# In the Wake of Natural Disasters

## A Conversation with Lori Peek

Aude Chesnais, Lori Peek

1 The following interview was conducted in June 2023 over email by editorial team member Aude Chesnais.

2 My name is Lori Peek. I live in Boulder, Colorado in the United States. I am director of the Natural Hazards Center and professor in the Department of Sociology at the University of Colorado Boulder. I have spent more than two decades of my life researching the human impacts of disaster. My PhD dissertation and first published book focused on the backlash against Muslim Americans after the 9/11 terrorist attacks. My subsequent collaborative books have explored a range of topics related to children and disaster, population displacement following Hurricane Katrina, how we learn lessons from large-scale disasters, and the contours of environmental sociology. Something that has always drawn me to the hazards and disaster field is its unapologetically applied nature. My mentors instilled in me a feeling that research should be designed to be practical and actionable, and I've carried those insights with me throughout my career and into the classroom. At the University of Colorado Boulder, I teach a large 400-student Introduction to Sociology course. I also mentor many undergraduate and graduate students who want to learn how to conduct research and apply the knowledge gained to reduce existing vulnerability. I love the work that I do, and it is always useful to have an opportunity to step back and reflect.

3 _Aude Chesnais (AC): Lori Peek, your work generally questions how marginalized communities cope with natural hazards and disasters. Your contribution means a lot to us. Can you tell us a little more about yourself and how your work relates to climate change?

4 _Lori Peek (LP): Thank you for asking about these connections. For more than 20 years, I've been studying how people who are socially marginalized—due to income, age, race and ethnicity, or other factors—prepare for, respond to, and recover from disasters. When I first started working at the Natural Hazards Center as a graduate research assistant in 1999, disasters were often characterized as "low probability, high-consequence events." In the years since, climate change has contributed to an acceleration of disaster impacts and losses. Now, I think it may be more accurate to characterize disasters as "high probability, high-consequence events." The rising number of disasters has taken a disproportionate toll on low-income populations, people of color, children, older adults, and others with limited power and resources. Because climate-change-related disasters are already displacing and harming so many people at the margins of society, I see a strong connection between sociological work on socially vulnerable populations and climate change research.

5 _AC: What can you tell us about the prevalence of natural hazards that turn into disasters? What do these trends suggest we can expect in the near future?

6 _LP: While reporting standards and practices have certainly been refined over the decades, most scholars agree that *the number* of climate-change-related disasters is increasing. Consider for example one recent report that found that 90 percent of U.S. counties suffered at least one major

weather disaster between 2011 and 2021.[1] The same report also showed that some counties experienced multiple, co-occurring, or cascading events. Analyses of large-scale disasters in the U.S. also indicate that *the time interval* between disasters is shortening, meaning that there is less time and resources available to respond, recover, and prepare for events, leaving communities in seemingly endless cycles of loss and disruption.[2]

7 These and many other data sources suggest that across the U.S. and globally, communities are increasingly confronted with the effects of extreme heat and cold, floods, drought, and myriad other crises linked to human activities that have raised carbon dioxide content in the atmosphere. Of course, it is important to underscore that disaster losses are not *only* stemming from climate change. They also occur because of unsustainable land use practices, unenforced or non-existent building codes, rising economic inequality that leaves fewer people with resources to mitigate and prepare, structural racism that has resulted in people of color often living in riskier places or more unsafe housing stock, and so forth. The point is that disasters occur at the interface of built, human, and natural environments. To only focus on one force driving these disaster losses would obscure the other intersecting factors.

8 _AC: How will this affect marginalized and racialized communities in the U.S.? Which population do you think is the most at risk?

9 _LP: I appreciate this question very much, but might revise it slightly to say: How *are* these disasters affecting marginalized and racialized communities in the U.S.? It feels important to talk about climate change-related disasters in the present, rather than future, tense. These disasters are here, they are being felt by billions of people around the world and hundreds of millions here in the U.S. People of color, low-income populations, and other groups that have limited power and resources are especially affected by climate extremes.

10 In terms of which population is most at risk, this is also complicated and in some ways impossible to answer. At the broadest scale, we are all living at risk and few if any are completely safe from impending disaster. With that in mind, disasters obviously cause disproportionate effects, but to understand those effects, it is vital to use an intersectional lens that explores closely interwoven threads of inequality and privilege. For example, those who use intersectional theory and methods in their work tend to carefully explore multiple *demographic factors*—such as race, class, gender, age, ability, and so forth—as well as *contextual factors* such as geographic location and (lack of) investment in infrastructure and community capacity. In the U.S., people of color and people with limited income or no wealth are more likely to live in communities with less healthcare access, less resilient infrastructure, and other contextual conditions that render those populations more vulnerable to disaster. As these examples suggest, there is nothing inherent about vulnerability. It is instead shaped and driven by historical, economic, and social forces. Taking these factors into account helps us identify which communities are most at risk, and why. Once we have that information, the question becomes how to change policy and practice to reduce risk.

11 _AC: What are ways that racialized and marginalized communities cope with and prepare for disasters?

12 _LP: We have learned, and still have much to learn, from racialized and other marginalized communities in terms of the resources and capacities that they bring to disaster preparedness, response, and recovery. There is no one single answer to this question, as there is much variability across communities of color. But researchers and practitioners in the hazards and disaster field have issued powerful calls to center considerations of justice in communities at

[1]Amy Chester and Johanna Lawton, *Atlas of Disaster,* a report by Rebuild by Design (Fall 2022), https://rebuildbydesign.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/ATLAS-OF-DISASTER-compressed.pdf.

[2]See Adam B. Smith, "U.S. billion-dollar weather and climate disasters in historical context," *Climate.gov*, January 10, 2023, https://www.climate.gov/news-features/blogs/beyond-data/2022-us-billion-dollar-weather-and-climate-disasters-historical.

risk of and affected by disaster.[3] For example, we have a real opportunity to learn more from Indigenous communities regarding land use management practices that could help to mitigate escalating wildfire threats.[4] After Hurricane Maria in 2017, Puerto Rican communities came together to establish resilience hubs to ensure that the most vulnerable residents had access to water, food, shelter, power, and medical supplies.[5] After Hurricane Katrina in 2005, which led to disproportionate deaths and displacement among the Black community, members of our feminist research collective gathered many moving stories of Black families working together to care for children and to ensure their basic needs were met.[6] The list goes on. It is vital we listen, learn, fund, and advance these efforts where possible, while altering the systems that render economically and socially marginalized communities disproportionately at risk in the first place.

13 _AC: What does it mean to you to "decolonize climate change"?

14 _LP: This is a great question. At a most basic level, it evokes the image of working together to fix something that is fundamentally broken with our systems and structures. I often draw on definitions that refer to working toward rooting out systemic injustices ("the fix") while simultaneously honoring Indigenous and other cultural systems that may offer alternative frameworks for addressing human-driven climate change. This journal is obviously going to play an enormous role in advancing the answer to that question.

15 _AC: How do you think your positionality influences your perspective?

16 _LP: Positionality is a topic I take very seriously. Drawing on the work of other social scientists and practitioners, our team at the Natural Hazards Center developed a CONVERGE Training Module on the topic of positionality,[7] and we have a book chapter on positionality[8] in press as well. We define positionality as a concept that encompasses one's multiple intersecting identities and how social roles, power, and privilege influence one's perspectives and experiences in research.

17 Personally, I have a positionality journal that I keep and refer to in the context of the field settings where I work. This helps me to remain reflexive and accountable regarding how my own identities may affect the work I do and relationships I try to cultivate. I am a White, straight woman from a rural community in Kansas. I grew up on a farm with two parents and three brothers, went to school for many years, and eventually earned a PhD. Now I'm a full professor at a university. I'm married to a man, we have a young child, and we own our own home. All these factors, and so many others, define who I am, and because I often work across lines of difference—studying people from other geographic regions or of different cultures, races, ages, and so on—it is important for me to critically reflect on my own identities and how they shape my power and privilege in the field.

18 Further, I spend a great deal of time talking to people in the field settings where I work to identify how we can ensure that the research makes a difference, that data and findings are returned to community members in usable formats, and that participants are supported in appropriate ways. For example, over the years, I've hired young people as research assistants[9] so they may not only share their stories but also learn about the research process, while gaining valuable credentials and economic support for their own future development. I've also led multiple efforts focused on the timely and ethical sharing of disaster data and instruments to ensure that community

[3]Alessandra Jerolleman, *Disaster Recovery Through the Lens of Justice* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).

[4]T. Schinko, C. Berchtold, J. Handmer, et al., "A framework for considering justice aspects in integrated wildfire risk management," *Nature Climate Change* 13 (2023): 788–95.

[5]See Mercy Corps, "'Resilience Hubs' in Puerto Rico are vital in the wake of Hurricane Fiona," October 10, 2022, https://www.mercycorps.org/blog/resilience-hubs-puerto-rico-vital.

[6]Lynn Weber and Lori Peek, *Displaced: Life after Katrina* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2012).

[7]See the training module available online from University of Colorado Boulder: https://converge.colorado.edu/resources/training-modules/.

[8]For a list of my up-to-date List of Publications, visit: https://hazards.colorado.edu/resources/lori-peek-publications.

[9]See the research process in detail in Katherine Browne and Lori Peek, "Beyond the IRB: An Ethical Toolkit for Long-Term Disaster Research," *International Journal of Mass Emergencies & Disasters*, 32, issue 1 (2014).

members have access to key information.[10] In the work that I do, I try to remember to recognize that all people—including myself—are privileged and disadvantaged in specific and dynamic ways. I try to honor that complexity as I learn from others. I also strive to remember, always, that privilege is not something to be ashamed of, but rather brings with it great responsibility to use advantages to advance more just and equitable social structures.

19 _AC: Climate change is increasingly causing anxiogenic reactions, especially in young people and those who feel it is a lost cause. What message would you like to share with them?

20 _LP: First, I would want to listen to them. My colleagues and I have learned an enormous amount from children whose lives have been upended by disasters[11]—both about the long-term damaging effects, and about how children have agency and can make a difference to lessen the harm from these events. Listening to young people is key, as is honoring their fears, hopes, dreams, concerns, and ideas. If there was one message I would share, it is that I am anxious too. I'm scared for what our future holds and what it will mean for current and future generations. I'm also completely overwhelmed when I think about all the biodiversity that is being lost and what that will mean for children's sense of wonder and their relationship to the natural world.

21 I also know that there is a possibility for something different if those of us—the global majority who care deeply about climate change and those who are already being so badly affected—work together to move toward a more just and equitable future. This problem is much too big for any one person or group to solve. That is exactly why we need each other now more than ever before. We also need strong governance structures, the best science, and people to exercise their moral imaginations as we try to envision new ways of living on this rapidly warming planet.

22 _AC: Thank you so much for your precious time and contribution.

23 _LP: Thank you. I am so honored to have been invited to share my thoughts and to be included in this inaugural issue. I have a heart full of gratitude for each of you and the work that you are doing.

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[10] See for example the 2023 workshop convened with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) Weather Program Office on Open Data, Workshop on Open Data and Reuse in Social Science Weather Research, https://hazards.colorado.edu/research/weather-ready-research/open-data-workshop.

[11] See Alice Fothergill and Lori Peek, *Children of Katrina* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2015).