



Perceptions of Racial and Socioeconomic Biases in Government Response Times Following Hurricane Katrina

Michelle Cohen

Derek de la Pena, Ph.D., Christine M. Bachman, Ph.D.
Faculty Sponsors

Abstract:

This study investigated college students' perceptions of government response efforts in aiding victims following Hurricane Katrina. The primary question of interest concerned whether the U.S. Government would have responded faster to aid victims located at the New Orleans Convention Center if their race and socioeconomic status would have been different. The race/statuses considered were: Rich/Caucasian, Poor/Caucasian, Rich/African-American, or Poor/African-American. Collectively speaking, the results indicated the influence of both racial and socioeconomic factors as students speculated that there would have been a difference in government response times. Specifically, participants (n=167) reported on average that the U.S. Government would have responded fastest to Rich/Caucasian victims, followed by Rich/African-Americans, Poor/Caucasians, and finally Poor/African-Americans. Although in general agreement with respect to government response times, differences in racial opinions were evident in areas of racial/socioeconomic discrimination and well-being. The largest differences existed between African-American and White participants.

Introduction:

The current study investigated perceptions of government response times to aid victims of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans. The primary objective was to assess whether or not perceptions were influenced by in-group biases. According to Tajfel and Turner (1979), in-group biases occur when people give preferential treatment and/or more positive interpretations to those they consider to be members of their own groups. He asserted that in-group biases occur even when random arbitrary groups are assigned. The authors later set forth social identity theory (1986), which states that people are more likely to demonstrate an in-group bias when part of their self-concept is strongly derived from membership in that group. This is likely evident in the case of race, because this is a part of the individual's identity that is with them all the time, regardless of place, time, or context.

In this study, two primary racial groups were identified, the victims (African-Americans [BLACK]-based on the fact that the majority of people left in New Orleans were Black), the accused (Caucasians [WHITE] - based on the predominate population of the U.S. Government/President), and a control group (OTHER) - which were members of any other racial groups). These participants served as the control group because they were neither the predominate victim nor the accused, following Hurricane Katrina. Three major areas of interest were investigated in questionnaire format: 1. Racial and/or socioeconomic discrimination, 2. Well-being of the victims, and 3. Accountability.

Hypothesis 1: Racial and/or socioeconomic discrimination and well-being of the victims

H1a: Perceptions of inequality would be greater for African-American participants relative to Caucasian participants

H1b: Caucasian participants would perceive no governmental biases.

Hypothesis 2: Accountability

H2: Caucasian participants would be more likely to blame the victims for not evacuating.

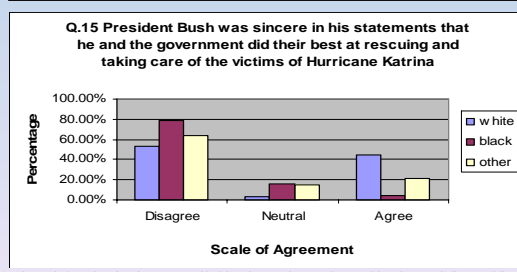
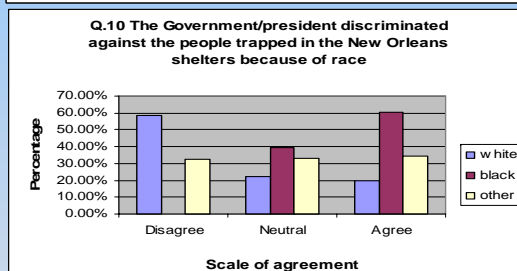
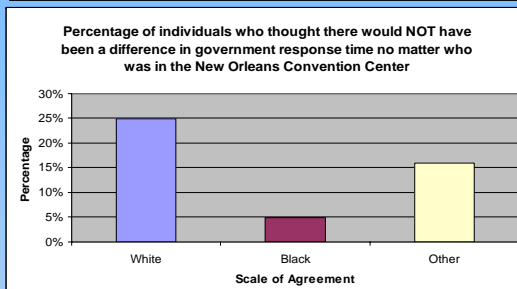
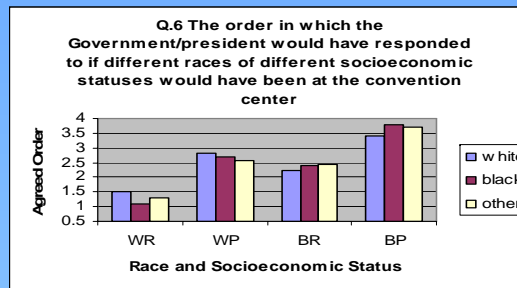
Methodology:

167 (Male=69 Female=98, Caucasians=36, African Americans=43, Other Racial Groups=88) college students from the University of Houston -Downtown served as participants. Participants watched a video that aired on September 9, 2005 on ABC's 20/20 special called NIGHTLINE: Hurricane Katrina - State of Emergency. This video showed media coverage of the events following Hurricane Katrina, and how the people of New Orleans were victimized. The video repeatedly raised the question of whether the inadequacy of government response times and methods were a result of the racial profile of New Orleans (i.e., Poor/Black residents). Participants were then given a questionnaire that assessed the 3 areas of interest previously mentioned (Discrimination, Well-being, and Accountability). The first 5 questions were demographic in nature. The primary question of interest, question 6, concerned whether or not the U.S. Government would have responded differently if a different predominate racial/socioeconomic group was located at the New Orleans Convention center. Participants were asked to "please rank order, who the government/president would have responded to faster to if different races of different socioeconomic status would have been at the New Orleans Convention Center. The categories are: Rich White, Rich Black, Poor White, Poor Black".

The rest of questionnaire consisted of statements to be answered on the following 5-point Likert scale: (5) strongly agree, (4) agree, (3) uncertain, (2) disagree, or (1) strongly disagree.

The statements were as follows:

- The government/president responded appropriately to Hurricane Katrina and the rescue efforts.
- Upon finding out the demographics of the people trapped in New Orleans, the government/president delayed in acting to rescue the people.
- As a result of being trapped in New Orleans shelters (The Superdome or the Convention Center), the victims of Hurricane Katrina experienced a great deal of harmful consequences.
- The government/president discriminated against the people trapped in the New Orleans shelters because of their race.
- The government/president acted in an ethical and unbiased way in his response to Hurricane Katrina.
- The government is prejudiced against black people.
- President Bush is prejudiced against black people.
- Following Hurricane Katrina, the government adequately took care of the victims with their physical, financial, and social needs.
- President Bush was sincere in his statements that he and the government did their best at rescuing and taking care of the victims of Hurricane Katrina.
- How much do you believe in the following statement: The lack of "acceptable" response times for aid in New Orleans was not related to the race of the victims (i.e., African Americans).
- The residents of the Gulf Coast should have taken a more proactive role in making sure they were safe and had adequate supplies prior to Hurricane Katrina.
- Hurricane Katrina and the role of the government in the aftermath will have a direct role in how I vote in the next election.
- Hurricane Katrina's media coverage affected my view of the adequacy of the government's response to the disaster?
- The media accurately portrayed the situation that was occurring in New Orleans following Hurricane Katrina.
- The media sensationalized the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina by focusing on racial issues.
- How much do you believe in rapper Kanye West's statement: President George Bush doesn't care about black people?



* In order to make the results easier to interpret, we combined the options strongly agree and agree, and the options strongly disagree and disagree.

References:

Goldinger, S., Kleider, H., Azuma, T., & Beike, D. (2003). "Blame the victim" under memory load. *Psychological Science*, 14(1), 81-85.

Tajfel, H., & Turner, J.C. (1979). An integrative theory of social contact. In W. Austin & S. Worchel (Eds.) *The social psychology of intergroup relations* (pp. 162-173). Monterey, CA: Brooks/Cole.

Tajfel, H., & Turner, J.C. (1986). The social identity theory of intergroup behaviour. In S. Worchel, & W.G. Austin (Eds.), *Psychology of intergroup relations* (pp. 7-24). Chicago: Nelson-Hall.

Walster, E. (1966). Assignment of responsibility for an accident. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 3, 73-79.

Results:

A 3 (race) x 4 (status) ANOVA was conducted on question #6 (see table), and statistical significance was attained, $F(6,320) = 3.52, p < .05$. Although no significance was revealed for the variable RACE, Tukey's post hoc tests revealed a significance for STATUS. Participants generally believed that the U.S. Government would have responded faster if the participants at the New Orleans Convention Center would have been Rich/White individuals, while the slowest response was listed for Poor/Black individuals (the predominate population at the New Orleans Convention Center) (see graph Q.6).

Although on the surface level it appears that collectively, all races had the same perception of government action and response times to Hurricane Katrina, further investigation of question #6 reveals an interesting difference in perception among the three race groups. With regard to participants who thought that there would **not** have been a difference in government response times, there was a substantially larger number of Whites (25%) compared to Others (16%) and Blacks (5%) (See 2nd Graph from the top).

Kruskal-Wallis non-parametric ANOVAs (RACE) revealed statistical significance, $p < .01$, for the following questions: 7,8,9,10, 12, 13, 15, 16, 18, and 22. Three representative questions related to our 3 areas of focus are highlighted: Questions 10 (Discrimination), 15 (well-being), and 17 (Accountability). Hypotheses for Discrimination and Well-being were confirmed for Questions 10 and 15, respectively, while Question 17 disconfirmed our hypothesis for accountability.

Q.10 asked participants how strongly they agreed with the following statement: "the government/president discriminated against the people trapped in the New Orleans shelters because of their race." Results show an overwhelming divide in opinion, with 58% of Caucasian participants **disagreeing**, and 0% of African-Americans **disagreeing**. Furthermore, 60% of African-Americans **agreed** with the statement. The opinion of Other group (i.e., control), is almost equally distributed throughout the responses, with about 31-32% of participants representing each opinion (agreement, neutrality, disagreement - see graph Q.10).

Q.15 dealt with how sincere President Bush came across when making statements about his concern for the well-being of the victims of Hurricane Katrina. The results reveal a general consensus between the races that he did not convey a sufficient concern for well-being (see graph Q. 15). However, there was still a noticeable difference between Caucasian and African-American participants. Forty-four percent of Caucasian participants agreed with Q. 15, compared to 5% of African-Americans (Other=22%), while 53% versus 79% (Other=64%) agreed, respectively.

Contrary to our hypothesis regarding accountability, Q. 17 showed general agreement between the races that the residents of the Gulf Coast should have taken a more proactive role in making sure they were safe (African-American = 83%; Caucasian = 77%; Other = 77%).

See Methodology for specific questions for the remaining listed questions (all statistically significant, $p < .01$).

In order to be more clear for the reader, the options of **strongly agree and **agree** were combined into one category (**Agreed**) and **strongly disagree** and **disagree** were combined and assigned to the column **Disagreed**.

| Q. # | White | | | Black | | | Other | | |
|------|-----------|-----------|--------|-----------|-----------|--------|-----------|-----------|--------|
| | Disagreed | Disagreed | Agreed | Disagreed | Disagreed | Agreed | Disagreed | Disagreed | Agreed |
| 6 | 30% | 30% | 30% | 3% | 2% | 3% | 3% | 3% | 3% |
| 8 | 3% | 3% | 3% | 3% | 3% | 3% | 3% | 3% | 3% |
| 10 | 60% | 25% | 15% | 3% | 2% | 3% | 3% | 2% | 3% |
| 12 | 5% | 2% | 3% | 3% | 3% | 3% | 3% | 3% | 3% |
| 13 | 5% | 2% | 3% | 3% | 3% | 3% | 3% | 3% | 3% |
| 15 | 5% | 3% | 3% | 3% | 3% | 3% | 3% | 3% | 3% |
| 16 | 2% | 1% | 3% | 7% | 3% | 3% | 3% | 3% | 3% |
| 18 | 5% | 3% | 3% | 3% | 3% | 3% | 3% | 3% | 3% |
| 22 | 6% | 3% | 3% | 3% | 3% | 3% | 3% | 3% | 3% |

Discussion:

The results of the study clearly revealed an in-group bias (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) throughout the study. Specifically, there was a statistically significant discrepancy between the perceptions of Caucasians and African-Americans with regard to questions 8, 12, 13, 16, and 22. With respect to racial discrimination, over 50% of Caucasians (the accused) disagreed that the unacceptable government response time was due to race, whereas, over 50% of African Americans (the victims) agreed that it was due to a racial factor. Interestingly, the "Other" racial groups (i.e., Control) remained equally divided with respect to racial discrimination and delayed government response times.

Regarding the well-being of the victims of Hurricane Katrina, a strong consensus was found amongst all racial groups that the U.S. Government did not adequately take care of the victims. Interestingly, it can be interpreted that all three racial groups believed that the victims were partly accountable for the negative consequences and they should have been more proactive in leaving the Gulf Coast area prior to the hurricane. We expected to find in-group biases (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) amongst the groups with respect to accountability, but instead our results supported the phenomenon of "blaming the victim" (Walster, 1966). According to Goldinger and colleagues (2003), hindsight makes it seem that the victim should have been able to predict the negative consequences and should have taken measures to avoid the perilous situation.

In conclusion, racial differences among college students exist regarding the perceived actions and intentions of the U.S. Government/President. The majority of African-American college students believe that racial discrimination was evident in the rescue efforts following Hurricane Katrina, while the majority of Caucasian students disagree. Students of other racial backgrounds are less united in their perceptions. However, when socioeconomic status is considered with race, students of all racial backgrounds are in agreement that the U.S. government and/or President Bush give preferential treatment to wealthy Caucasian citizens and are less concerned for impoverished African-American citizens. Additionally, college students generally agree that residents of the Gulf Coast should have been more proactive evacuating the area prior to Hurricane Katrina. Whether federal biases actually existed during the rescue efforts following Hurricane Katrina is still not currently known. However, it is evident that college students believe the color of a person's skin and how much money a person makes contribute to how one is treated by federal organizations in the United States.

Acknowledgements:

I would like to thank Rose Mary Istre, Michelle Klarman, Donna Nance, and Allison Tate for their help with developing the survey. I would also like to thank Gwendolyn Scott for her help with participant recruitment. Finally, I would like to thank the UHJ Social Sciences Department for giving me this opportunity to learn about the research process.