

Study shows people's racial biases can skew perceptions of how much help victims need

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When assessing the amount of help someone needs, people's perceptions can be skewed by their racial biases, according to a Kansas State University study.

Donald Saucier, K-State associate professor of psychology, and psychology graduate students Sara Smith, Topeka, and Jessica McManus, Maineville, Ohio, surveyed undergraduate students a year after Hurricane Katrina to examine their perceptions of the hurricane victims and the helping response.

The researchers created a questionnaire that evaluated the participants' perceptions of Hurricane Katrina victims. The questionnaire evaluated whom the participants perceived to be the victims based on measures like [gender](#), race and [socioeconomic status](#). The results showed that participants generally thought people impacted by Hurricane Katrina were black and lower class.

"What we wanted to do was see how perceptions of victims of Hurricane Katrina would interact with things like racism," Saucier said. "We wanted to look at how much the participants felt that the victims may have been to blame for their own situation in Katrina."

The researchers measured differences in the participants, including their levels of conservatism, [empathy](#) and racism. The findings showed that when recalling victims of Hurricane Katrina, participants who were less racist thought the victims did not receive adequate help from the

government. Participants who were more racist thought the victims received adequate government assistance and were at fault for their situation. The survey also asked questions that measured whether the participants thought the victims had enough time to evacuate and whether they had enough resources to get out before the hurricane hit.

"We asked the participants to make personality attributions about individuals, such as whether they thought the victims were lazy, stupid, sinful or unlucky," Saucier said. "If they said they were lazy, stupid or sinful, they were putting more blame on the victims for the situation. If they said they were unlucky, they took away the blame."

The results suggest that perceptions of the victims and the Hurricane Katrina situation depended on the participants' individual differences, including their levels of racism. Negative perceptions and placing blame on the victims were generally associated with the participants' perceptions that the situation was less of an emergency and that the victims needed less help.

Saucier said although the findings can't fix what happened to the victims, the study helps show how people interpret the situation. He said when something negative happens, people often evaluate the situation and see whether they can fix it, and sometimes they avoid the situation by blaming the victim.

The researchers study the effects of group membership, and groups can be categorized in various ways, including by gender, [race](#) and socioeconomic status. Studies show there are specific factors that cause someone to help a member of their own group more than others. In helping situations, discrimination is often expressed by not giving help to those of a different group than the helper, Saucier said.

"Rather than doing something bad, the person who chooses not to help

the out-group member fails to do something good," Saucier said. "I think this illustrates the complexity of how prejudice is expressed in contemporary society despite the social norms that usually serve to suppress the expression of prejudice."

Saucier said discrimination is often expressed only when other factors are present that would justify the action and rationalize it as something other than an expression of prejudice. Factors that contribute to the justification of not helping someone include the time it would take to help; the risk, effort, difficulty and financial cost involved; the distance between the potential helper and the person needing help; the level of emergency and the ambiguity of the helping situation.

The researchers said the Hurricane Katrina situation had several elements that studies show trigger acts of discrimination, such as a high cost of help, a high level of emergency and a large amount of time and effort required to help. The researchers are exploring other helping situations and how other group memberships affect the helping response.

"We want to examine how the perception of someone that you're going to be helping is going to affect your perception of how much help they need and how much help you'll want to give," Saucier said.

Though it's unlikely that researchers can fix the beliefs and attitudes that lead to discrimination, studies are being done to try to change the behavior that is expressed when related to discrimination, Saucier said.

The researchers' findings on Hurricane Katrina victims are included in a chapter about discrimination against out-group members in helping situations in "The Psychology of Prosocial Behavior: Group processes, intergroup relations and helping," published in September 2009.

Provided by Kansas State University

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