

A statement from the Association of Black Psychologists on Hurricane Katrina

This message is a compilation of thoughts being shared between the members of the ABPsi. Almost immediately after Hurricane Katrina struck the Gulf coast, communication began to take place between our members regarding the experiences of grief and dismay being experienced in response to the losses and hardships being imposed by nature on the people of Alabama, Louisiana, and Mississippi. Their lives were being severely disrupted by this natural disaster. It was particularly disheartening to be confronted with the images on our television screens of the disproportionate number of African Americans who were unable to evacuate their communities. As the days wore on it became apparent that these African decent people in New Orleans and the Gulf area were essentially experiencing a modern day Maafa, an event of catastrophic death and destruction beyond human comprehension. The emotional agony expressed by the generally stoic news reporters was a testament to the magnitude of the trauma unfolding in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. The disproportionate degree to which our people were having to bear the brunt of the suffering and loss is clearly attributable to the economic and social stratification that exists within this society at large. It was made undeniably evident in New Orleans. This disparity exists because of our people's economic and social oppression under a system where both societal and governmental manifestations of white supremacy continue to play out. The insidious effects of such exclusion from access to society's resources and ongoing stigmatization was evidenced by the rapid disintegration and loss of hope by these people after two days of inadequate response or at times no response from the government. Some of the press coverage was especially distasteful and shameful, even if not surprising.

What happens to a people who have been dispossessed, despised, and disinherited when tragedy occurs? The answer is that they are seen as dispensable and can thus be destroyed and disposed of. The destruction of a people is preceded by the defamation of one's character. This is exactly what

has happened to thousands of African Americans living or who lived in New Orleans, Louisiana from Monday, August 29, 2005 until the present. A city known for its revelry and festive atmosphere was devastated by Hurricane Katrina. The amazing aspect about this hurricane is that it started out in a manner that almost went unnoticed by meteorologists and other weather analysts. Although the devastation that it caused clearly has gained the attention of the world, like the beginnings of the storm the aid that has been rendered to the survivors has been relatively unnoticed by them. What the hurricane survivors have noticed is benign neglect. This happened in large part because the surviving Black population that had to remain in New Orleans has suffered from the defamation of character. While aid and rescue has been slow to fly towards the survivors, the pejorative euphemisms regarding the African American survivors of Hurricane Katrina have flown freely.

A seventeen-year-old boy was able to start a New Orleans Parish School Bus and safely drive people (40- 50) from New Orleans, Louisiana to the Astrodome in Houston, Texas was called a thief. The bus was called a "renegade bus" and the hurricane survivors on the bus were denied access to the Astrodome because they did not come directly from the New Orleans Superdome on a designated bus and they had arrived sooner than the designated chartered busses. The survivors were given water and later allowed to enter. Some report the seventeen-year-old bus driver was arrested when he was returning to go back the New Orleans to rescue others. If he had been White he would have been called a hero but he was not White, he was Black. Thus he was called a renegade. When the displaced residents of New Orleans finally arrived at the Houston Astrodome they were called refugees. A refugee is defined as a person who flees to a foreign country or power to escape danger or power. These people were simply evacuees from a flooded city and the bus driver was resourceful.

In a similar story of survival, people were securing survival items for themselves and their families. When the news reported that the people were White, the caption read "two residents wade through chest-deep water finding bread and soda from a local grocery store." When a reporter for the As-

sociated Press saw Blacks doing the same thing, the story read, "A young man walks through chest-deep water after looting a grocery store." The difference in the perception of these two situations was in the perspective of the reporters. The perception is largely guided by the contemporary thought of society. Blacks are portrayed as negative within American society therefore their behaviors were judged accordingly.

The world saw thousands of African Americans sitting at the Superdome waiting for some assistance for more than three days. The scene was akin to events of Haiti or Kosovo or any war torn country. Desperation could be seen on the faces of so many people. This is a very shocking reality when Americans reported assisting Asian Tsunami victims within 48 hours. While time elapsed, the Katrina survivors were said to have resorted to total anarchy. They had reportedly begun to shoot at the "law" officials and other forms of rescue units. They had also been reported to have had engaged in raping and killing children. Thus they have been called rapists. There was more effort placed on restoring order via the military troops (Martial Law) than on getting supplies to people and rescuing stranded individuals. People with adequate resources are more likely to be cooperative than those suffering for the basic necessities of life. An eye-witness reporter suggested people shot guns at helicopters that were passing over them going to mostly White, Kenner and Metairie, LA (Metairie, LA is home to a nationally known Ku Klux Klan's member David Duke) and rescuing people there rather than saving those in the severely flooded areas of New Orleans. They said the shots were fired because the Blacks were being unnoticed again and had become upset about this. It was also reported that all of the patients in the mostly White Tulane Hospital had been completely evacuated, while the mostly Black patients of Charity Hospital were being transported out slowly. Was this act of benign neglect? Many of the African American citizens of New Orleans saw this as such and became even more frustrated at the blatant racism.

The perpetrators of such "racist" acts do so out of their own spiritual bankruptcy and culturally hard wiring to be "anti other." Their language consequently reflects their internal set. Looters? Renegades? Refugees? Rapists?

All of these are terms that are designed to dehumanize a people and thus justify their ill treatment. On a psychological level we see where people who have been denied access to the goodness of life have been relegated to be the scum of the earth. Who were these people left behind in New Orleans? Why were they there following the call for a mandatory evacuation? These people were mostly working class Blacks who either could not afford to leave or did not have adequate transportation to leave. These were the people that made the city pop although they got very little recognition for their contributions. These people were the ones that had been passed over long before Hurricane Katrina relief helicopters passed them over. The distinction between the "haves" and the "have nots" was ever present to one who visited "The Big Easy". Classism and racism is still the order of the day in New Orleans. The ones who we have seen on television are mostly the heartbeat of the city. Just as our heartbeat, which is vital to our existence, is often unnoticed to us in our daily actions, these people had gone unnoticed. We often notice our heartbeat during times of excitation or stress, just as we are noticing the dispossessed of the "Crescent City". The media assault on these vital people has caused an angina pectoris (i.e. a chest pain, which occurs because the muscle tissue of the heart must continue its activity without a sufficient supply of oxygen) to America. The world has seen how America treats its despised citizens. In an effort to justify the ill treatment of African Americans in this situation defamation of character is being carried out. The psychological damage that results from the defamation of character is long lasting and is slow to be removed.

The Association of Black Psychologists denounces the utilization of the usage of the term refugees for domestic citizens who have been displaced from their homes due to an act of God.

- We further denounce the utilization of the word looters, in a discriminatory manner, for those individual seeking the secure some of the necessities of life.
- We further denounce the utilization of the term renegade for those who have applied their genius to engage in an act of heroism in time of need.

- We further denounce the application of the term rapist to a large portion of African Americans who are honorable and respectful. The utilization of such terms is psychologically damaging and also delays the hurricane survivors from receiving the assistance that they need because people are less likely to help people that hurting them.
- We advance that more appropriate terminology (e.g. hurricane survivors, evacuees, displaced citizens) be used to ensure that the adequate assistance is rendered to displaced people of the Gulf coast.
- We vow to render the culturally appropriate assistance to these evacuees wherever they may be found. This assistance will be in line with the essence of a people who have experienced years of benign neglect.
- We further vow to assist the survivors of Hurricane Katrina with career counseling and job readiness training.
- We seek to ensure that the children receive an appropriate education in an environment that is understanding of their unique situation of being displaced.
- We seek to inspire the inherent value and worth of these estranged children by acknowledging their strengths of resilience and resourcefulness.
- We seek to assist the families with securing adequate housing, healthy food and clean clothes, employment, and childcare and charge our membership to facilitate such acquisition by opening their homes to displaced evacuees in the spirit of African kinship.
- We recognize that this effort to enhance the well being of our people is a long-term undertaking that involves working in conjunction with the existing crisis response teams that are already in operation to achieve immediate results. This work must be followed up with collaborative engagement with many existing agencies and service networks to address

the long-term needs made so evident by this disaster. We are committed also to utilizing our expertise to create culturally congruent programs where it becomes apparent that none currently exist.

The Association of Black Psychologists is committed to functioning within the spirit of Afro-centric unity to accomplish these aims.

I AM BECAUSE WE ARE AND BECAUSE WE ARE THEREFORE I AM.

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