Race and Media Coverage of Hurricane Katrina: Analysis, Implications, and Future Research Questions

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We analyze three aspects of media depictions of Hurricane Katrina, focusing on the relationship between race and coverage of the crisis. Examination of media language use explores the debate surrounding the terms "refugees" and "evacuees"— as well as descriptions of "looting" versus "finding food"—in light of the predominantly Black demographic of the survivors in New Orleans. Assessment of the story angle indicates a disproportionate media tendency to associate Blacks with crime and violence, a propensity consistent with exaggerated and inaccurate reports regarding criminal activity in Katrina's aftermath. A review of new media sources such as mass e-mails identifies stereotypical depictions of storm survivors that both converge and diverge from coverage found in more traditional media outlets. Psychological explanations, implications for public attitudes and behavior, and future research questions are explored.

Upon seeing the first images of New Orleans in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, Americans began to ask why there had not been better preparation for the storm and what could be done to prevent similar catastrophes in the future. Almost as immediately, people also took note of one unmistakable aspect of these images, namely that the overwhelming majority of individuals depicted on rooftops, at the Superdome, and in front of the Convention Center was Black. Accordingly, race-related questions about Katrina began to emerge as well: Why did race seem to covary with ability and willingness to evacuate before the storm? In what ways did the race of the displaced residents of New Orleans affect public perceptions of

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the crisis? And, perhaps most controversially, to what extent did the race of these individuals influence governmental preparations for and responses to the storm?

The focus of this article is on another, related series of questions concerning the relationship between race and media coverage of Katrina. Media portrayals have the potential to both shape and reflect societal attitudes (see Entman & Rojecki, 2001; Gandy, 1998; Gerbner & Gross, 1976; Gilens, 1997), and their examination therefore has broader implications concerning the psychological tendencies alluded to by the questions above. As such, the coverage of Katrina provides a unique, real-world opportunity to consider the relationship between race, popular media, and the general public. We focus on three specific aspects of this media coverage. First, we consider media *language use*, including two of the hallmark controversies of the Katrina coverage: debate regarding the use of "refugees" to describe survivors of the storm, and the widely circulated photo captions that described a Black man as "looting" and a seemingly comparable White couple as "finding food." Second, we examine issues of *story angle*, particularly the media's disproportionate—and, in retrospect, exaggerated—focus on reports of violent crime in New Orleans after the storm. Third, we explore first-person accounts circulated through "new" media outlets such as mass e-mails and weblogs, comparing aspects of this coverage with that of more traditional media outlets. For each topic we offer analysis using psychological research and consider practical implications, all in the effort to identify new links between theory and real-world events and to generate avenues for future investigation.

Language Use

Describing the survivors. Much of the media controversy to emerge in the aftermath of Katrina focused on issues of language. Most notably, debate raged regarding the language used to describe the displaced survivors (Prince, 2005). Indeed, in the first days after the storm, the most common description for these individuals was "refugees" ("Media abounds," 2005), a word infrequently used to describe American citizens still within the borders of the United States (Fenton, 2005; Kirgis, 2005). Within a week, President Bush decried use of the term, and many news organizations made formal announcements of a shift to the more traditional "evacuees," "survivors," or "victims."

To more closely examine this issue we conducted a Google News search for stories appearing in the two weeks after the storm (meaning that at least half of our sampling window occurred after the "refugee" controversy exploded and after some organizations disavowed use of the term). Our search revealed 2,830 stories about Katrina using the word "evacuee," compared to 1,040 using "refugee," a difference that might be expected given the dubious applicability of the latter term. Thus, "evacuee" was the more popular word by a ratio of 2.7 to 1. The unprecedented nature of the Katrina crisis renders comparisons problematic, but

in a crude effort at such an analysis, we conducted a similar search for stories about Hurricane Rita, a storm that made landfall on the Gulf Coast three weeks after Katrina. This search revealed 1,510 stories that used "evacuee," compared to only 257 references to "refugee." This ratio of 5.9 to 1 is more than twice that observed for Katrina stories, suggesting that, by one comparison at least, "refugee" was used disproportionately more often in stories about Hurricane Katrina.

There are many potential explanations for this difference. Perhaps media outlets learned that they could prevent controversy by avoiding the word "refugee," and they adhered to this strategy when covering Rita. The damage and displacement caused by Katrina was unprecedented in recent U. S. history; perhaps the unique circumstances of the crisis rendered "refugee" more applicable (Pesca, 2005). Others, however, proposed a more controversial explanation. Even though initial media reports made virtually no mention of race in describing the scene in New Orleans (Shafer, 2005),[1] the images transmitted from the Superdome and Convention Center left no doubt that the overwhelming majority of victims remaining in the city was Black. To some public figures, the most parsimonious explanation for the unusual use of "refugee" was the demographic composition of those affected by the hurricane. Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton, for instance, argued that the use of "refugee" was racially biased, as it depicted the primarily Black population in outgroup terms and implied that the victims were less than full citizens ("Calling Katrina," 2005).

Was the unique language used to describe victims of Katrina influenced, at least in part, by race? Linguist Geoffrey Nunberg has provided compelling evidence in the affirmative. Nunberg (2005) examined Nexis wire service articles in the first week after Katrina and found that those using "evacuee" (56%) outnumbered those using "refugee" (44%). This 1.3 to 1 ratio is even lower than that of our analysis, presumably due to the different time frame of Nunberg's study (as well as potential differences in search engines). Most interestingly, in articles in which either "evacuee" or "refugee" appeared within 10 words of "poor" or "Black," "refugee" was the more popular term by a statistically significant margin of 68% to 32%. This result cannot be accounted for by the race-neutral explanations identified above. Rather, these data support the conclusion that race played some role in the use of "refugee" in the coverage of Katrina.[2]

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[1] This tendency to resist addressing race is an interesting one in and of itself (see Kurtz, 2005). Shafer (2005) argues that it resulted from media concerns about avoiding the appearance of racism, a conclusion consistent with recent psychological research regarding the general reluctance of Whites to mention race in describing others, even when it is obvious and diagnostic information (Norton, Sommers, Apfelbaum, Pura, & Ariely, in press).

[2] This analysis also raises the important question of whether the influence of race is separable from the influence of socioeconomic status (SES). Compared to social psychological investigations of race-related stereotypes and attitudes, far fewer studies have examined the specifics of people's beliefs regarding SES. Still, many of the analyses offered in this article could also be used to support the contention that SES colors media depictions, a conclusion we address again below.

The "refugee" debate was not the only language controversy to emerge. In early September, two news service photographs taken in front of a flooded grocery store received a great deal of television attention and achieved wide circulation on the Internet ("Loot loops," 2005; Ralli, 2005). In one of the photos, a Black male was shown in waist-high water, carrying a carton of soft drinks and a full garbage bag. The other photo showed a White couple carrying food and drinks through similar floodwaters. Although nearly identical in composition, the photos were released with markedly different captions. The first caption—for the photo with the Black subject—began with "A young man walks through chest deep flood water after looting a grocery store . . ." The caption for the second photo read, "Two residents wade through chest-deep water after finding bread and soda from a local grocery store." That comparable photos could carry such different captions was attributed by some to the major difference between the images: the race of the parties depicted.[3] Although anecdotal in nature—and therefore not amenable to the type of analysis conducted above regarding the use of "refugee"—these competing photo captions are certainly consistent with the conclusion that race played some role in language use during coverage of Katrina.

Analysis, implications, and future questions. Given empirical evidence of the influence of race on perception and judgment in a wide range of domains (for review, see Fiske, 1998), it would be quite surprising if similar effects did not occur with media depictions. Race is one of the most salient characteristics people perceive when encountering others (Ito & Urland, 2003; Montepare & Opeyo, 2002). Interacting with—or even viewing faces of—Black individuals has been found to activate stereotypical associations regarding criminality, hostility, and other negative characteristics, and this process often occurs automatically—outside a perceiver's conscious awareness—and absent explicitly prejudicial attitudes (e.g., Devine, 1989; Eberhardt, Goff, Purdie, & Davies, 2004; Fazio, Jackson, Dunton, & Williams, 1995; Greenwald & Banaji, 1985).

Perhaps exposure to Black individuals also renders more accessible constructs sometimes associated with "refugee," such as "stigmatized," "poor," or "outgroup." Consider the analysis of Mike Pesca (2005) of NPR, who wrote that even though legal definitions of "refugee" did not apply to Katrina (see Kirgis, 2005), the word seemed "apt" for other reasons. Automatic associations regarding the category African American may have played a role in beliefs that, in this instance, "refugee" just felt like the right word. Pesca (2005) draws analogies between New Orleans and refugee scenes in Haiti and Kosovo (e.g., "the dynamic

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[3] This controversy suggests that at least some of the influence of race is distinct and separable from that of SES. The individuals in the two photos are not distinguishable in terms of SES, but are clearly members of different racial groups. Although it was almost certainly a combination of race and SES that had an influence on media coverage of Katrina, we believe that these effects would not have been the same were the survivors in New Orleans mostly poor White individuals.

I witnessed was clearly of the dirty masses on one side and the soldiers and police on the other"), but even more common were media comparisons to Africa or the "Third World" (Street, 2005; Wa Ngugi, 2005). Indeed, any overlap in associations between "Black" and "refugee"—as suggested by Nunberg's (2005) analyses—would have rendered the latter term more likely to surface in the minds of journalists covering Katrina. In this manner, pernicious intent or racial antipathy would not have been required in order for race to impact media coverage, and journalists' denials of such influence would hardly preclude the possibility that bias occurred.

However, it remains elusively difficult to determine whether race has affected judgment in any particular instance (Norton, Sommers, Vandello, & Darley, 2006). People are often unaware of the extent to which race has been influential, rendering unreliable their self-reports on the matter (Nisbett & Wilson, 1977; Shafir, Simonson, & Tversky, 1993). Moreover, in a culture where motivations to avoid appearing prejudiced are pervasive (Dunton & Fazio, 1997; Plant & Devine, 1989), few social category labels are as aversive as that of "racist" (Crandall, Eshelman, & O'Brien, 2002; Sommers & Norton, 2006) and people are remarkably facile at recruiting race-neutral justifications for potentially biased behavior (Norton, Vandello, & Darley, 2004). The justifications provided by the two caption writers for the Katrina photos illustrate the difficulty inherent in attempts to identify the influence of race. A spokesperson for the Associated Press, which published the photo caption of the Black individual, explained that the reporter "saw the person go into the shop and take the goods, and that's why he wrote 'looting' in the caption" ("Loot Loops," 2005). The photographer who wrote the caption regarding the White individuals explained, "I believed . . . that they did simply find them, and not [*sic*] 'looted' them in the definition of the word . . . they picked up bread and cokes that were floating in the water. They would have floated away anyhow" ("Loot Loops," 2005). Standing alone, either explanation is plausible. In fact, had only one of the captions been published, it is likely that no one would have questioned the motivation behind it. But the rare presence of a comparison group in this instance led to the caption controversy and enables us to at least consider the possibility that race played a role.

We suggest that the explanations for these captions, though likely honest, are just as unreliable as typical self-report accounts for social judgment. Theory suggests that encountering the Black individual outside the grocery store would have activated associations such as "thief," "immoral," or "needy," rendering the construct "looting" more accessible. Indeed, researchers have demonstrated that perceivers have a lower threshold for labeling an ambiguous behavior as criminal or threatening when an actor is Black as opposed to White (e.g., Correll, Park, Judd, & Wittenbrink, 2002; Duncan, 1976; Eberhardt, et al., 2004; Sagar & Schofield, 1980; Wittenbrink, Gist, & Hilton, 1997). By the same token, the journalist who photographed the White individuals ruminated on the circumstances leading up to

their possession of the items, and decided to give his subjects the benefit of the doubt. Would he have exerted the same effort if the individuals had been Black? Or would he have been more likely to rely instead on stereotypical and heuristic thought processes? Of course, these are empirical questions.

Moving beyond the Katrina context, there are other interesting questions regarding the language used by media to describe individuals of different races. For instance, is the qualifier "alleged" used more often to refer to White versus non-White criminal suspects? Does race covary with the use of other phrases with subtle differences in connotation such as "suspect," "detainee," and the recently ubiquitous "person of interest?" The real-world repercussions of such variations in media language use are also important considerations, as media coverage not only reflects, but also shapes public perception. For example, Dunn, Moore, and Nosek (2005) have shown that subtle variations in the words used to describe violent actions have a significant impact on individuals' attitudes toward terrorism, as well as their actual memory for events. In the case of Katrina, one might ask whether exposure to the same photo labeled with either a caption of "looting" or "finding food" could affect participants' willingness to donate to relief efforts (see Iyengar & Morin, 2006). The factors predicting differential media language use—as well the attitudinal and behavioral consequences of this language—are issues that merit closer empirical investigation.

Story Angle

Focus on violent crime. Related to how language is used to depict events is the broader question of which aspects of a story the media focuses on—or whether a story is deemed newsworthy at all in the competitive marketplace of information. With regard to Katrina, one story emphasis in the days after landfall was the outbreak of violent crime throughout New Orleans. "Looting" comprised one aspect of this coverage, but beyond property crimes, a great deal of attention was also paid to what was described as a "violent crime wave" within the city of New Orleans, particularly among evacuees at the Superdome and Convention Center (Loney, 2005). Reports described sniper fire aimed at rescuers, rampant homicide, and roving gangs of youths committing rapes against teenage victims and even babies (Pierre & Gerhart, 2005; Rosenblatt & Rainey, 2005).

One set of questions psychologists could ask concerns the deindividuation processes contributing to these acts. But another interesting aspect of these behaviors is that, in retrospect, many of them did not happen at all, or at least not to the extent that media and local officials led the public to believe. With regard to allegations reported by CNN and other outlets on September 1 that gunfire directed at helicopters halted a hospital rescue mission, "National Guard officials on the ground at the time now say that no helicopters came under attack and that evacuations were never stopped because of gunfire" (Pierre & Gerhart, 2005). That

same week, the *New Orleans Times-Picayune* reported that 40 murder victims had been found in a freezer at the Convention Center; one month later a government spokesperson reported that four bodies were found, and only one appeared to be that of a murder victim ("Auditing the early," 2005; Rosenblatt & Rainey, 2005). Finally, although sexual assaults often go underreported even under normal circumstances, only one such assault (with an adult, not child victim) has been confirmed at the Convention Center or Superdome, hardly supporting allegations of a sexual assault wave ("Auditing the early," 2005).

It is difficult to prove that the largely Black population in question led to this focus on—and overestimation of—violence, but other media analyses are consistent with the proposition that race was at least a contributing factor. Entman and Rojecki (2001) have chronicled a wide array of evidence demonstrating that media coverage of Blacks disproportionately emphasizes violent crime, and that this coverage is more likely to focus on race when a suspect is Black as opposed to White (see also Dixon & Linz, 2000). Biases are also evident in the public's memory for media representations. In one study, when participants presented with crime stories and photographs were asked to reconstruct the faces they had seen, they selected features that were more Afrocentric than those of the original suspect, particularly when the crime was violent (Oliver, Jackson, Moses, & Dangerfield, 2004).[4] Findings such as these are consistent with the more general tendency of social perceivers to fall victim to illusory correlations: overestimations of the co-occurrence of distinctive events and distinctive group memberships (Hamilton & Gifford, 1976).

Analysis, implications, and future questions. Much of the analysis above regarding race and language use also applies to story angle. Automatic associations between "Black" and "criminal" likely color the perceptions of journalists and news producers even if they do not harbor explicit prejudice. Moreover, beliefs about which stories will interest an audience may also be affected by race. For instance, the extent to which a Black suspect at-large is viewed as a greater public safety threat than a White fugitive may influence the coverage his story receives. Such portrayals can then bias public perceptions, reinforcing preexisting beliefs about race and crime (e.g., Correll et al., 2002; Oliver et al., 2004). Coverage of Katrina may have had even more immediate behavioral consequences. Stories about violent crime deterred some individuals from rescue efforts (Pierre & Gerhart,

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[4] This association between prototypical Black features and stereotypes of criminality (see Dixon & Maddox, 2005; Maddox & Gray, 2002) is yet another interesting topic that would require too much of a tangent to address presently in sufficient detail. This issue was at the center of controversy in 1994 when the cover of *Time* magazine featured a mug shot of O. J. Simpson with heightened contrast and darkened skin tone. The magazine's editorial staff explained the motivation behind the alteration as "aesthetic," although many criticized it as an attempt to portray Simpson in a more threatening light by preying upon stereotypical associations with skin tone (Sturken & Cartwright, 2000).

2005) and could have affected people from outside the region as well, rendering them less willing to make donations or more likely to minimize the hardships experienced by evacuees (for potential example, see "Barbara Bush," 2005). Media focus on crime also may have affected government officials. Several state and local governments ran criminal background checks on victims of Katrina who relocated to their jurisdiction, often as soon as these individuals stepped off a plane or bus ("Authorities hunt," 2005), a move criticized by some as unprecedented and inappropriate ("ACLU criticizes," 2005; Foley, 2005).

The unique aspect of the Katrina coverage, though, is that much of the reported information about violent crime turns out to have been false. Yes, the lack of reliable channels of communication was unprecedented in contemporary America, obstructing the media's ability to obtain and confirm information. But this was not the case at the Superdome and Convention Center, where operations were carried out by the National Guard and where reports should have been more easily confirmable.[5] Moreover, communication issues did not lead to similarly misleading coverage in storm-affected areas with largely White populations. Perhaps most tellingly, the inaccuracies regarding the behavior of the storm survivors seemed to err in the same direction, portraying these individuals more negatively, more violently, more stereotypically; there were few if any stories that depicted the predominantly Black population in a more positive or generous light than the facts warranted (Britt, 2005; Rosenblatt & Rainey, 2005). These observations suggest that demographic factors such as race contributed to the nature of the inaccurate reporting. As the editor of the *Times-Picayune* postulated, "If the dome and Convention Center had harbored large numbers of middle-class White people, it would not have been a fertile ground for this kind of rumormongering" (Britt, 2005).

Another consideration related to story angle involves whether the media deem an event worthy of news coverage in the first place. In the case of Katrina, coverage was extensive. In fact, many pundits credit the media with goading governmental agencies out of their apparent inaction in the immediate aftermath of the storm, as well as "redeeming" a news institution that had become increasingly deferential and preoccupied with melodramatic human interest stories in recent years (Carr, 2005; Kurtz, 2005). But other recent news items suggest that race can play a role in determining whether a story even receives media attention in the first place. Consider, for example, the spate of missing woman cases that have recently captured media and public attention in the United States. The disappearances of Chandra Levy, Laci Peterson, and Natalee Holloway, received extensive coverage. One characteristic these cases share is that they involve young White women. Similar disappearances of non-White women have not received comparable attention. The disappearance of Tamika Huston, a 24-year-old from South Carolina,

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[5] Indeed, much of the false information reported appears to have originated from government officials who had not taken the time to confirm the rumors (Pierre & Gerhart, 2005).

was covered by local television stations, but efforts by her family to draw wider media attention were largely ignored (Mankiewicz, 2005). LaToyia Figueroa was pregnant at the time she went missing in Philadelphia, yet her case received a fraction of the coverage devoted to the disappearance of Laci Peterson (O'Connor, 2005). Such discrepancies are not limited to missing persons stories: the March 2005 school shooting that killed 10 Native American students on a reservation outside Minneapolis received far less attention than similar school shootings with predominantly White victims, such as the 1999 murders at Columbine High School in suburban Denver (Teng, 2005).

When pressed to explain these disparities, journalists and executives often explain that they are simply covering the stories that interest the audience (O'Connor, 2005). This may be the case: Perhaps viewers feel greater empathy toward victims who are similar to them, or toward young White victims in general; perhaps they also experience more fear and threat in response to Black criminals. But regardless of whether media decisions about story angle and newsworthiness influence or merely reflect the attitudes of the public, the conclusion that race can affect these decisions is problematic. To no real surprise, journalists and media executives underestimate the potential role of race in these judgments, as illustrated by this vehement denial from the former president of NBC News: "Let me make this clear: Race is not a factor in who we cover or how we cover it" (Mankiewicz, 2005). Comparisons of the coverage of stories involving individuals of different races—crude as they may be—converge with psychological theory to suggest otherwise. But the extent to which race influences such decisions, and the circumstances under which this influence is strongest, have yet to be identified empirically.

"New Media" Reporting

Web-based first-person accounts. In the 21st century the term "media" has been expanded to refer to outlets other than newspaper, magazine, radio, and television. In the 2004 U. S. presidential campaign, for example, weblogs (or "blogs") were a popular source of news and analysis, and several candidates maintained official blogs (Rice, 2003). As such, it seems appropriate to consider the coverage of Hurricane Katrina in the "new media," including weblogs, listservs, on-line bulletin boards, and mass e-mails. Evidence of the influence of race in these media would not be surprising; these are typically products of individual writers and it is well documented that contemporary individuals exhibit subtle and explicit racial bias despite norms of egalitarianism. In fact, White supremacists and others espousing overtly racist ideologies responded to Katrina with a barrage of e-mails and postings warning that Black evacuees would start crime sprees across the country, blaming the victims for their fate, and proposing strategies for sending aid that would exclusively target White survivors ("Racists stir," 2005).

But one did not have to frequent extremist web sites to find accounts of Katrina tinged by race. In the aftermath of the storm, several mass e-mails began circulating as ostensibly first-person accounts from New Orleans and beyond. Many described survivors in an unflattering as well as stereotypical light. Consider, for example, excerpts from an account of the behavior of evacuees at a Texas rest area:

> Last Friday, my dad, who works for TxDOT, answered a call for TxDOT employees to go help with the refugees at this rest stop. These buses from New Orleans start pulling in. . . . As they get off the bus, they are greeted and shown to the restrooms—where they pee all over the walls, floors, mirrors, etc. They did not even flush the toilets. Left the restrooms in a HORRIBLE mess. . . . He and my mom said the people were HORRIBLE. Nasty, filthy mouthed, ungrateful. . . . Why the hell can't they line up themselves and help unload all these trucks and cars full of FREE stuff? Okay, let them have a day or two of rest but then put those folks to work taking care of themselves. Why the hell should any of them want to get a job when they can lay around all day in free air conditioned stadiums where they don't have to spend a dime and they have TV, entertainment and education and great food?
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> ("Rest stop," 2005)

The Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT) was unable to confirm these allegations, and the supervisor of the rest stop refuted them, particularly the alleged incidents in the restroom ("Rest stop," 2005). Again, it is not surprising that there exists an e-mail that describes the survivors of Katrina so negatively, and one such account hardly indicates a general media bias. But it is noteworthy that this account shares some characteristics exhibited by the traditional media coverage reviewed above. The full e-mail consistently refers to survivors as "refugees," at one point using quotation marks to make sarcastic reference to "evacuees." Although the focus of this e-mail is not on violent tendencies among the survivors, the depiction is consistent with stereotypes, suggesting that the individuals were dirty, ungrateful, lazy, and manipulative.

Another circulated e-mail does focus on issues of crime and violence, in addition to casting aspersions on the survivors' work ethic and general sense of morality:

> Let me tell you a few things about the wonderful group of evacuees we received here in Utah . . . the National Guard removed from their person; 43 handguns . . . 20 knives, one man had 100000 dollars in cash, 20 pounds of Marijuana, 10 pounds of Crack, 15 pounds of Methamphetamines, 10 pounds of various other controlled substances including Heroin. Upon their arrival here in Salt Lake City, two people immediately deplaned and lit up a joint. . . . It was discovered that parents were using their kids to carry loads of looted jewelry (price tag still on), and other items. . . . By the second night in the shelter, there was one attempted rape of a relief worker, sales of drugs on going and a gang had begun to rebuild. . . . This past Saturday, workforce services held a job fair. 85 of the 582 evacuees attended. 44 were hired on the spot. 24 were asked back for a second interview. Guess the others had no desire to work.
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> ("Utah evacuees," 2005)

Public safety officials and the Governor of Utah immediately and categorically denied these allegations (Dethman, 2005; "Hurricane Katrina," 2006; "Utah evacuees," 2005). It is difficult to estimate just how many similar "first-person accounts"

were written in the weeks after Katrina. But as demonstrated by the fact that a spokesman for the Department of Public Safety, as well as the Governor himself felt obliged to respond to it in public, the Utah evacuee email—as well as emails erroneously attributing a string of carjackings in other states to relocated evacuees from New Orleans—was widely distributed after the storm (Dethman, 2005; "Utah evacuees," 2005), and has continued to circulate into 2006 ("Hurricane Katrina," 2006).

Analysis, implications, and future directions. Interestingly, these emails share characteristics typical of many urban legends, including a fantastical nature and propensity to elicit emotions of fear and disgust (Heath, Bell, & Sternberg, 2001). The accounts are not content to portray the survivors of Katrina as common criminals, but rather go further, focusing on bodily function and barbaric behavior. Such outrageous claims may explain why these e-mails in particular achieved mass distribution. It is important to note, however, that even though these e-mails are less polished and eloquent than traditional media output, they are reminiscent of the exaggerated media claims of violence analyzed earlier in this article. Inaccurate mainstream reports about crime in New Orleans also included fantastical allegations, such as the claim that babies were being raped. The nature of these inaccurate accounts in traditional and new media formats suggests that future investigations might consider the possibility that urban legends and other unreliable "memes" (see Dawkins, 1976) are propagated more easily when they involve members of particular racial groups.

How to explain these biased first-person accounts? First, it is important to highlight a clear distinction between these e-mails and the reporting found in traditional forms of media, namely, that the latter format has more established ethical guidelines and a higher level of accountability. A few recent high-profile cases of journalistic fraud aside, when television, newspaper, or magazine reporters offer a first-person account, there is usually every reason to assume that the individual has been to the area in question and that they are making a reasonable effort at accurate fact-finding. No such assurances exist for personal blogs and e-mails, particularly when the identity of the author is inconsistent across versions or even anonymous. These e-mails could simply be efforts to capitalize on the Katrina disaster by spreading stereotypical depictions and rumors, as opposed to the examples reviewed above, which may very well have been cases of racial bias absent pernicious intent or even conscious awareness.

Yet another possibility is that these e-mails reflect other social motivations, such as efforts to bolster just world beliefs (Lerner, 1980). The belief that the world is an orderly, predictable place is positively associated with subjective well-being and the willingness to commit to long-term goals (for review, see Hafer & Begue, 2005). As such, an event such as Katrina poses a threat to just world beliefs, and, by association, to well-being and motivation. These conclusions help

explain why people often do not respond with "unqualified compassion" to victims of natural disasters (Skitka, 1999). One strategy for coping with the threat posed by Katrina would be to distance oneself from the victims, either by deciding that they are not "innocent" or by situating them firmly within the confines of an outgroup (Drout & Gaertner, 1994; Hafer, 2000). The excerpts above are certainly consistent with these strategies. In fact, the first e-mail ends with a clear effort to blame the victims: "I have always said New Orleans was a toilet; now everyone has proof that not only was it a toilet, but a toilet long overdue for a flush" ("Rest stop," 2005). A similar just world explanation could account for the assertion of televangelists and religiously oriented blogs that Katrina was the punishment from God for the perceived sins of legalized abortion, homosexuality, and a generally decadent lifestyle among residents of New Orleans (Grieve, 2005; "Religious conservatives," 2005).

This analysis of new forms of media raises interesting questions for the broader consideration of Katrina coverage. Presumably, the authors of the above e-mails could have attenuated the threat posed by Katrina to their own belief systems by portraying the survivors as undesirable, immoral members of the outgroup. But what of the effects of such strategies on readers of these accounts? More generally, to what extent did media exaggerations of violent crime and use of outgroup language such as "refugee" not only render the storm's survivors less sympathetic, but also assuage the anxieties and uncertainty of the viewing public? In this manner, could exposure to media coverage of a crisis such as Katrina actually predict *decreased* concern that a similar fate could befall one's own family some day? That the potential biases described throughout this article could reflect more than just race-based associations, but also efforts—conscious or not—to cope with psychological threat is a provocative proposition.

Recommendations and Conclusions

Our objective in this article has been to analyze the media coverage of Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath in order to offer more general psychological conclusions and to identify future research questions regarding race and media depictions. Whereas we cannot identify with absolute certainty the extent to which survivor demographics influenced media coverage, a review of psychological theory and findings converges with anecdotal examples to suggest a high likelihood that race played a contributing role. We would hasten to point out that the difficulty of conclusively identifying the influence of race in any given depiction or judgment is not limited to the media domain; as Norton et al. (2006) suggest, absent an appropriate comparison group or data from aggregated judgments, it is often impossible to rule out alternative race-neutral justifications. As such, we hope that researchers will consider directing future attention to more controlled investigations of the

effects of race on aspects of media coverage, not to mention consideration of the implications of these tendencies for public attitudes and behaviors.

Providing recommendations to combat these potential biases is no easy task. One of the unique strengths of media coverage in the United States has always been the freedom of the press, and far be it from us to suggest that this right should be restricted. In fact, much of what went awry in the coverage of Hurricane Katrina was first commented on and brought to public attention through the work of other reporters and journalists who took themselves and their industry to task. Nonetheless, to combat the potential racial biases—including those of an automatic and nonconscious nature—that may lie at the root of these problems, psychologists can offer some specific strategies.

Greenwald and Banaji (1995) describe three categories of strategies to curtail racial bias: blinding, affirmative action, and consciousness-raising. In the specific case of media coverage, the first category is not viable, as blinding journalists to the race of the individuals they cover is a practical impossibility. Affirmative action is a more intriguing possibility. In the media context, this might entail conscious efforts by journalists to compensate for potential biases by forcing themselves to report on an equal number of positive and negative story angles regardless of a subject's race. This would seem to be a difficult task given that not all story subjects are comparable, and a true version of "affirmative action" might include exaggerating or at least placing greater emphasis on positive angles for stories involving Black individuals—hardly strategies befitting an institution with an expressed commitment to accuracy and objectivity.

We would therefore suggest that consciousness-raising is likely the most promising tool with which to address racial bias in the media. As Greenwald and Banaji (1995) explain, when individuals motivated to be fair-minded are made aware of a potential source of bias, they are often able to avoid discrimination; making conscious the category associations that typically reside outside of awareness is one way to render those associations less influential. Of course, such a strategy is only effective to the extent that the individuals in question are motivated to avoid bias. We assume that—with the notable exception of the authors of the fabricated first-person e-mails described above—the vast majority of journalists covering Hurricane Katrina fall into this category. If this is not the case, then efforts to ameliorate racial bias in media coverage would require an entirely different course of action.

But if this assumption is valid, then perhaps the compilation and presentation of data regarding disparate media coverage of White and non-White individuals—as achieved by many researchers cited in this article (e. g., Dixon & Linz, 2000; Entman & Rojecki, 2001; Nunberg, 2005)—can serve to remind journalists of their motivations to remain accurate and impartial. Presumably, few reporters will now be able to utter the word "refugee" or type the word "looting" without giving

newfound thought to the implications of their language choice. Public dissemination of social psychological research findings regarding the nature of contemporary racial bias has the potential for similar effects on a broader societal level. It is our hope that the present article furthers, at least in some small way, these objectives. By continuing to highlight the ways in which race can color media coverage, even when the individuals involved believe that it has not, perhaps psychologists can play a role in curtailing the media biases that simultaneously reflect and shape public opinion.

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