Hurricane Katrina: African American Children’s Perceptions of Race, Class, and Government Involvement Amid a National Crisis

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The devastation associated with Hurricane Katrina raised several issues related to race, class, and the government in the United States. We examined African American children’s (a) knowledge of demographic characteristics of the victims, (b) beliefs about the role of race and class biases in the delayed relief efforts, and (c) views of the role and effectiveness of the government in response to the disaster. Overall, results indicated that older African American children were less likely to attribute the delayed relief to individual culpability, and slightly more likely to attribute it to racial discrimination, than were younger African American children. All youth believed in a strong, but nuanced, role of the government, but younger children were more likely to rate it as effective. Among those children who had discussed the disaster with a parent, children’s attributions for the delayed relief were associated with their political views.

In 2005, Hurricane Katrina sparked a large national debate about race, class, and the role of the government in the United States. As is well documented, approximately 150,000 people were stranded in New Orleans without sufficient aid for one week (Castellano, Ussery, & Gruntfest, 2006). Largely because of the

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disproportionate racial and class composition of the hurricane victims—one in three was African American and one in five lived in poverty before the disaster (U.S. Census Bureau, 2005)—many adults, including government officials and popular media figures, perceived race and class to play a role in the disaster (see *Time*, 2005a, 2005b; *Newsweek*, 2005).Poll data indicated that 73% of African American (but fewer than 30% of European American) respondents indicated that the government would have responded more rapidly if the victims had been predominantly White (see Adams, O’Brien, & Nelson, 2006; Henkel, Dovidio, & Gaertner, 2006; *Time*, 2005; *USA Today*, 2005). No work to date, however, has examined children’s and adolescents’ attitudes about the event. Thus, the current study examined African American children’s and early adolescents’ perceptions of the role of race and class in the disaster, with a particular emphasis on their attributions for the failed evacuations and views of the role and effectiveness of government in the context of a national crisis.

Understanding African American youths’ perceptions of Hurricane Katrina is important for both theoretical and applied purposes. At the theoretical level, the research contributes to our understanding of youths’ reasoning about racial and class discrimination. Most existing work on the topic of discrimination is limited to youths’ perceptions of personal experiences with racial discrimination (e.g., Fisher, Wallace, & Fenton, 2000). Little work has explored children’s perceptions of the extent to which racial or class biases permeate their broader cultural context and shape major societal institutions (e.g., government). In addition, extant studies have examined perceptions of discrimination among older children and adolescents; almost no work has examined this topic among elementary school-aged children. Thus, we viewed the study of children’s perceptions of racial and class discrimination within a national tragedy as likely to widen the scope of theoretical models that outline the consequences of race and class for development.

At the applied level, this research has the potential to inform the design of educational curricula and intervention programs aimed at increasing civic and political involvement among youth. Adolescents, particularly African Americans, often feel disengaged from the political process and believe that they make little to no difference to their communities (Lopez & Kirby, 2005). There is considerable stability in the political attitudes of early adolescents (Sears, 1975), and these attitudes, in turn, affect voting behavior (Krampen, 2000). Therefore, a better understanding of African American children’s and adolescents’ perceptions of the interface among race, class, and government may facilitate the design of interventions aimed at increasing civic and political involvement among these youth.

**Perceptions of Race and Class Discrimination**

One of the first issues to arise in the weeks following the hurricane concerned many adults’ belief that the delayed relief efforts were the result of racial and class
There is reason to believe that youth might also have perceived racial bias or discrimination regarding the response to Hurricane Katrina. For example, during the elementary school years, children become increasingly aware, at least implicitly, of the differential social status of African Americans and European Americans (Bigler, Averhart, & Liben, 2003). Furthermore, by middle school, many African American children report having experienced at least one instance of racial discrimination (Brown, 2006b; Simons et al., 2002).

Children are more likely, however, to detect interpersonal discrimination (such as that perpetrated by peers and teachers) than institutional discrimination (such as government-level discrimination; Fisher et al., 2000; Greene, Way, & Pahl, 2006; Szalacha et al., 2003). Brown and Bigler (2005) argued that institutional discrimination is more difficult to detect than interpersonal discrimination because it is typically abstract and requires more advanced perspective-taking abilities. For example, the use of racial slurs is overt and concrete, and thus easily recognized as an instance of racial bias. In contrast, understanding that those regions of the country populated largely by poor and African American residents are devalued relative to those regions populated by largely wealthy and European-American residents, and thus allotted few resources, requires several advanced cognitive abilities. For example, children must be able to take the perspective of a particular institution rather than an individual. This skill, which develops in adolescence (Selman, 1976), involves understanding that larger social systems are constructed from the opinions and perspectives of its members. Because of the cognitive complexity involved in perceiving institutional discrimination, we predicted that older children would be more likely to perceive racial discrimination to have played a role in the treatment of the victims of Hurricane Katrina than younger children.

In contrast to racial discrimination, there is virtually no research on children’s perceptions of class discrimination. Previous research indicates that adolescents’ explanations for, and evaluations of, economic inequality mirror those of adults. Both groups endorse negative stereotypes about the poor (Chafel, 1997; Skafe, 1989) and tend to attribute poverty to such personal characteristics as work ethic and effort more than to structural factors such as job availability, government supports, and discrimination (Crosby & Mistry, 2002; Flanagan, Ingram, Gallay, & Gallay, 1997; Leahy, 1983, 1990). However, because of the dearth of developmental research on perceptions of class discrimination, it is difficult to predict whether—and if so, at what age—African American children might perceive class bias or discrimination in response to Hurricane Katrina.

**Attitudes about Role and Effectiveness of Government**

A second issue to arise in the aftermath of the hurricane concerned attitudes about the effectiveness and role of the government in response to a national crisis.
In the context of Hurricane Katrina, many adults were critical of the effectiveness of government in providing aid. Most African Americans (85%) and European Americans (63%) believed President Bush could have been more effective in the relief efforts (The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, 2005). In addition, concerns were raised about the type and source of aid that should be provided to the victims, and the adequacy of the U.S. government’s attempt to provide aid. Research indicates that most adults in the United States believe in a relatively limited role of government in providing aid. For example, American adults are more supportive of policies providing in-kind benefits (e.g., food, clothing, Head Start programs) than policies providing cash benefits (e.g., welfare cash assistance) to the poor (Heclo, 1997).

There is limited research examining children’s and adolescents’ views of the role and effectiveness of government. Adolescents typically believe that government should play a larger role in their own lives and the outcome of the country than do adults (Lopez & Kirby, 2005). However, when evaluating the effectiveness of government and actual public policy issues, children and adolescents often express strong political opinions that can be internally inconsistent and based on little information (Sears & Valentino, 1997). Research suggests that national events shape attitudes about government. Important, emotionally evocative political events (such as national disasters, assassinations, and closely contested elections) have been shown to crystallize young adolescents’ political opinions, making them consistent, reliable, and stable across the life-span (Sears, 2001; Sears & Valentino, 1997).

Additional research has shown a strong relationship between young adults’ responses to national crises, such as September 11, 2001, and their political attitudes (Sherrod, Quiñones, & Davila, 2004). Thus, it appears that attitudes about political issues and leaders do not develop linearly across development, but are sharply formed when political events occur—whether it is elections or national disasters—because of the intense political socialization surrounding the coverage of the events (Sears & Valentino, 1997). Thus, we predicted that youth would believe that the government should play a strong role in response to the disaster, and that youth who had been socialized by the media and their parents about Hurricane Katrina would show internally consistent attitudes. For example, we predicted that socialized youth who perceived institutional discrimination on the basis of class or race would rate the government as less effective than youth who did not perceive discrimination.

Current Study

An economically diverse sample of African American children between the ages of 6 and 14 years was asked about their (a) perceptions of the people affected by the disaster, (b) attributions for the failed evacuation and delayed relief (specifically, whether logistical problems, individual victims, or discrimination were to
blame for the disaster), (c) attitudes about aid (specifically, views about both the type and source of assistance provided to the families affected by the hurricane), and (d) attitudes about the effectiveness of the President. Analyses focused on developmental differences in such perceptions and attitudes.

Method

Participants

Participants consisted of 77 African American children in the second ($n = 17$), fourth ($n = 23$), sixth ($n = 23$), and eighth ($n = 14$) grades attending schools in Los Angeles, CA. Slightly more than half of the sample was girls (65%). The sample was economically diverse. Based on parent-reported household income for 51 of the 77 participants, 28% reported earnings less than $25,000, 29% between $25,001–$50,000, 18% between $50,001–$75,000, and 26% above $75,001. Only children who had signed parental consent, who themselves gave assent, and who indicated they had seen pictures of the disaster, participated.

Procedure

Children in second and fourth grade were interviewed individually by an experimenter in a quiet room in the school building. Children in sixth and eighth grade completed the questionnaire in small groups in an unoccupied classroom. An experimenter read aloud the questions as the older children marked their answers. Children’s parents also completed a brief questionnaire ($n = 51$). Among other items, parents were asked about how much exposure children had to the events surrounding Hurricane Katrina. Parents could respond on a scale ranging from 10 (a lot) to 1 (none/almost none). The mean score was 6.07 ($SD = 2.19$) and did not differ across children’s grade. Parents were also asked if they discussed the disaster with their children (yes or no) and whether their children expressed concerns about the disaster (yes or no).

Measures

Perceptions of racial and economic composition of hurricane victims. To assess children’s perceptions of the racial and economic composition of the Hurricane Katrina victims, participants were asked who was caught in the flooding in New Orleans. Specifically, children indicated whether the people caught in the flooding were “only Black people,” “mostly Black people,” “some Black people and some White people,” “mostly White people,” or “only White people.” Children were also asked to indicate whether the people caught in the New Orleans flooding were “only poor people,” “mostly poor people,” “some poor people and some rich people,” “mostly rich people,” or “only rich people.” To make questions about race
and socioeconomic status less central, these questions were embedded within a series of questions about the age, gender, and health status of the residents of New Orleans.

**Attributions for delayed relief efforts.** To assess children’s attributions for the disaster, participants were asked why people did not evacuate and thus were caught in the flooding in New Orleans. Children rated their agreement with a series of statements focused on four categories of attributions: (a) logistical problems, (b) individual culpability, (c) class discrimination, and (d) race discrimination. The specific items that tapped these attributions appear in Table 1. Responses ranged from 1 (disagree a lot) to 4 (agree a lot).

Next, children were asked why it took so long to rescue and help the people caught in the flooding. Participants again rated, using the same 4-point scale, their agreement with a series of statements focused on (a) logistical problems, (b) individual culpability, (c) class discrimination, and (d) race discrimination.

**Attitudes about role of government.** Next, children’s attitudes about the types of aid that should be offered, and which entities should be responsible for providing aid, were assessed. Participants rated the value of providing flooding victims with (a) money, (b) clothing, (c) housing, (d) jobs, and (e) food. Participants rated whether each type of aid would help the families a lot, a little, or not at all. For each type of aid, adolescents rated their agreement with statements that aid should be provided by (a) the government, (b) communities and churches, and (c) relatives and friends. For example, in reference to getting more money, participants rated their agreement with the statement, “The government should give families money to help them get back to normal.” The statement was repeated for communities/churches and friends. Participants rated their agreement with each statement, with responses ranging from 1 (disagree a lot) to 4 (agree a lot).

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**Table 1.** Type of Attributions for Delayed Relief Efforts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attribution type</th>
<th>Failure to evacuate</th>
<th>Delay in providing aid</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Logistics</strong></td>
<td>People had no other place to go.</td>
<td>It was impossible to rescue so many people at once.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>There were so many people living in the city that it was impossible to get them all out.</td>
<td>The people lived in areas that were hard for rescuers to reach.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Individual Culpability</strong></td>
<td>People didn’t follow directions or didn’t listen to police.</td>
<td>People were violent and mean to rescuers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Class Discrimination</strong></td>
<td>Because the people were mostly poor, no one tried very hard to help them leave the city.</td>
<td>Because the people were mostly poor, no one tried hard to rescue them quickly.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Race Discrimination</strong></td>
<td>Because the people were mostly Black, no one tried very hard to help them leave the city.</td>
<td>Because the people were mostly Black, no one tried hard to rescue them quickly.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Evaluations of effectiveness of government. Finally, children were asked about their attitudes about the effectiveness of the President. They were first asked to name the President of the United States. They were then asked, “How good a job do you think he does as President?” Participants could respond 1 (terrible), 2 (not good), 3 (so-so), 4 (pretty good), or 5 (very good).

Results

Overview

The current study was motivated by two primary questions. First, we were interested in whether children perceived race and class discrimination by the government in response to Hurricane Katrina. To examine this question, we first examined children’s perceptions of the race and class of the hurricane victims. Next, we used repeated measures analyses of variance to test for possible age differences in children’s attributions for the delayed relief efforts (i.e., attributions to logistical problems, individual culpability, class discrimination, and race discrimination). Second, we were interested in children’s view of the role and effectiveness of the government in response to the disaster. To do so, we first used repeated measures analyses of variance to examine age differences in children’s views of appropriate sources of aid. We then used correlational analyses to examine whether children’s perceptions of the victims, attributions about the disaster, and attitudes about aid were related to their evaluation of the effectiveness of President Bush, and whether these relationships were moderated by the amount of socialization children had received about the disaster. All post hoc comparisons among means were conducted using the Bonferonni post hoc test.

Perceptions of Racial and Economic Composition of Victims

Race. Overall, 50% of the children believed that the victims of the flooding were “some White people and some Black people,” and 41.7% of the children believed that the victims of the flooding were “mostly Black people.” Less than 5% of the children believed that the victims of the flooding were “mostly White people” and less than 3% believed the victims were “only Black people” or “only White people.” Chi-square tests of independence were used to test whether the percentage of children who viewed the victims as “mostly Black people” (yes vs. no) and the percentage of children who viewed the victims as “some Black people and some White people” (yes vs. no) differed across age. Results indicated no significant differences in responding. Too few participants endorsed the remaining options to test for age effects.
**Class.** Similar analyses were used to examine children’s responses to the question concerning the socioeconomic status of New Orleans flooding victims. Overall, 58.4% of children believed that the victims of the flooding were “some poor people and some rich people” and 37.5% believed that the victims of the flooding were “mostly poor people.” Less than 3% of children believed flooding victims were “mostly rich people” or “only rich people.” No child believed the victims were “only poor people.” Chi-square tests of independence were used to test whether the percentage of children who believed the victims to be “mostly poor people” (yes vs. no) and the percentage of children who believed the victims to be “some poor people and some rich people” (yes vs. no) differed across age. Results indicated no significant differences in responding. Too few participants endorsed the remaining options (i.e. “mostly rich people” and “only rich people”) to test for age effects.

To examine whether children perceived race and class as overlapping, we recorded children’s joint responses concerning the racial and economic composition of Hurricane Katrina victims. Results appear in Table 2. Slightly more than one-third of African American children (36%) perceived the victims as neither predominantly African American nor predominantly poor. A relatively small number of children (18%) perceived the individuals caught in the flooding to be predominantly poor African Americans.

**Attributions for Delayed Evacuation and Relief Efforts**

Children made attributions for two outcomes: the failure to evacuate individuals and the failure to provide relief to victims. Preliminary analyses revealed that children’s ratings of the possible reasons for these two outcomes were significantly correlated ($r$s ranged from .35 to .78). Thus, ratings for each attribution type (i.e., logistical problems, individual culpability, class discrimination, and race discrimination) were averaged across the two questions to form composite scores.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race of flooding victims</th>
<th>Economic status of flooding victims</th>
<th>Only poor</th>
<th>Mostly poor</th>
<th>Some poor, some rich</th>
<th>Mostly rich</th>
<th>Only rich</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Only Black</td>
<td></td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mostly Black</td>
<td></td>
<td>0</td>
<td>15.3</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some Black, some White</td>
<td></td>
<td>0</td>
<td>19.4</td>
<td>29.2</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mostly White</td>
<td></td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Only White</td>
<td></td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Numbers are the percentage of children who gave each type of response.
Table 3. Attributions for Delayed Relief Across Participants’ Grade Level

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade Level</th>
<th>Attribution type</th>
<th>Logistical problems M (SD)</th>
<th>Individual culpability M (SD)</th>
<th>Class discrimination M (SD)</th>
<th>Race discrimination M (SD)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2nd</td>
<td></td>
<td>3.12 (.80)a</td>
<td>2.85 (.79)a</td>
<td>2.35 (1.03)a</td>
<td>2.43 (1.04)a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4th</td>
<td></td>
<td>3.04 (.64)a</td>
<td>2.47 (.95)ab</td>
<td>2.24 (1.02)b</td>
<td>2.33 (.94)b</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6th</td>
<td></td>
<td>2.94 (.53)a</td>
<td>2.41 (.71)b</td>
<td>2.23 (.86)b</td>
<td>2.20 (.80)b</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8th</td>
<td></td>
<td>2.76 (.77)a</td>
<td>1.78 (.54)b</td>
<td>2.79 (1.12)a</td>
<td>3.00 (1.22)a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Combined</td>
<td></td>
<td>2.97 (.67)a</td>
<td>2.38 (.84)b</td>
<td>2.36 (.99)b</td>
<td>2.44 (.99)b</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note:** Different letter superscripts indicate significant mean differences across attribution types (read horizontally).

To examine children’s attributions for the outcomes by grade level, a 4 (type of attribution: logistical, individual culpability, class discrimination, race discrimination) × 4 (grade: 2, 4, 6, 8) mixed ANOVA was first conducted, with the first variable treated as a within-subjects variable. Means are presented in Table 3. Results indicated a significant main effect of attribution type, $F(3, 207) = 9.01, p < .001, \eta^2 = .12$. Post hoc tests revealed that, across ages, children more strongly attributed the delayed evacuation and relief efforts to logistical problems than to class discrimination, race discrimination, or individual culpability (which did not differ from each other).

Subsumed by the main effect was a significant interaction between attribution type and grade level, $F(9, 207) = 3.02, p < .01, \eta^2 = .12$. Data are depicted in Figure 1. Post hoc tests indicated that, among second graders, there were no
differences across attributions. That is, second graders endorsed all attributions equally strongly. Among both fourth and sixth graders, children attributed the delayed relief efforts to logistical problems more than the other attributions (which did not differ from each other). Among eighth graders, however, a different pattern emerged; eighth graders were less likely to make an attribution to individual culpability than any of the other attributions (which did not differ from each other).

We also examined children’s attributions for the delayed relief as a function of their perceptions of the characteristics of the victims. Small cell sizes prevented us from analyzing both grade level and perceptions in one ANOVA, thus a 4 (type of attribution: logistical, individual culpability, class discrimination, race discrimination) × 4 (perceptions of victims: predominantly Black but not poor, predominantly poor but not Black, predominantly poor and Black, neither poor nor Black) mixed ANOVA was conducted. Results indicated a significant interaction between attribution type and perceptions of victims, $F(9, 201) = 3.96, p < .05, \eta^2 = .07$. Post hoc tests indicated significant differences only for attributions to class discrimination. Those children who perceived the victims to be primarily poor ($M = 2.79, SD = .83$) and primarily Black ($M = 2.64, SD = 1.14$) attributed the delayed relief efforts more strongly to class discrimination than those children who perceived the victims to be neither poor nor Black ($M = 1.90, SD = .81$). Children who perceived the victims to be both poor and Black did not differ from any other group ($M = 2.23, SD = .88$).

**Attitudes about Role of Government**

To examine children’s attitudes about the type of aid that would be most helpful to families and the entity that should provide the aid, a 5 (type: money, clothes, houses, jobs, or food) × 3 (source: government, communicates/churches, or families) × 3 (grade: 4, 6, 8) mixed ANOVA was conducted, with the first two variables treated as within-subjects variables. Because of the length of the questionnaire, second graders were not asked questions about aid and thus are omitted from this analysis. Results indicated a significant main effect of source of aid, $F(2, 96) = 10.22, p < .001, \eta^2 = .18$. Post hoc tests revealed that children, regardless of age, believed the government should provide more aid than communities/churches and families. Results also indicated a significant main effect of type of aid, $F(4, 192) = 7.53, p < .001, \eta^2 = .14$. Post hoc tests revealed that children believed housing would be less helpful than money and food in helping families recover. Means are presented in Table 4. These main effects were subsumed, however, by a significant interaction between type and source of aid, $F(8, 384) = 9.53, p < .001, \eta^2 = .17$. Children believed the government should be more responsible for providing money, housing, and jobs (but not clothing and food) than communities/churches and families.
### Table 4. Attitudes about Which Types of Aid Would be Most Helpful to Families and Which Entities Should Provide the Aid

| Types of Aid | Sources of aid |   |   |   |
|--------------|----------------|------------------|
|              | Government M (SD) | Community M (SD) | Family M (SD) | Combined M (SD) |
| Money        | 3.72(.53)a       | 3.39(.72)b       | 3.41(.66)b    | 3.52 (.44)     |
| Jobs         | 3.60(.60)a       | 3.31(.67)b       | 3.31(.76)b    | 3.42 (.53)     |
| Houses       | 3.74(.56)a       | 2.86(.87)b       | 3.03(.91)b    | 3.23 (.60)     |
| Clothes      | 3.39(.72)a       | 3.45(.61)a       | 3.54(.57)a    | 3.46 (.43)     |
| Food         | 3.56(.70)a       | 3.58(.57)a       | 3.70(.50)a    | 3.62 (.47)     |
| Combined     | 3.61(.43)a       | 3.33(.47)b       | 3.41(.44)b    | 3.45(.36)      |

Note: Different letter superscripts indicate significant mean differences across sources of aid (read horizontally).

A second ANOVA was conducted to examine children’s attitudes about types and sources of aid based on their perceptions of who was most affected by the hurricane. There were no significant interactions involving perceptions of victims.

**Evaluations of Effectiveness of Government**

Correlations were computed to examine relations among children’s (a) grade level, (b) perceptions of who was most affected by the disaster (whether primarily poor and/or Black), (c) attributions for the disaster, (d) belief in the helpfulness of aid, and (e) ratings of President Bush. Because the crystallization of children’s political attitudes is facilitated by parental and media socialization (Sears & Valentino, 1997), separate correlations were examined for children with no socialization to Hurricane Katrina and children with some socialization. Specifically, children whose parents indicated that they had watched no media coverage of the disaster, who reported no discussions with their child, and who indicated that their child expressed no concerns about the disaster were considered to have no socialization (n = 15). Children whose parents indicated at least some media exposure, who reported that they had discussed the disaster with their child, or who indicated that their child had expressed concerns about the disaster were categorized as having at least some socialization (n = 36).

Among children with no socialization about the disaster, children’s ratings of the effectiveness of President Bush were correlated only with grade level (r = −.70, p < .01), with younger children rating President Bush more positively than older children. Among children with some socialization about the disaster, children’s ratings of the effectiveness of President Bush were correlated with grade level (r = −.57, p < .01), attributions to class discrimination (r = −.44, p < .01), and belief in the utility of family-based aid (r = .38, p < .05).
Discussion

The primary purpose of this study was to examine African American children’s views of the role of race, class, and the government in the Hurricane Katrina disaster. Of particular interest were possible developmental differences in African American children’s perception of institutional discrimination on the basis of race and class. We began by assessing children’s beliefs about the race and class of the victims, in part because such information is likely to play a role in the perception of discrimination. We expected that children would, for example, be unlikely to claim that racial discrimination played a role in the disaster if the victims were perceived to include equal numbers of African Americans and European Americans. Results indicated that half of the children did, indeed, perceive the victims to include equal numbers of Whites and Blacks. About 40% of the children perceived the victims to be “mostly Black people.” Results were similar for perception of the victims’ class. Slightly more than half of the children perceived the victims to include approximately equal numbers of poor and rich people. Just under 40% of the children perceived the victims to be “mostly poor people.” These data are important in that they indicate that children and adolescents, across all ages, attended to victims’ race and class. Furthermore, the data suggest that pursuing a “color blind” (and class blind) strategy when discussing situations such as the Hurricane Katrina disaster with youth is unnecessary and even unwise. Anecdotal evidence indicates that most media and educational materials aimed at addressing the topic of Hurricane Katrina with children adopted such an approach, avoiding discussion of the race of the victims (see American Red Cross, 2005). Such strategies are potentially damaging in that they leave children to construct hypotheses about causal links among race, class, and victimization without adult input. These hypotheses may reflect children’s social stereotypes or beliefs about discrimination. Thus, children are likely to benefit when adults explicitly discuss with them the role that race and class play within national events such as Hurricane Katrina.

Our central question of interest concerned children’s explicit attributions for the delayed relief efforts following the Katrina disaster. Prior work has suggested that children and adolescents are knowledgeable about personal discrimination on the basis of race and class (Brown & Bigler, 2005; Brown, 2006a; Fisher et al., 2000; Simons et al., 2002); however, no work had yet examined youths’ perceptions of institutional discrimination in an actual event. Results indicated that youths’ age and perceptions of the race and class of the victims moderated their attributions for the disaster. Specifically, the youngest children (second graders) did not differentiate between the different types of attributions. They rated all possible attributions as equally likely. Between the two middle age groups of children (fourth and sixth graders), logistical problems were perceived to be a more accurate attribution for the delayed relief than racial discrimination, class discrimination, or individual culpability. In other words, neither race or class bias,
nor individuals, were blamed for the disaster. As can be seen in Figure 1, fourth and sixth graders actually disagreed with attributions to race and class discrimination. The oldest group of children (eighth graders), in contrast, strongly disagreed with the attribution of individual culpability. Eighth graders were also slightly more likely to attribute the delayed relief to race discrimination compared to the other attributions. They were the only age group to endorse discrimination as a possible attribution.

The finding that the oldest participants were least likely to hold individuals culpable for their circumstances is consistent with research on racial attitudes, which finds that older African American children are more likely than younger African American children to show positive in-group attitudes (Spencer & Markstrom-Adams, 1990). That is, older children were less likely than younger children to endorse the racially stereotypic view that African Americans caught in the flooding were stubborn or violent and thus individually culpable. Further, these older African American children may have been concerned about the confirmation of negative stereotypes about African Americans, and thus been particularly inclined to disagree with statements that blamed the victims of the disaster.

The trend for older children to perceive race discrimination more than younger children is consistent with work indicating that early adolescents are more likely to recognize institutional discrimination than younger children (Brown & Bigler, 2005; Fisher et al., 2000; Greene et al., 2006; Szalacha et al., 2003). The oldest participants in this sample seem to endorse race discrimination only slightly less frequently than adults. In adult surveys, approximately three-fourths of African Americans believe racial discrimination was a factor in the government’s response (Adams, et al., 2006; Time, 2005; USA Today, 2005); in comparison, 64% of the participating eighth graders agreed at least somewhat with that attribution. It is unclear how our participants’ perceptions of race discrimination might have differed from actual evacuees’ perceptions. Research frequently finds that individuals are more likely to perceive others as the target of discrimination than themselves (cf. personal/group discrimination discrepancy; Crosby, 1984; Major, Quinton, McCoy, & Schmader, 2000; Moghaddam, Stolkin, & Hutcheson, 1997), so it is likely, albeit speculative, that our sample of non-evacuees were more likely to perceive race discrimination than actual evacuees.

Youths’ perceptions of the race and class of the victims also moderated their attributions for the disaster. Specifically, if children perceived the victims to be either primarily poor or primarily Black, they perceived more class discrimination than if they perceived the victims to be neither primarily poor nor Black. This finding suggests that children understand that lower status social groups (in this case, poor people or African Americans) are more likely to be targets of discrimination than those in higher status social groups. Interestingly, although the reason is unclear, children’s perceptions of the victims did not moderate their views of the role of racial discrimination in the disaster.
The data on children’s attributions for the delayed relief suggest that it may be useful for adults to explicitly address race and class discrimination with youth. It is clear that, by the middle-school years, some African American children have begun to endorse the notion that individuals’ race may affect their treatment by societal institutions. Consistent with this finding, Hughes et al. (2006) reported that most African American children are aware that the presidents of the United States have all been European American, and a substantial percentage of these children attribute this fact to racial discrimination. If unaddressed, such perceptions are likely to undermine youth’s interest and participation in civic activities. In sum, it appears as if many adults (perhaps especially White adults) incorrectly believe that children are too naive to detect racial and class biases, and thus fail to discuss these topics with them. Although additional research on the topic is needed, we believe that explicit discussion of the role of class and race in shaping governments’ policies and actions is likely to benefit children from all racial and ethnic backgrounds.

The current study also examined children’s attitudes about the role and effectiveness of the government in response to the disaster. Overall, children reported that the government should play an important, but specific, role in aiding victims of the hurricane, regardless of the race and class of the victims. Specifically, participants stated that government aid was most helpful in terms of money, houses, and jobs for families. The provision of clothing was viewed as the responsibility of family and community members. This indicates that, by fourth grade, children are beginning to form beliefs about the government’s responsibility in providing for its citizens in a refined and contrastive manner. Although little prior work has investigated children’s perceptions of government responsibility in relation to a natural disaster, these findings are consistent with prior work on children’s nuanced notions of government responsibility (CivEd; Baldi, Skidmore, Greenberg, & Hahn, 2001).

These results suggest that children and early adolescents are optimistic about the role of government in improving society. This finding is consistent with earlier work that indicates that adolescents believe government should play a larger role in their own lives and the outcome of the country than adults (Lopez & Kirby, 2005). Future research should examine the reasons for individuals’ increasing pessimism about the impact of government with age, and whether this reflects greater knowledge about government limitations (e.g., bureaucracy), greater knowledge about institutional discrimination, or greater pessimism in general.

Finally, this study assessed children’s attitudes about the effectiveness of government leaders in the context of a national crisis. Consistent with previous research on political socialization (e.g., Sears, 2001), children with at least some socialization about Hurricane Katrina had internally consistent political attitudes. Specifically, children who experienced some socialization surrounding the hurricane (via television, newspaper, etc.) endorsed more negative views of President
Bush when they perceived class discrimination to have occurred and viewed the government (rather than relatives) as responsible for providing aid. This finding is consistent with reports of political attitudes among adults, in which individuals who think the government should do more to help the poor are more likely to identify as Democrats than Republican (The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, 2003). Among children with no socialization, children’s political attitudes were unrelated to their views of the causes of the disaster and relief efforts. Future research should examine more closely the process and impact of socialization surrounding race-related events among racially diverse youth, including the possible impact of such events on later voting behavior.

The death and devastation surrounding Hurricane Katrina focused national attention on issues of race and class in a way that is unprecedented in recent history. The disaster afforded a rare opportunity, therefore, to examine children’s and adolescents’ views of race and class bias at a societal level. Nonetheless, this study is not without important shortcomings. The sample size is modest, which limits its power to uncover differences and its generalizability. This concession was made, however, so that all data could be collected within three months of the disaster, ensuring that children as young as seven would remember the event.

Finally, there are always additional research questions that could be asked. Some (but not all) research has shown that perceptions of racial discrimination are associated with increased levels of racial mistrust, problem behaviors, and anger and depressive symptoms (Albertini, 2004; Bowman & Howard, 1985; DuBois, Burk-Braxton, Swenson, Tevendale, & Hardesty, 2002; Fisher et al., 2000; Wong, Eccles, & Sameroff, 2003). Future research should examine whether children’s attribution for victimization in cases such as Hurricane Katrina also affect mental health and behavioral outcomes. Future research might also address whether individual differences in children’s intergroup attitudes and identity salience affect perceptions of racial and class discrimination and, in turn, their coping responses and mental health outcomes.

References


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