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# FEELING THE PAIN OF MY PEOPLE

## Hurricane Katrina, Racial Inequality, and the Psyche of Black America

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In late August of 2005, Hurricane Katrina ripped through the U.S. Gulf Coast region causing a subsequent cycle of evacuation, relocation, and rebuilding. The storm exposed in its wake vast racial and class differences in how the hurricane and its aftermath affected individual citizens. Using two public opinion polls conducted immediately after Katrina, the authors demonstrate that African Americans in this country were much more likely than Whites to experience feelings of anger and depression in response to the events surrounding the hurricane. They also show that these feelings of anger and depression held by African Americans are respectively explained by their perception of racial discrimination by the federal government and complacency on the part of President Bush in response to Katrina. These results provide additional support for the idea that African Americans have a racially group-centric view of society that powerfully shapes how they respond to political events.

**Keywords:** *Hurricane Katrina; group consciousness; racial inequality; governmental neglect*

I feel that, if it was in another area, with another economic strata and racial makeup, that President Bush would have run out of Crawford a lot quicker and FEMA would have found its way in a lot sooner.

—Reverend Al Sharpton

In late August 2005, the United States was hit by one of the most costly and deadly tropical storms the country had ever experienced. Classified as a Category 5 hurricane, Hurricane Katrina caused approximately \$75 billion in damages to the U.S. Gulf Coast. Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans, Louisiana, especially hard, leaving approximately 80% of the city flooded in up to 20 feet of water (Knabb, Rhome, & Brown, 2005). The vast amount of property damage, injury, and loss of life left residents in Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama devastated.

Adding insult to injury was the perceived lack of sufficient response by the government in general and President George W. Bush in particular. For weeks following Hurricane Katrina, those outside the affected areas witnessed, via the media, the impact the storm and the botched recovery effort had on residents of the hurricane-ravaged areas. Indeed, these images of suffering and despair will likely be etched in the minds of an entire generation of Americans who observed one of the greatest natural disasters in this nation's history.

We may never be able to fully gauge all of the consequences of the hurricane, especially its impact on the American psyche. Nevertheless, it is important to try to probe just how extensive its effects were. This includes looking at those populations not physically affected by the hurricane. For instance, given that the storm had a particularly devastating impact on many African American communities, did the awareness of this racial disparity lead those Blacks living outside the hurricane-stricken area to empathize with the victims of the storm? If so, did the government's handling of the situation affect the psychological response that African Americans had to the event? In this article, we address these questions by examining Blacks' emotional response to Hurricane Katrina and the subsequent relief efforts. We argue that because Blacks were disproportionately represented among the victims of the storm, those African Americans living outside of the hurricane-ravaged areas, more so than members of other racial groups, were more likely to be emotionally moved by the event. In particular, we argue that African Americans living outside of the affected areas were more likely than their White counterparts to have felt angered

and/or depressed by what happened in areas affected by the hurricane. Furthermore, we show evidence that suggests that the emotional responses of African Americans to the events surrounding Hurricane Katrina likely resulted from the concern among Black Americans that the federal government's response to the hurricane was not only insufficient but would have been more efficient had the victims been White.

### EMOTIONS AND POLITICS

For decades, psychologists and political scientists have challenged the notion that citizens react purely rationally when encountering the world around them (Murphy & Zajonc, 1993; Zajonc, 1980, 1982), especially when it comes to politics (Brader, 2006; Marcus & MacKuen, 1993; Marcus, Neuman, & MacKuen, 2000). Rather, these scholars argue that emotions often precede cognition when people are called to make evaluations. In other words, instead of expending cognitive energy on weighing the pros and cons of an object, issue, person, or political event, individuals frequently react affectively. That is not to say that cognition and affect work independently of one another. "After all, many affective experiences involve some participation of cognitive processes, and virtually all cognitions have some affective qualities" (Murphy & Zajonc, 1993, p. 724). People, however, sometimes feel before they think. Consequently, emotions can induce political learning (Marcus et al., 2000), increase political interest and participation (Brader, 2005), affect evaluations of the economy (Conover & Feldman, 1986), and influence evaluations of candidates and other political figures (Abelson, Kinder, Peters, & Fiske, 1982; Brader, 2006; Conover & Feldman, 1986; Marcus & MacKuen, 1993; Valentino, Hutchings, Philpot, & White, 2006).

But to what extent is emotional response conditional on racial group membership? We know that individuals respond to objects or events that are deemed personally significant (Conover & Feldman, 1986; Damasio, 2000). Inasmuch as group loyalties matter to individuals' perceptions of the political world (Berelson, Lazarsfeld, & McPhee, 1954; Campbell, Converse, Miller, & Stokes, 1960;

Dawson, 1994; Green, Palmquist, & Schickler, 2002; Gurin, Hatchett, & Jackson, 1989; Hutchings, 2003; Philpot, 2004; Tate, 1993), we argue that we should see divergent emotional responses to political stimuli perceived to be particularly relevant to a racial group.

With respect to Hurricane Katrina, the slow response from the government was perceived by many to be race driven. According to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities,

African Americans made up a disproportionate share of the hurricane's victims. About one of every three people who lived in the areas hit hardest by the hurricane was African American. By contrast, one of every eight people in the nation is African American. (Sherman & Shapiro, 2005, p. 2)

Many Blacks felt, as the above quote from Reverend Sharpton suggests, that the relief effort would have been faster and more efficient if the area had been primarily White. Because of the racialization of this event, we contend that Blacks should exhibit higher levels of emotional response than Whites.

Few studies focus on African American emotional response to political phenomena. One notable exception, however, demonstrated that Blacks' feelings of hope and fear intensified when they read an article about a candidate that threatened the group's interests (Valentino et al., 2006). In what follows, we examine whether the same pattern holds when Blacks encounter politics outside of the electoral context. In this case, we examine the impact that one of the nation's greatest natural and human disasters has had on the psyche of the Black community.

## **HYPOTHESES**

From extant research, we know that Blacks tend to have a more group-centric view of politics than other groups in American society. For example, African Americans' psychological connectedness or closeness to Blacks as a group (i.e., group identification) has been found to be essential in accounting for their largely liberal views of policies such as affirmative action (Conover, 1984; Dawson, 1994; Gurin et al., 1989; Tate, 1993). Despite the greater

socioeconomic heterogeneity experienced by the Black community during the past few decades, Black political behavior is marked by overwhelming uniformity. The political cohesiveness of African Americans is thought to be a function of Blacks' belief that what happens to the group is relevant to the individual. In other words, Blacks use information about what events and issues are relevant to the group as a proxy for what is in their own self-interest, a phenomenon coined by Dawson (1994) as the Black Utility Heuristic. Because of this, African Americans often internalize politics that affect Blacks as a whole, even when they themselves are not personally affected. This Afrocentric world view, we argue, also applies to the area of emotions and political evaluations. Therefore, if our argument about Black emotional responses is correct, we should observe the following:

*Hypothesis 1:* Black Americans will be more likely than White Americans to be emotionally affected by the events surrounding Hurricane Katrina.

*Hypothesis 2:* Blacks, compared to Whites, will be more likely to perceive the government's response to Hurricane Katrina as racialized.

*Hypothesis 3:* The perceived racialization of Hurricane Katrina and the perception that the government did not adequately respond to the disaster will explain Blacks' emotional response to the hurricane.

We intend to test these propositions by examining Black Americans' evaluations of and emotional responses to governmental efforts to help those stranded during the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. We speculate that the more relevant a political event is to an individual's salient in-group identity, the greater the likelihood that individual will exhibit an emotional response to that event. Because most of the people stranded in New Orleans following the hurricane were African American and because of the strong sense of in-group closeness among African Americans, we expect to observe African Americans, more so than White Americans, experiencing strong emotional reactions to the event. We believe African Americans will experience greater degrees of sadness, shock, depression, and anger in response to the event. We also hypothesize that African Americans' emotional responses will be directly linked

to their perceptions of the racialized governmental response or lack thereof following the hurricane.

## DATA AND METHODS

To test these hypotheses, we use data from two national random sample surveys: the Gallup/CNN/*USA Today* Hurricane Katrina poll and the Pew Hurricane Katrina and New Orleans/Race Survey. The Hurricane Katrina Survey (HKS) and the Hurricane Katrina and New Orleans/Race (HKNO) survey were conducted September 7-8, 2005, and September 8-11, 2005, respectively, and comprised telephone interviews with nationally representative samples of 1,000 and 1,005 adults, nearly all of whom live outside the hurricane-affected areas.<sup>1</sup> Telephone numbers were selected using list-assisted random digit dialing. For HKS, an additional 110 interviews with adults in African American households were incorporated to ensure an adequate number of African American respondents. The HKNO survey supplemented the national sample with an oversample of 262 African American adults. Results are weighted to accurately reflect national demographics, and PSRAI procedures are used to correct for the potential design effect resulting from systematic nonresponse.

Using the Gallup/CNN/*USA Today* poll, we examined the responses to the following question: "Please say whether you, personally, have felt each of the following emotions in response to Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath, or not. How about shock/sadness/anger?" If respondents indicated that they experienced the emotion, we coded their answers as 1. If they did not, their answers were coded as 0.

In the Pew data, feelings of anger are measured using the question "Have you yourself felt angry because of what's happened in areas affected by the hurricane?" Yes responses were coded 1, and no responses were coded 0. We used the responses to the question "Have you yourself felt depressed because of what's happened in areas affected by the hurricane?" to determine if respondents had feelings of depression. Again, we coded yes responses as 1 and no responses as 0.<sup>2</sup>

**TABLE 1**  
**Emotional Response to Hurricane Katrina by Race**

	<i>Blacks (%)</i>	<i>Whites (%)</i>	<i>Difference</i>
Anger (Pew)	71.14	46.51	24.63*
Anger (Gallup/CNN/ <i>USA Today</i> )	76.34	60.03	16.31*
Depression (Pew)	73.97	55.66	18.31*
Shock (Gallup/CNN/ <i>USA Today</i> )	80.12	77.35	2.77
Sadness (Gallup/CNN/ <i>USA Today</i> )	99.16	97.46	1.70

Note: Values are weighted means.

\* $p < .05$ .

## RESULTS

Looking at Table 1, we see that the results of our analysis support the idea of a racially group-centric response to the events surrounding Hurricane Katrina. As Table 1 demonstrates, Black Americans were much more likely than White Americans to report feeling angered by what happened in the areas affected by Hurricane Katrina. According to the Pew data, although 71% of Blacks responded that they felt angered by what happened in areas affected by the hurricane, only 46% of Whites reported feelings of anger. The Gallup/CNN/*USA Today* poll yielded similar results—76% of Blacks reported being angry, whereas only 60% of Whites indicated anger. In both polls, the differences between Blacks and Whites are statistically significant, indicating a considerable degree of difference in how Black and White Americans reacted to the events surrounding the hurricane.

Likewise, African Americans were 18 percentage points more likely than Whites to report being depressed as a result of Hurricane Katrina. Nearly three quarters of the Black respondents reported feeling depressed. In contrast, just more than half of Whites reported experiencing feelings of depression in the aftermath of the hurricane. Again, these differences are statistically significant.

There were, however, only small differences between the two racial groups in terms of shock and sadness. Eighty percent of Blacks and 77% of Whites reported feeling shocked by the events surrounding Hurricane Katrina. This modest difference was not statistically significant. The suffering that followed the storm also



produced few racial differences in feelings of sadness. Nearly all respondents (99% of Blacks and 97% of Whites) reported being saddened as a result of the devastation left by the hurricane.<sup>3</sup> Although feelings of anger and depression were markedly different for Black and White respondents, the human suffering observed engendered sadness in nearly every respondent, transcending any racial differences. Given this collective sadness, why should White Americans be less likely than African Americans to embody feelings of anger or depression? We have hypothesized that the reason for this difference lies in the perceived racialization by African Americans of the nation's response to Hurricane Katrina.

Although the previous results provide strong evidence to suggest that African Americans as a group had a unique emotional experience when it comes to how they felt about the events surrounding Hurricane Katrina, we still know very little about the origins of these emotional responses. As we have stated, our argument is that the unique emotional responses of Black Americans to the events surrounding Hurricane Katrina arise from a perception among African Americans that the race of the victims played an important role in explaining how the government—particularly the federal government—responded to the storm. In Table 2, we see that much like the racial differences in emotions, there are also significant racial divisions in Black and White Americans' perception of the racial consequences and repercussions of the event. Here, we see that Blacks are nearly 4 times as likely as Whites to think that the government's response to the hurricane would have been faster had the victims been White and more than 2 times as likely to think that the disaster shows that racial inequality remains a major problem in this country. These results suggest that race, specifically the perceived racial discrimination by the government, played an important role in shaping how Black Americans saw the event. In other words, the apparent racial discrimination on the part of the government activated a group lens through which Black Americans throughout the nation viewed Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath. These results also point to the unwillingness of most White Americans to see the racial implications of the event, illuminating the frequently distinct realities experienced by White and Black Americans.

**TABLE 2**  
**Perceived Racialization of Hurricane Katrina**

	<i>Blacks (%)</i>	<i>Whites (%)</i>	<i>Difference</i>
Government response would be faster if victims were White ( <i>agree</i> = 1, <i>disagree</i> = 0)	70.68	17.88	52.82*
Disaster shows that racial inequality remains a major problem ( <i>agree</i> = 1, <i>disagree</i> = 0)	76.16	36.78	39.38*

Source: Hurricane Katrina Survey, September 6-7, 2005; Pew Research Center for the People and the Press.

Note: Values are weighted means.

\* $p < .05$ .

The results presented in Table 3 more clearly illustrate the connection between Blacks' emotional responses to what happened in the areas affected by the hurricane and their perception of the racialized nature of the event. Presented here are logistic regression results that assess the effect of racial perceptions of the hurricane recovery effort on Blacks' emotional responses. Unlike the previous analysis, the results presented here allowed us to control for plausible alternative explanations of emotional response, such as demographics, having a close friend or relative affected by the storm, and attitudinal and dispositional factors such as partisanship and ideology (see Appendix for detailed variable description).

The column labeled *Anger* presents the results of the predictors of Blacks' feelings of anger with regard to the events surrounding Hurricane Katrina. If our hypothesis that the perceived racialization of the events surrounding Hurricane Katrina explains Blacks' expression of anger in response to these events is correct, then we should observe a statistically significant relationship between anger and either the variable that measures Blacks' belief that the storm points out that racial inequality is still an important problem in the United States or the variable that measures Blacks' belief that there would have been a faster governmental response to the hurricane had most of the victims been White. Looking at the coefficients on these two variables, we see that Blacks' belief that racial inequality is still an important problem does not appear to be related to their expression of anger. The coefficient on this variable is both substantively small and statistically insignificant (at  $p < .05$ ). Blacks' belief

**TABLE 3**  
**Predictors of Blacks' Emotional Response to Hurricane Katrina**

	<i>Anger</i>	<i>Depression</i>
Age	-.023* (.01)	.008 (.01)
Female	.194 (.38)	.482 (.39)
Education	.005 (.10)	-.010 (.11)
Ideology (liberal)	-.030 (.19)	-.080 (.21)
Party identification (Democrat)	.693 (.68)	.511 (.73)
Friend/relative affected ( <i>yes</i> = 1, <i>no</i> = 0)	-.287 (.38)	.480 (.40)
Response faster if people were White ( <i>agree</i> = 1, <i>disagree</i> = 0)	.976* (.46)	.053 (.53)
Disaster shows that racial inequality remains a major problem ( <i>agree</i> = 1, <i>disagree</i> = 0)	.081 (.48)	-.816 (.64)
Rating of federal government response ( <i>excellent</i> = 1)	-.672* (.25)	.396 (.30)
Rating of state government response ( <i>excellent</i> = 1)	-.104 (.21)	.093 (.20)
President Bush could have done more ( <i>agree</i> = 1, <i>disagree</i> = 0)	.266 (.71)	2.108* (.80)
Constant	2.288 (1.41)	-2.035 (1.56)
<i>N</i>	180	180
Pseudo <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	.14	.08

Source: Hurricane Katrina Survey, September 6-7, 2005; Pew Research Center for the People and the Press.

Note: Estimates are logistic regression coefficients, with standard errors shown in parentheses.

\* $p < .05$ .

that there would have been a faster governmental response to the hurricane had most of the victims been White, however, does appear to increase the likelihood of Black Americans being angered by the events surrounding the hurricane. The model indicates that there is a statistically significant (at  $p < .05$ ) positive relationship between Blacks' racialized perception of the government's response and their expression of anger. This result suggests that African Americans' emotional response to the hurricane originated in part from their racial beliefs—insofar as they felt that the governmental response was not as fast as it should have been because the victims were mostly African Americans. In other words, the perception that the government neglected Hurricane Katrina's victims through race-based discrimination explains the anger felt by African American

respondents. Although not physically affected by Hurricane Katrina, most African American respondents identified with the governmental neglect suffered by the largely African American victims of the hurricane, engendering a profound psychological impact.

Turning to the results predicting Blacks' expression of Depression, we see that Blacks' feelings of depression do not necessarily have the same racial origins as their anger. Neither Blacks' belief that the response would have been faster if the victims were White nor their belief that Hurricane Katrina revealed that racial inequality is still an important problem seems to be related to Blacks' feelings of depression. As we see in Table 3, the coefficients on each of these variables are relatively small compared to the standard errors, suggesting that there is likely to be little or no relationship between Blacks' racial perceptions of the events and their feelings of depression. Blacks' feelings of depression, instead, appear to originate from their frustration with President Bush's handling of the situation. Looking at the coefficient on the "President Bush could have done more" variable, we see that Blacks' belief that President Bush did not do all he could to get relief efforts going quickly is a rather large and a statistically significant ( $p < .05$ ) predictor of Blacks' feelings of depression.

In summary, the results presented indicate that the events surrounding Hurricane Katrina deeply affected the psyche of Black America. The images of other African Americans left to suffer while government officials failed to adequately respond had a profound impact on Blacks' emotional responses to the events. More so than White Americans, Blacks were deeply angered and depressed by the events surrounding the hurricane. What seems to have angered Blacks the most is the apparent role that the race of the victims played in the government's slow response to the disaster. Blacks' feelings of depression in response to the event, instead, are in part predicted by their frustration with President Bush and his apparent unwillingness or inability to respond quickly to the situation.

## CONCLUSION

This analysis has sought to explain, as explicitly as possible, the role that in-group relevance plays in shaping African Americans'

emotional responses to Hurricane Katrina. Here, we saw that Black and White Americans had very different emotional experiences in response to the event. Consistent with our expectation of a group-centric response to the event, Blacks were much more likely than Whites to be angered or depressed by the events surrounding the storm. We also saw that the perceived racialization of the events that surrounded the storm strongly predicted the anger of Black Americans and that the perceived complacency of the federal government explained feelings of depression among Black Americans. Despite geographic and socioeconomic differences, Black Americans throughout the country—as evidenced by their unique emotional response to the disaster—identified with Hurricane Katrina’s primarily African American victims. This conclusion points to the role of racial discrimination as a stimulus for the activation of Blacks’ racial group interest in shaping Black emotional response—the perceived racialization of the events surrounding the natural and human disasters of Hurricane Katrina helps to explain Black Americans’ group-centric response.

We believe that this study constitutes an important step in understanding group dynamics in American politics. In 1968, the *Kerner Report* warned that the United States was “moving toward two societies, one black, and one white—separate and unequal” (National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, 1967). The extent to which this passage has proven prophetic can be seen when the country experiences crises as it did in the late summer of 2005. By showing that Blacks as a group felt abandoned by their government during one of the most devastating natural disasters this country has experienced, we help illuminate why there persists a racial divide in lived experiences of Black and White Americans. The distinct realities of Black and White Americans are perpetuated by the myth of a colorblind society and threaten the very foundation of America’s allegedly representative democracy. Until racial divisions in condition and opinion can be bridged, the state of American democracy will be incomplete, lacking equal representation for all.

## APPENDIX

### Variable Descriptions for African American Respondents

	M	SD
Age	49.57	17.49
Gender ( <i>male</i> = 0, <i>female</i> = 1)	0.58	0.49
Education	4.2 or some college	1.65
Ideology ( <i>conservative</i> = 1, <i>liberal</i> = 5)	2.96	0.96
Party identification ( <i>Democrat</i> = 0, <i>Independent/other</i> = 0.5, <i>Republican</i> = 1)	0.21	0.30
Did you have a friend or relative affected by the hurricane? ( <i>yes</i> = 1, <i>no</i> = 0)	0.40	0.49
Would the government response been faster if most of the victims were White? ( <i>agree</i> = 1, <i>disagree</i> = 0)	0.71	0.45
Does the disaster show that racial inequality remains a major problem in this country? ( <i>agree</i> = 1, <i>disagree</i> = 0)	0.76	0.41
How would you rate the federal government's response to the hurricane? ( <i>poor</i> = 1, <i>excellent</i> = 4)	1.78	0.86
How would you rate the state government response to the hurricane? ( <i>poor</i> = 1, <i>excellent</i> = 4)	2.31	0.98
Did President Bush do all he could to get relief efforts going quickly or if he could have done more? ( <i>did all he could</i> = 0, <i>he could have done more</i> = 1)	0.92	0.28

Source: Hurricane Katrina Survey, September 6-7, 2005; Pew Research Center for the People and the Press

Note: Results are not weighted.

## NOTES

1. We would like to thank the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press and the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research for making these data available.

2. Although similar measures of emotional response have been used by other researchers (e.g., Valentino et al., 2006), the measures used here certainly do not represent perfect measures of emotional response. Psychologists have developed much more precise measures of complex emotional states such as depression (see Robinson, Shaver, & Wrightsman, 1991, for an example of these measures).

3. Black Americans are also more likely to exhibit emotional responses to the events in the hurricane-affected areas than either Asians or Hispanic citizens. While 71% of Black Americans in the Pew data indicated feeling angry, only 53% of those who identified as Asian

American and 57% of Hispanic Americans were angered by the events. The differences between Blacks and other racial groups in depression are, however, smaller. Nearly 68% of Asian Americans and 62% of Hispanic Americans expressed feelings of anger in response to what happened in the hurricane-affected areas. It is important to note that we are limited in the inferences we can draw from these data because we only have approximately 16 non-White/Black Hispanic respondents and 17 Asian respondents in the Pew data set.

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