

Perceptions of Hurricane Katrina Efforts in University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill and University of Arizona Students

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Several studies have been conducted in which American citizens were polled about their perception of relief efforts in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, but all have focused on statistics rather than on details of subjects' reasoning and experiences. There is also little in-depth information currently available regarding the experiences and attitudes of the individual volunteers who responded to the disaster by participating in the relief effort after Hurricane Katrina. For this study, I analyze the responses of the general student population to those of volunteers who felt moved enough to offer help and who have personally seen the aftermath of the hurricane. This study seeks to compare UNC student responses to University of Arizona student responses. Using a qualitative approach, this study seeks to unpack these statistics to reveal the human element regarding the relief and rebuilding efforts of Hurricane Katrina. While these findings are not to be interpreted as conclusive of any population, I seek to find out how exposure to media reports surrounding the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina influenced public perception. What other factors did the subjects use to empathize with Hurricane Katrina evacuees? Also, I attempt to identify what other factors people used to explain the slow Hurricane Katrina response.

Keywords: Hurricane Katrina, rebuilding efforts, race

Introduction

Whether it was listening to the radio, watching television or reading newspapers, millions of Americans witnessed Hurricane Katrina from afar through the media. Countless stories were written from political, health, social, and economic angles surrounding Hurricane

Katrina. When people tell stories, the words used can be seen as a gateway to their consciousness. Because social issues are tied to abstract thoughts in a person's mind, these stories are reflections experienced by the storyteller. Heron (1981) suggests that the core of what it means to be human is the ability to use language. Through language, humans are able to capture their experiences. Therefore, interviewing is a plausible method to tap into experiences of humans and how they see the world. It is important to recognize that it would be nearly impossible to understand another being completely. In order for this to happen, one would need to enter the others "stream of consciousness and experiences what he or she had" (Seidman 1998). Despite these limitations, in depth interviewing is still a valuable resource because it allows us to put their experiences and behavior in context. A key assumption to in-depth interviewing is that "the meaning people make out of their experience affects the way they carry out that experience" (Seidman 1998).

Literature Review

Media Representation in the Media

Because student participants used media outlets, such as watching television and/or reading the newspaper, it is important to discuss what was actually being released by media professionals. Despite not being able to verify the claims to a certain degree of legitimacy, media outlets reported stories of numerous acts of lootings, shootings and even rape during the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. The widely cited example of two Associated Press photos shows a White female and male carrying backpacks with the

female holding a bag of supplies with a caption that read: “Two residents wade through chest-deep waters after finding bread and soda from a local grocery store after Hurricane Katrina came through the area” (Carbado and Harris 2006). The other photo reveals an African American male carrying a bag of supplies through the water with a caption that read: “A young man walks through chest-deep flood water after looting a grocery store in New Orleans” (Carbado and Harris 2006). Undeniably, the media reports raised a lot of issues surrounding race and the treatment of African Americans. However, the real issue is the perpetuation of racial stereotypes involving poor African Americans and looting (Carbado and Harris 2006). With a long history of stereotyping minorities, the media was more readily to accept these images because it reinforced what was widely believed to be true about poor blacks (Dyson 2006).

In the first few days after the levees broke, the media sympathized with African Americans by framing them as victims of Hurricane Katrina and unorganized governmental efforts. Over time, the frames shifted its focus from seeing African Americans as victims to seeing them as perpetrators of criminal acts such as murder, looting, and rape. While it is nearly impossible to tabulate exact numbers for what actually happened during the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, crime was presented in the media to be rampant and out of control. As a result, the more popular frame of seeing poor blacks as “lazy, undeserving, and inherently criminal” arose (Carbado and Harris 2006). On the other hand, members of the media subsequently retracted comments that

they realized had been inaccurate, stating, for example, that “the vast majority of reported atrocities committed by evacuees at the Dome — murders, rapes and beatings — have turned out to be false, or at least unsupported by any evidence” (Russell and Thevenot 2005).

Bevc et al. (2006) argues that mainstream media representation did have an effect on the relief efforts during the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. As the media continued to report on various accounts of criminal activities that were supposedly happening, government officials shifted their focus from mainly a relief effort to maintaining order in the city. In the beginning, Louisiana governor Kathleen Blanco called for all efforts to be streamlined towards search and rescue; however, three days later Blanco ordered public safety officers to turn their attention to the looters (Bevc et al. 2006). This change of direction had an effect on the resources guided toward the search and rescue efforts.

As pressure mounted to “secure” New Orleans, the purported looting and other violent crimes were also seen as beyond the local government’s ability to control. President Bush assured the public that one of the government’s main objectives was to “restore and maintain law and order.” As a result, the National Guard deployed more than 7,000 troops for the Hurricane Katrina response. Hundreds of evacuees were searched in the convention center before they were allowed to board buses to leave the area. A “warzone” metaphor appeared as military personnel started comparing New Orleans to Iraq. (Bevc et. al) Undoubtedly, media reporters picked up this metaphor in their stories

and it was disseminated to their readers. I argue that this may account for some of the shift seen in readers' sentiments—over time public empathy for Hurricane Katrina evacuees diminished, and many analysts trace the impact to changing media coverage.

Pro-Social Behavior

Despite initial media reports, it is important to note that during times of crises patterns of prosocial behavior emerge, creating new roles for individuals and institutions, and that this clearly happened during the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. For example, hotels converted their rooms into temporary housing for evacuees and supplied food and water to those in need. By stepping out of their normal roles, the hotel staff contributed to the emergence of prosocial behavior amidst confusion for evacuees. Hospitals improvised their primary roles after shortage in electricity with doctors, nurses and technicians by fanning their patients to keep them cool. Prosocial behavior extended from institutions to the neighborhoods. The “Robin Hood Looters”, a group of eleven friends, decided to remain behind in New Orleans to help evacuate neighbors, searched for food in abandoned homes and collaborated with the National Guard. Another group in Uptown occupied an empty school as its base to support and evacuate elderly neighbors (Quarantelli et al. 2006). Even more so, the media influenced the emergence of neighbors collaborating together:

The people in the school, through their radio, heard stories of what supposedly was going on in the Superdome and the Convention Center, which strengthened their determination not to evacuate to those localities....some white residents organized themselves into heavily armed groups to protect that locality from

rumors about invading gangs of young Black men. Other residents in that same neighborhood paid for a team of former Israeli commando units to fly into the area in former Russian attack helicopters (Quarantelli et al. 2006).

In this instance, the media helped create a potentially dangerous situation by giving residents a reason to bear arms in the face of disaster. This protective disposition resonated in the minds of neighbors providing validity for these stories that were being reproduced in the media. With this setting, the violent, young Black man stereotype was in full swing reinforcing the need for weapons.

African American Politics

As people all over the country watched the tragedy unfold, African Americans were more likely than Whites to feel anger in response to the events around Hurricane Katrina. These feelings of anger, in part, can be explained by African Americans' perception of racial discrimination by the federal government. Because the areas affected by Hurricane Katrina were largely populated by African Americans prior to the storm, the emotional response of outside Blacks is expected to be stronger compared to other racial groups. (McGowen et al.) African Americans were also more likely to respond emotionally to Hurricane Katrina with the belief that the federal government would have responded faster if the large majority of the population had been White. In a CNN/Gallop/USA Today poll, six out of ten African Americans agreed with the statement that the federal response was slower in rescue efforts because a large majority of those stranded were African American compared to just one out of eight Whites (CNN

2005).

African Americans tend to have a group-centric view over other groups in society and psychological connectedness, as a whole, has been found essential in political movements. Even more so, African Americans internalize politics that affect the population as a whole, even when they themselves are not personally affected. The more a political event relates to the individual's in-group identity, the more the chances are of the individual exhibiting an emotional response to the event (McGowen et al. 2007). The strong response by African Americans to Hurricane Katrina can be, in part, explained by racial discrimination surrounding the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.

On September 3, 2005 during the NBC telethon raising money for Hurricane Katrina, Kanye West, a rapper, diverted from his scripted lines to criticize President Bush for the slow response of the federal government. West blatantly states on live television that "Bush doesn't care about Black people." (Dyson 2006) Unsurprisingly, Bush and his family fired back at West's comments about Bush's commitment to African Americans during Hurricane Katrina. Weisberg (2005) suggests that it would be easier to demonstrate that Bush does not care about African American votes rather than African American on a personal level, which may mean the same thing. Since African Americans typically vote Democratic, Republicans have rarely sought efforts to try and court the African American vote (Weisberg 2005). Capture of the black vote is not on the main agenda for Republicans, and it is certainly possible to win a race without them because

African Americans only make up a small percentage in the U.S. population as a whole.

Weisberg adds:

Had the residents of New Orleans been White Republicans in a state that mattered politically, instead of poor Blacks in (a) city that didn't, Bush's response surely would have been different. Compare what happened when hurricanes Charley and Frances hit Florida in 2004. Through the damage from those storms was negligible in relation to Katrina's, the reaction from the White House was instinctive, rapid, and generous to the point of profligacy. Bush visited hurricane victims four times in six weeks and delivered relief checks personally (Weisberg 2005).

Weisberg's argument demonstrates how complex the discussion around race and the relief and rebuilding efforts during the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina can be. It may be possible that Bush's efforts in the previous hurricanes were calculated with a political motive. In any case, Bush's initial concern for the destruction in the wake of Hurricane Katrina was questionable, even hesitant in manner.

Methodology

During the summer of 2007, I conducted ten interviews with University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill students and Hurricane Katrina volunteers. Four of the interviewees identified themselves as African American/ Black; while the other six identified themselves as White/Caucasian. The interviews were digitally recorded and took place individually in a secluded room on campus or a local church. Each interview lasted between thirty minutes and an hour. The interviewees were asked open-ended questions about the relief and rebuilding efforts around Hurricane Katrina, including questions about what roles they believed the race of the victims played in national

attitudes and relief efforts. (See Appendix A) For the second portion of the paper, I interviewed ten University of Arizona students. Five of the interviewees identified themselves as White; while the other five identified themselves as African American or Black.

Findings

UNC students

Like the majority of Americans, UNC students observed the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina through the eyes of the media. However, three of the six students I interviewed had participated in post-Hurricane Katrina efforts near their own homes, such as participating in food drives and donating clothes. All expressed the desire to do more at that time but were limited due to school obligations.

While all of UNC respondents felt that the federal response would have had different outcomes had the majority of the victims been White, differences in the reasoning for their response divided along racial lines. Nearly all of the African American student participants used historical memory and racial identification to justify their reasons for sympathizing with Hurricane Katrina victims. African American respondents had internalized the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina using terms like “my people”. This may be because a large portion of the victims of Hurricane Katrina had been African American. Angela, an African American student, says:

Because the way the black community is, we may have our differences and vices but we still see someone suffering who is black and there is an automatic thing you feel with them...but if push came to shove and it was black people against however else that kinship would bond us.

Angela uses her ethnic identity to help reinforce her sympathy towards Hurricane Katrina evacuees. Like the other African American participants, Angela took on this “nothing new” attitude about how the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. She goes on to explain that this was not the first time African Americans have been mistreated by the government. When asked, the other participants said they felt the same, claiming they were not shocked that it happened but only angry and frustrated that it did. This may suggest that because those who were more likely to experience or those who understand how racial discrimination can manifest in other’s lives were more likely to identify race as a factor in Hurricane Katrina relief efforts.

White student participants tended to sympathize with the relief efforts by using their financial status to evaluate how devastating it was for Hurricane Katrina victims and their position as a White American to explain their emotional response.

David uses his knowledge obtained from the media and his personal background:

I felt bad seeing all of those people who didn’t have the resources to make it to safety. I guess cause’ there’s this white attitude that because the majority of the people left there or we saw on TV were African American. We just kind of assumed that they didn’t take the warnings seriously, but if they were white and educated they would have taken the warnings and should have known better.

David’s assumption that those who were left behind had the resources to leave is consistent with privilege. He realizes that the majority of those left behind were poor but he assumes that the poor had a car or a way to leave the affected areas. Brown (2006) argues that the “normalization of privilege” allows for the privilege to judge society on

their terms and anything less than that would be abnormal. Following this reasoning, the behavior of Hurricane Katrina victims who stayed behind is considered abnormal and gives David enough validation to distance himself a little from the situation. David's use of the correlation between "White" and "educated" suggests that those who supposedly did not heed the warnings from the government were not as educated and therefore could not make the reasonable decision to leave before the hurricane hit.

HK volunteers

For the second portion of the interviews, I enlisted Hurricane Katrina volunteers from a nearby church. Since January 2006, the church has organized yearly trips to New Orleans, taking approximately around 20 parishioners each time to spend about a week to participate in the rebuilding efforts of the neighborhoods. Some of the participants volunteered on both trips; while others only made the first or second trip. Like the UNC students, the volunteers first heard about Hurricane Katrina through the news.

Many of the volunteers formed their opinion about relief and rebuilding efforts of the government after seeing the destruction for themselves. All except for one, who happened to be African American, did not attribute race to be a possible factor in the slow federal response but rather the incompetence of the federal government and miscommunication between federal and state agencies. I suggest that because the volunteers were able to see the destruction for themselves and personally meet with Hurricane Katrina evacuees, the inadequate response of government agencies turned out

to be more pressing for most of the volunteers.

Beyond race, one of the key factors that motivated Hurricane Katrina to sympathize with those who lost their lives and belongings: the human condition. After seeing the destruction for themselves, many of the volunteers remembered trying to put themselves in the situation and used this feeling to associate what happened could have happened to anyone. Bill, a volunteer, considers himself to be lucky to have not been in such a predicament:

I felt very sorry for them for anybody in that situation. I realized how fortunate I was not to be in that situation. It could have easily been me without a home. We would have to find another place to live.

He sympathizes even further with HK victims by actively trying to understand what it must have been like for those impacted:

I don't know how you can tell somebody that they can't go home. That would be very difficult thing for me to do. On the other hand, if this happened once, I don't know that it couldn't happen again. So why to allow them to endanger themselves and maybe others? I wrestle with that. I'm sure they have to. It would be hard.

Kathy, a volunteer, recalls feeling stripped of her social status when in New Orleans:

I don't care if you are a nurse, minister, educator, lawyer, doctor, homemaker or whatever- on this gut level, we are all the same. For a week, we were stripped of our social status, working in the med with our sleeves pushed up trying to help. For a week, I didn't feel inhibited by my perceived rank in society and I learned we are really all about the same. We are trying to fit in, to find love from each other, to show love to each other, and to make the best of the life we've been given.

Here, the volunteers position themselves as if they had been directly affected and use this to enrich their volunteer experience. Bill's internal struggle with the impact of

volunteering further signifies the sincerity of his concerns about what happens to the neighborhoods in where he volunteered. He later talks about being unsure if the neighborhoods in the 9th ward will be rebuilt. If not, then the volunteer experience could have been considered a waste. However, Bill insisted on ignoring the very real possibility of not knowing what will happen to the houses in the future. Kathy's revelation about being stripped of her identity for a week taps into elemental feelings that can be felt by anyone given the right situation.

Kathy

After seeing images of people crowded in the Superdome, Kathy knew she wanted to get involved. She recalls initially wanting to throw boxes of water in her car and drive them down to New Orleans, but having to take care of her family prevented her from going down with the church the first time. But when the opportunity to volunteer presented itself again, Kathy knew that she could not pass up the opportunity to volunteer a second time. When she first reached New Orleans, she remembers feeling overwhelmed after seeing houses with clearly marked water lines on the outside and spray paint markings. Kathy speaks of the abandoned houses which she says gives the neighborhoods the appearance of a ghost town rather than a place that was once filled with families:

The dilemma that some of the residents get into is that they wanna get back home but yet there is no infrastructure..No grocery stores or gas stations up and running yet..If they go back and they are one of the first back into the neighborhood it's an insecure place to be it's a dangerous situation..It takes the first few to get the ball rolling to get the rest of them to come back...A lot more vacancies in the neighborhood than I expected it to be.

Kathy's concern about the abandoned homes reflect the very real concern of former New Orleans residents who wish to move back into their old neighborhoods. Recovery and reconstruction efforts in New Orleans are controlled by the private sector. With that being said, the government does not have a particular function with this effort though it does contribute in the planning process (CNN 2006). Because renters do not own their once occupied homes, they do not have a say in the rebuilding. This may pose as a problem for the poor, who were mainly renters, and are more likely to need low income and subsidized housing (Bates 2006). However, the Louisiana Recovery Authority provided funding for owner-occupied and rental housing complexes. Cash assistance was made available for temporary housing which was administered by FEMA. Despite these incentives to help increase the post-Katrina population, New Orleans now stands at around half of its original population.

*Violeta*¹

After opting out of going on a spring break trip with her friends, Violeta decided to spend the time volunteering in the rebuilding efforts in New Orleans. After being displeased with the media coverage of Hurricane Katrina, particularly with its representation of African Americans, Violeta felt motivated to become active in the relief efforts. Once she found Commonground, the group who hosted her stay in New Orleans, Violeta boarded a train to New Orleans with a friend in tow. The train station didn't seem

¹ Violeta classifies herself as a student and a volunteer. During her interview, she talks about being both.

too bad, but it was when Violeta traveled to the roads that she saw where the effects of the hurricane were in plain sight. Overturned trees, water on the sides and random boats on the middle of the road made it feel unnatural to Violeta. Once Violeta began cleaning out houses in the 9th ward, she recalls being told by residents that they were scared of the police and didn't want them to come in and shoot them, so they hid in their houses. Others sought refuge in abandoned buildings because of hearing about the rapes and murders that were supposedly going on the outside. In one instance, Violeta and other volunteer group members were cleaning out an empty school and were greeted by community members, who were setting camp inside to help other neighbors.

Violeta reveals that her experience was enriched by the association of using her racial identity to connect even more with residents she came across in the 9th ward. This association made her volunteer experience more meaningful:

Even going down there I felt more of a kinship with the guys I would see were the same that I would see back home. Same hair cuts, same cars. At the end of the day this could have easily been Detroit. They already are similar with a high African American population and high poverty rate. I kind of felt of home interacting with my own people. I felt like this was where I needed to be to make a difference not matter how small it may be.

Even though Violeta was not directly affected by Hurricane Katrina, she was able to internalize the experience that she perceived other African American evacuees to have had experienced along with hearing stories, which influenced her opinions as well.

Historical Memory

While highly criticized, African Americans distrust in the government may have

some ground. In a historical context, the African American experience in disasters is coupled by social change. Rivera and Miller (2006) use three natural disasters: The Mississippi River flood of 1927, the 1948 Vanport Flood, and Hurricane Katrina to demonstrate the poor response of the federal government. According to Rivera and Miller, natural disasters not only change the landscape physically but help bring about social and demographic change to the new environment. During the flood of 1927, New Orleans elite plotted to destroy parts of the levee around the city in order to save the city. The plan was to blow up regions of the levee in order to direct the water to the marshlands, where a majority of the poor and African Americans lived. Without homes, thousands of African Americans migrated north to seek a better life and jobs. In Portland, Vanport was an area situated in reclaimed swamp and predominantly populated by African Americans. Before the flood, the living conditions were already intolerable. When the flood broke without any warning, Vanport was submerged under water but the majority of the residents were not at home. The residents were relocated in various places but Vanport was never rebuilt. Hurricane Katrina once again leaves African Americans vulnerable to natural disasters. Because of events like these, African Americans have gained a distrust of the federal government. Rivera and Miller state that trust among the African American community can be restored only with active policy measures, which the federal government will have to take a stance and not leave it just to the local government.

While Angela, Donovan, or Violeta were alive to relive these events or even know about them, the notion about the missed relationship between the government and African Americas was somehow passed down to them. Mary, an African American student, recalls when she first heard about the complaints against the relief efforts:

When I first heard about how delayed the relief efforts were, I wasn't surprised. I mean who would be. I wasn't. My parents wasn't. Nobody was. I started to question myself to like why wasn't I surprised? Growing up, you would stories about people getting screwed over somehow or someway because of their ear race. If it can happen there, what makes you think that it can't happen with the government. After all, they are majority white. I wanna believe things have changed and they have but not as much as you would think. In my mind I didn't want to believe race had anything to do with but in my heart. I knew. I just knew.

Here, Mary draws on her memory of personal experiences and stories told to her by family and friends. She internalizes these stories as truth and uses them to validate her acceptance of the notion that the government is capable of being bias on a racial basis. According to Simon (2005), the “social practice of remembrance” is not limited to providing a reference base for our intuition but “it also starts to lay out the terms for the relationship between history and public life from which we can truly learn something.” Mary’s foundation for remembrance is layered with accounts that influence her present day thinking. The art of remembering is an active force that has the ability to shape our perceptions as we live life and come across situations. In this sense, historical memory does play a key role in determining whether or not she believed race to have been a factor in the slow response of the federal government.

University of Arizona Students

When asked about whether race or socioeconomic status held greater weight in the evacuation process, UA students responded with mixed answers. Peter, a White student, felt poverty was the main factor in which Hurricane Katrina victims were left behind and victimized in the media. While he leans towards poverty, he claims race was thrown in by the media to garner attention:

I think poverty is more so the issue than race is but people tend to tag race into it. A lot of people associate poverty with minorities. It seems like it goes hand in hand. I just don't get why people are like that. I don't understand the whole race issue and why people see diversity or minorities as a problem.

Peter separates himself from those who believed race trumps socioeconomic status but he was still able identify racial biases in the media. Lisa, an African American student, felt the evacuation response would have been faster had the majority of the victims been rich and White. She cites political power the wealthy have over others and their ability to draw together resources in need. Poor Whites would have been in the same boat as poor Blacks. Peter and Lisa's responses appear to suggest a relationship between poverty and race and victims who were left behind. Historically, race and socioeconomic status have a clear relationship demonstrated in the forms such housing segregation, health disparities in the minority population and unequal access to education.

Like the UNC students, Tara, a White student, used media outlets such as the newspaper and broadcast television to keep up with Hurricane Katrina events. She particularly references the popular Associated Press photographs that drew national attention:

I remember seeing a Black kid who was walking away with something and they were saying “there’s this young boy walking. They said he was looting”. It probably reinforced the stereotypes to see stuff about the White kid having trouble versus the Black kid stealing something. If something was watching it, I could picture them saying “see I told you those people are up to no good”. It reinforced their opinion. The media does have a responsibility in playing into how people see current events and different groups, how they interpret what’s going on.

Tara admits she wasn’t always comfortable talking about race but was still able to identify stereotypes that were portrayed in the media. She further mentions that these stereotypes were not new and that it was almost “second nature” to see negativity about minorities and the poor in the media. Tara’s acknowledgement of such stereotypes in the media signifies her awareness and skepticism of the media. While aware of stereotypes, it did not influence her opinion about the federal response and race.

Evidence of similar reports being looped in the media was evident in the student’s responses when asked to recall images they remember seeing and hearing about. Most of the UA students could remember seeing reports of rapes, murders and shooting occurring after the Hurricane hit but many were skeptical to believe it. Some were angered by it because they felt like it placed the poor and minorities at a disadvantage. Most expressed a general distrust of the media. Hearing the violent reports did not create the initial distrust of the media but only reinforced the weariness that was already there. While it is hard to pinpoint exactly where the distrust originated from, it is still worthy to note that it was there in the first place, which may have influenced their responses and why some were not desympathized from hearing about the violent reports.

In an emergency situation, the act of looting was validated as a legitimate response for survival. When asked if they would steal in order to survive, many respondents said that they would. Jason, an African American student, felt betrayed:

I was angry that they were trying to make them come off as common thugs and people that we didn't need in the world because they were breaking buildings and stealing stuff to help their families. Of course, you have those who took advantage of the situation but that small portion of the population messed it up for the rest of them.

While the UA students agreed they thought stealing was morally wrong, many disassociated themselves with the term "stealing" rather emphasizing survival as the main agenda.

A general distaste towards the media before Hurricane Katrina may help explain why some participants were leery of the media coverage after the hurricane. The belief that mainstream media outlets had a political agenda convinced others the media was putting on a "side show" to boost up ratings. Jerrod, a African American student, admitted to listening to a select few broadcast outlets and newspapers he felt he could trust. Even then, he felt the information presented could only be trusted to a certain extent:

Even with your average story, I don't think I could trust the media. I have a general distaste for the media in general. I believe they all have an agenda. Anything could be framed into how you want it to be framed. It's a matter of how you spin it. Before Katrina, I did already not really trust anything the media had to say.

Around 75% of UA student participants admitted they were not happy and did not trust

the media before Hurricane Katrina. The mistrust may served as a screening mechanism weeding out the reports that were considered to be lies or “spinned”. These responses hint toward a possible expected role student participants felt journalists had the responsibility to uphold.

UA student participants referenced past federal government responses to natural disasters and used it to put the response to Hurricane Katrina into perspective. Kelly, an African American student, uses the 2005’s Hurricane Wilma in Florida to justify her answer for the belief on an intentional delayed response for Hurricane Katrina:

Not even a year after (Hurricane Katrina), there was a hurricane in Florida but it was political. A white populated area. I think Bush was over there the next day doing his photo-op. According to the government and according to some people, there is this view that certain people are more disposable than others. I know there is a divide along racial lines but I think it’s along class lines as well.

Limitations

Because this research study had a limited amount of participants, the number is too small to be considered statistically significant or conclusive of any population. Since this research study was completed over a short time period, I did not conduct long interviews for transcription purposes.

Conclusion

While it is certainly harder to prove the federal government response would have been expedited had the majority of the victims been White, it also appears that both White and African American UA students at both universities used race and economic

status as a factor in the late federal government response. UA and UNC participants were more readily to believe racial issues were slanted and biased during the Hurricane Katrina news coverage. Over all, student participants were more likely than the volunteers to reveal race as a factor in the relief efforts of Hurricane Katrina. This may suggest that possible linkages between age and the inclusion of race as the volunteers were older and the student participants were between the ages of 20 to 23 years of age. Nearly all of the African American UNC student participants used historical memory and racial identification to justify their reasons for sympathizing with Hurricane Katrina victims. While White UNC student participants tended to sympathize with the relief efforts by using their financial status to evaluate how devastating it was for Hurricane Katrina victims and their position as a White American to explain their emotional response. The ethnographic inclusion of the volunteer accounts provides a particular insight that would have been overlooked had it been constructed other ways. While these findings are not to be interpreted as conclusive of any population, it seeks to explore attitudes about people who observed Hurricane Katrina through the media and those who participated in the rebuilding efforts in Hurricane Katrina. This paper seeks to explore attitudes about people who observed Hurricane Katrina through the media and those who participated in the rebuilding efforts in Hurricane Katrina. Why did people racialize a natural disaster?

As an African American female researcher, I realize there were initial barriers between me and some of the White UNC and UA students. Even though I made it clear

that I could skip questions if the subject felt too uncomfortable to answer and all refused, I sensed a discomfort that stemmed from the racial difference between the both of us. For instance, David would change between the usage of the words “I” and “we” in order to shift the blame of having guilt about white privilege and how he benefits it. Seidman (1998) offers advice when facing these type of situations by “maintaining sensitivity to issues that trigger distrust as well as exhibiting good manners, respect, and a genuine interest in the stories of others can go a long way toward bridging racial and ethnic barriers.” The inclusion of ethnographic accounts from the general public and Hurricane Katrina volunteers provides insight that oftentimes statistics cannot reveal. In hopes to encourage open dialogue about race, ethnographic research can offer a space to do just that.

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Appendix A

Where were you when you first heard about Hurricane Katrina? What were you doing? Did you have relatives who were affected by Hurricane Katrina?

Did you watch the news reports of the disaster in the days and weeks following the hurricane? Did you look at TV, newspapers, and/or the internet? What are some of the things you remember seeing? How did you react?

Did you donate money or time to relief efforts?

What do you think about the government's response to Hurricane Katrina? Do you have different opinions of local, state and federal responses?

Do you think more lives could have been saved if things were done differently? Why or why not?

What do you think about the claim "the federal government would have responded more effectively and rapidly if the majority of victims had been White"?

Do you think the government is prepared for another Hurricane Katrina? Why or why not?

For those who volunteered to help with relief or rebuilding efforts

What motivated you to volunteer? What are some of the things you remember seeing?

Where did you volunteer? How many did you travel with?

Did you come into contact with any Hurricane Katrina evacuees? What was your role in assisting the relief effort?

Do you think that more relief should have been available? Why or why not?

Important: I have obtained IRB approval for the interviews for UNC students and the HK volunteers but I did not seek IRB for the UA student portion of this project.