enter the library with this request. Thus one consideration is making it clear to participants how your research differs from other studies done before, why you cannot simply use an interview they did with a journalist years ago, and how you plan to use your position in the academy to tell their story in a way that they value.

### 3.6 Paying for trauma stories (New Orleans and Christchurch)

An additional consideration with respect to the ethics of interviews in a disaster situation is whether and how much to pay participants. While laboratory linguistic research typically offers compensation for participants’ time, data collection in the field poses more complex questions about assigning a monetary value to the stories collected (for more in-depth considerations about power dynamics between researchers and participants in the field, see, e.g., Leonard and Haynes 2010; Rickford 1997; Trechter 2013). The question becomes all the more challenging when the data being collected consists of stories from participants who have experienced trauma. Is it offensive to offer too little? Coercive to offer too much? Ultimately, both projects decided not to compensate participants, because there was no amount of money that seemed appropriate. This decision is likely to be very culturally and contextually specific, and thus needs careful consideration in the context of solid local understanding by the researchers.

## 4 Practical advice: things we wish we had known

### 4.1 Don’t use a shipping container as a mobile recording studio! (Christchurch)

When a container is on the back of a truck, it is just a container on the back of a truck. When it is on the ground, it is a “building” and must comply with local building regulations. It was expensive and time-consuming to secure the necessary consents to move this recording studio around Christchurch, including activities such as relining the booth with fabric that was on the council’s short list of pre-approved fire-retardant fabrics. Identifying potential locations and negotiating with property owners was also not straightforward. The team ultimately believes it was good they did not know how difficult it would be, because recording at the university would have severely restricted the visibility and accessibility of the project, and inevitably led to a much less diverse range of participants and stories. It is invaluable to get out into the community to do recordings, but one should also keep in mind that there may be local restrictions that are harder to overcome than expected. Understanding these well in advance can be vital to ensuring that appropriate resources are allocated to the project.

## 4.2 Remember the humanity of your community (New Orleans and Christchurch)

Katie's research in New Orleans took place seven years after the storm. Thus, her insights are more of a "long view", rather than experience of doing research mid-crisis. However, when she was in New Orleans for fieldwork in 2012, Hurricane Isaac made a direct hit on the city on the Katrina anniversary. Thankfully, this time the levees held, but many residents that Katie had befriended had wind damage or food spoilage from power outages. In the weeks following this storm, Katie made a purposeful decision to pause data collection, and instead focus all efforts on helping the community that had given so much toward her project. This ended up being a turning point for the project, as the skepticism about Katie being an outsider lessened, and she achieved a new level of integration and trust in the community. This was not *why* Katie participated so heavily in volunteer efforts after Hurricane Isaac; but sometimes by doing the right thing and remembering the humanity of the community you work within, those community members can see your humanity as well.

In Christchurch, the QuakeBox project has turned into a longitudinal project, with at least 100 of the original participants returning eight to nine years later to retell their stories, and update them with what has happened since. In planning, these retells would be earthquake stories – told with some temporal distance – and stories about how the earthquakes had shaped people's lives. The team certainly did not predict that this round of story-collection would be affected by two new disasters. In 2019, the Christchurch mosque shootings took place, claiming 51 lives. Recording was paused, and then restarted, with the awareness that the team needed to account for the way the shootings impacted interviewees in the present, and also how they may have shaped their view of past trauma. COVID-19 provided a second interruption to data collection, and a further topic of reflection that inevitably shaped the stories that participants told. This second round of capturing disaster stories, then, has taken some different directions than predicted, highlighting the necessity of being sensitive to the need to let participants tell the stories that they need to tell.

## 4.3 Giving back to the community (New Orleans and Christchurch)

A related concern is that the kind of analysis we complete on these data sets may not benefit participants in any tangible way. For example, these stories could be used to influence policy, but this is not the way linguistic research typically works. Thus, researchers may want to consider the ways their findings or data could be used by individuals in a position to make such changes – for example, by allying with local nonprofit organizations, think tanks, or other policy influencers. The question of linguistic gratuity (Cameron et al. 1992; Wolfram et al. 2008) is especially relevant in a post-disaster context, in which participants may be suffering continued effects from the event. In the case of Hurricane Katrina, disaster capitalism and disaster tourism were widespread after the storm, both of which made locals feel that strangers were profiting from their pain. And indeed, the interviews provided one channel for participants to reclaim their own narratives, and to frame the stories they told in terms of their truth and lived experience.

In the case of QuakeBox, for those participants who elected for their stories to be made public, the videos, audio, and full orthographic transcript appear on a public-facing website for anyone to browse (<https://quakestudies.canterbury.ac.nz/store/collection/235/>). Speakers can find their stories there, and thus share them with their networks if desired. Links to select videos were also regularly posted to a Facebook page (UCQuakeBoxStories) for approximately a year. In contrast with the QuakeBox stories, it was important in New Orleans to assure participants that their narratives would *not* become part of the public record, or appear on the evening news, as so many tellers of Katrina stories had experienced in the years following the hurricane. Instead, Katie provided the high-quality recordings to participants so that they could decide with whom and how to share them. In this way, participants were able to take literal ownership of their Katrina stories. This approach was decided upon based on Katie's previous work in the Louisiana French-speaking Indigenous communities of Pointe-aux-Chênes, Louisiana, and follows the way language documentation researchers have approached ethical considerations with community-driven engagement and data storage decisions (Czaykowska-Higgins 2009; Leonard and Haynes 2010). Indeed, looking to other subfields who

have grappled with such ethical questions in the case of community-based research can provide sociolinguists with crucial insights into post-disaster contexts. And, when in doubt, one ought to just ask!

#### 4.4 Future-proof your data as far as possible (Christchurch)

In Christchurch, the QuakeBox project team collected over 700 earthquake stories in high-definition video and audio. At the time, they thought very carefully about the types of equipment that they would use to collect these stories so that they could create not only a public-facing repository of stories but also a high-quality audiovisual corpus suitable for linguistic and gesture analysis. So in that sense, they took great care to future-proof their data. However, it never crossed anyone's mind at the time that they might want to re-record these stories in the future, and so participants were not asked for contact information. In fact, they were asked for very little social or demographic information; this was deliberately done to avoid putting people off from sharing their stories by having to complete a lengthy questionnaire. However, by not collecting contact information, the current phase of the data collection has involved the labor-intensive task of attempting to track down participants via the electoral roll, mail, Facebook, and the telephone directory.

## 5 Conclusions

While completing research in the aftermath of a major disruptive event is challenging, there are crucial insights to be had in such contexts as well. Our major advice is to do the internal work, the self-reflection that may feel uncomfortable, in order to complete research that is of value to the field, but also that aligns with your own values and ethics. There is still a great deal we can do in terms of considering how linguistics research can provide direct benefits to the communities that we study, and sociolinguistics has been at the forefront of this conversation (Charity 2008; Rickford 1997; Wolfram et al. 2008). We suggest that continued reflection, and looking to other subfields (e.g., language documentation) can provide additional considerations in challenging contexts.

The COVID-19 pandemic has produced worldwide challenges. It has also brought attention to the methods that sociolinguists use, and how we might adapt to current circumstances, using technology and creative solutions, as the researchers in this issue have pointed out. We hope that we have also provided some food for thought with respect to the practical issues, ethical considerations, and long term concerns that may arise when conducting research in contexts of de-stability and potential trauma.

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