

**A Care Ethics Analysis of the Response to Hurricane Katrina by the Local, State, and  
Federal Government**

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By

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On my honor as a University student, I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid on this assignment as defined by the Honor Guidelines for Thesis-Related Assignments.

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## **Introduction**

Hurricane Katrina, which occurred in August of 2005, is recognized as one of the worst hurricanes in recent U.S. history in terms of damages and loss of life. The government's poor response to Katrina, from a lack of experience from those in charge to a mishandling of the resources needed by residents, only worsened the consequences of the storm. The incompetence occurred at multiple levels of government, from the local government of New Orleans to the state's government to the federal level with agencies like FEMA (Federal Emergency Management Agency) (Lopez, 2005).

The aftermath of the hurricane is usually seen as the result of general confusion and inexperience, with many saying that no one could have prepared for such a storm because it was bigger than anything anyone had faced. There were congressional investigations into the government's response, with the House of Representatives committee concluding that "Katrina was primarily a failure of the initiative" (H.R. Rep. 109-377, 2005). However, such a conclusion fails to consider the specific actions and decisions of certain government officials, which made the situation worse than it needed to be. Such decisions and actions showed a lack of consideration for the residents of New Orleans as they had severe negative consequences for those impacted by the storm. For example, residents experienced slow response times for government aid and confusing messages from officials about where to find shelter or resources, adding to an already stressful situation. By refusing to consider the moral conduct of these officials and their actions, we are missing an understanding of what it means to be an ethical public official and potentially allowing a similar situation to occur when another large natural disaster strikes.

I will examine the local, state, and federal governments' response to Hurricane Katrina through the framework of care ethics to demonstrate that these agencies failed the duty of care owed to their constituents, the residents of New Orleans, Louisiana. I will do this by focusing on three of the four attributes of practicing care: competence, attentiveness, and responsibility. The lack of these attributes is apparent through the actions taken and decisions made by key officials in public office positions after the hurricane passed.

## **Background**

Hurricane Katrina made landfall in New Orleans, Louisiana on August 29th, 2005. The storm caused billions of dollars in damage, meaning that the city would need a lot of help to recover. In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, the local, state, and federal governments were all widely criticized for their insufficient responses and lack of support to the residents of New Orleans. Much of the criticism revolved around the government's lack of preparation for the storm, mismanagement of resources for those in need, and overall bad leadership. Additionally, one government agency that was specifically criticized for its inadequate handling of the disaster was FEMA. The storm's devastation would prompt a congressional investigation, which examined the roles that each level of the government had and how they responded to the storm's aftermath.

When a disaster occurs, it is on the local and state government to handle the situation, and if it is too severe and they need help from the federal government, then they can request assistance. States can ask FEMA for help, who will then provide resources like food, water, and medical supplies. To get aid, the state must send a request to the President to use FEMA's funds and then the request must be approved by several people in a chain of command, starting with the state governor, moving past directors at FEMA and the Secretary of Homeland Security, and finally

going to the President. If approved by the President, then the resources are allocated. Each of these officials play a major role in this process because without their approval these requests cannot go to the next person in command and these resources cannot be allocated to those in need.

## **Literature Review**

Given the infamy of Hurricane Katrina, many scholars have investigated the event and the government's response after it occurred. Their analyses looked at all levels of the government, attempting to see who was responsible for failing to assist those affected by the storm. The typical conclusion is that general confusion between all three levels of government were to blame for the response failure; however, blaming just these factors disregards some direct actions that were committed during the recovery period. Additionally, these conclusions disregard questions about the seemingly lack of care those in charge gave to those impacted by the storm.

In *Attributing Blame: The Public's Response to Hurricane Katrina*, its authors Malhotra and Kuo conducted a survey experiment looking at who the residents of New Orleans, LA blamed for the failures that occurred during Hurricane Katrina. They manipulated the amount of information participants received about a certain public official "with some receiving the officials' party affiliations, others receiving their job titles, and others receiving both cues" (Malhotra & Kuo, 2008). Malhotra and Kuo concluded that the party cue did have an effect but when partnered with the job cue this effect was reduced; therefore, saying that they were "cautiously optimistic about the capacity of citizens to make unbiased blame attributions" (Malhotra & Kuo, 2008). While this study looked at the specific officials who were responsible for helping the public after the disaster, the focus of the paper is on the effect of party affiliation on the popularity of these individuals rather than a moral judgment of their actions.

In *Administrative Breakdowns in the Governmental Response to Hurricane Katrina*, its author Schneider looks at the government's emergency management system to determine what went wrong in the aftermath of the storm. Published right after the disaster, she concluded that "it is impossible to produce an authoritative answer to the question of what went wrong in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina" (Schneider, 2005). Instead, she attributes much of the blame to general confusion, inexperience, a lack of focus, and overall unpreparedness from public officials. While these issues were certainly present during the disaster relief period the focus of this paper fails to consider the character and the motivations of individual officials and how that might have played a role in their responses.

Current scholarly works provide interesting insights into the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina as seen in Schneider's look at the factors at play in the government's failure and Malhotra and Kuo's experiment with survey data and party affiliations. However, the research ends by attributing the blame to numerous factors, failing to consider the actions of specific individuals and their own motivations. This paper will look within these government organizations to provide a moral judgment into their actions using the framework of care ethics. The argument will then be able to determine if these officials failed to provide the duty of care owed to the residents of New Orleans, Louisiana.

### **Conceptual Framework**

The moral conduct of the government officials during the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina can be analyzed using the framework of care ethics. Carol Gilligan and Nel Noddings developed this framework in the 1980s, creating something different from most normative ethical theories. What sets care ethics apart is that it emphasizes relationships and interconnectivity saying that "people learn norms and values within specific contexts and by encountering concrete people

with emotions” (van de Poel & Royakkers, 2011). In care ethics, mutual responsibility and care for one another is essential. Care becomes particularly important when one’s roles and relationships are taken into consideration, as one’s role can determine to what degree we can expect care from one another. For example, in asymmetrical relationships, where one party holds more power than the other, the more powerful party cannot exploit or take advantage of the more vulnerable one. In this case, we will look at the asymmetrical relationship of government officials and their constituents, as these officials hold the power to impact the lives of their constituents through their decision-making. How does one determine whether or not the more powerful party is acting in a caring manner towards the more vulnerable party?

To do so, I will use the definition of care used by van de Poel and Royakkers who defined care as “everything we do to maintain, continue, and repair our world so we can live in it as well as possible,” and who described it as both an action and an attitude (van de Poel & Royakkers, 2011). Furthermore, van de Poel and Royakkers say that practicing care has the following four necessary components:

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| <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Attentiveness - becoming aware of others' needs</li><li>2. Responsibility - taking responsibility for others' needs</li><li>3. Competence - providing good and successful care</li><li>4. Responsiveness - receiving care well</li></ol> |
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*Figure 1: Four Components for Practicing Care*

For this paper, I will discuss whether or not the government effectively practiced care, using these categories and the actions they took after the hurricane. This analysis will focus on specific actions taken by government officials with respect to the following three categories for practicing care: competence, attentiveness, and responsibility.

**Analysis**

Several figures in the local, state, and federal government did not practice care when handling the response to the damages caused by Hurricane Katrina and specifically lacked competence, attentiveness, and responsibility when dealing with the aid response. These three components are vital for practicing care and without them one cannot act in a morally responsible manner. In the context of Hurricane Katrina, the lack of these components had severe consequences as many residents of New Orleans, vulnerable from the storm's damages, were counting on the government to help them in their time of need. Using care ethics, the government acted in a morally irresponsible way because the decisions and actions they took lacked these three aspects to practicing care. In the paragraphs that follow, I will look at each of these three aspects and describe the specific decisions and actions that highlight the lack of care towards the residents of New Orleans.

### *Competence*

When those in power do not have enough experience with disaster management to make appropriate decisions, there can be problems getting through the chain of command necessary for approving aid requests. For example, during the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, many media correspondents and political officials criticized the leadership of FEMA for their lack of expertise, particularly FEMA's then director Michael Brown. Members of the press suggested that he had little to no prior experience with disaster management because "before joining FEMA, Brown supervised judges at horse shows, [and] he joined FEMA through a connection with his friend Joe Allbaugh who was President Bush's first campaign manager" (Roberts, 2017).

Looking at Brown's prior career experiences in "horse shows," it looks like he was out of his realm when Katrina made landfall in the U.S. as he had not worked previously in emergency

management. In addition, the mention of his friendship with “President Bush’s first campaign manager” suggests that he was appointed as director of FEMA based on his connections rather than his merits or expertise in this field. Third, competence requires you to have the proper knowledge and skills necessary to perform your job well, and without such knowledge or experience it is hard to provide good and sufficient care to those in need. As a result, FEMA Director Brown made many mistakes in his handling of the disaster from communication failures to mishandling aid meant for New Orleans residents. Amid heavy criticisms for his mistakes, in early September Brown was removed from Katrina’s relief efforts by the Secretary of Homeland Security and a couple of days later Brown resigned from his position at FEMA (King & Malveaux, 2005). Due to his lack of experience Michael Brown made a lot of decisions that hurt the residents of New Orleans rather than helped them, leading to both him and the agency not being able to provide competent care.

As I have argued, competent care to the residents of New Orleans was not provided after Hurricane Katrina due to the lack of experience and expertise that FEMA’s leadership had in disaster management, namely with their director Michael Brown. Nicol Andrews, FEMA spokeswoman at the time of hurricane, however, contends that “the agency [had] a deep bench of career professionals...simply because folks who have left the agency have a disagreement with how it's being run doesn't necessarily indicate that there is a lack of experience leading it” (Hsu, 2005). But what this view fails to consider is that FEMA, as a whole, was making mistakes that were severely impacting the victims of the hurricane not just Brown as the agency’s director. So, either the career professionals should have been named director or they should have assisted Brown more with knowledge on disaster management so that he and FEMA could have provided more competent care. During an interview on CNN, journalist Soledad O’Brien stated that



FEMA had responded quickly to other disasters, namely an earthquake and tsunami in the Indian Ocean that occurred when Brown was still the director, yet they moved much slower to provide resources for the people of New Orleans:

FEMA has been on the ground for four days, going into the fifth day. Why no massive airdrop of food and water? In Banda Aceh, in Indonesia, they got food dropped two days after the tsunami struck. ...It's five days that FEMA has been on the ground.

(Brown, 2005).

So, Brown had dealt with disasters before and was able to act quickly to help the victims of the Indonesian tsunami but the same could not be said for the residents of New Orleans. And as a result, these residents, particularly those who were the most vulnerable, suffered due to a lack of competent care.

### *Attentiveness*

To provide adequate care, it is also necessary that the people in power, especially those who can distribute aid to those in need, know exactly what is happening on the ground. Doing so will allow them to know what specific resources are needed and where these resources are needed. However, during the recovery period after the storm many federal government officials who were a part of the aid approval process were unaware of what was happening in Louisiana. During interviews with journalists, FEMA director Michael Brown and Secretary of Homeland Security Michael Chertoff were frequently called out for their lack of knowledge on the situation unfolding in Louisiana.

One instance occurred during an interview with NPR's Robert Siegel where Homeland Secretary Chertoff stated that the people in New Orleans Convention Center weren't in any danger, despite many journalists seeing thousands of people stranded in this location:

*SIEGEL:* We are hearing from our reporter--and he's on another line right now—  
thousands of people at the convention center in New Orleans with no food, zero.

*Sec. CHERTOFF:* As I say, I'm telling you that we are getting food and water to areas  
where people are staging. And, you know, the one thing about an episode like this is if  
you talk to someone and you get a rumor or you get someone's anecdotal version of  
something, I think it's dangerous to extrapolate it all over the place. The limitation here  
on getting food and water to people is the condition on the ground. And as soon as we  
can physically move through the ground with these assets, we're going to do that. So...

*SIEGEL:* But, Mr. Secretary, when you say that there is--we shouldn't listen to rumors,  
these are things coming from reporters who have not only covered many, many other  
hurricanes; they've covered wars and refugee camps. These aren't rumors. They're seeing  
thousands of people there.

*Sec. CHERTOFF:* Well, I would be--actually I have not heard a report of thousands of  
people in the convention center who don't have food and water. I can tell you that I know  
specifically, the Superdome, which was the designated staging area for a large number of  
evacuees, does have food and water. I know we have teams putting food and water out at  
other designated evacuation areas. So, you know, this isn't--and we've got plenty of food  
and water if we can get it out to people. And that is the effort we're undertaking.

(Siegel, 2005)

First, during the evacuation many evacuees were moved to both the Superdome, the  
football stadium used by the New Orleans Saints, and the New Orleans Convention Center,  
located 15 blocks away, and Secretary Chertoff only knew about the Superdome saying, “I have

not heard a report of thousands of people in the convention center who don't have food and water.” As Siegel points out reporters at NPR have been covering the conditions at the convention center for days, showing that Chertoff is unaware of another location where thousands of evacuees are staying without any food. Attentiveness requires that you are aware of the needs of those you are taking care of in order to best support them, so if Secretary Chertoff is unaware of the conditions for the evacuees in the convention center, then they are not getting the support that they need from the federal government. Secondly, despite what Siegel is telling him Secretary Chertoff continuously disputes this report, calling them “rumors” and saying “you get someone's anecdotal version of something, I think it's dangerous to extrapolate it all over the place.” Here, he is almost calling these reports gross exaggerations of the situation, just because he has not heard of them, even though Siegel is presenting him with firsthand accounts from NPR’s correspondents. It is important to note that following their conversation, Siegel begins talking to NPR correspondent John Burnett, the one who had previously reported on what he himself saw at the convention center. After the interview, Chertoff realized that Burnett’s report was true and sent supplies to the convention center. Thus, due to a lack of awareness of the situation happening in New Orleans Homeland Secretary Chertoff and the government officials under his command sent out necessary supplies much later than they should have. And so, they were unable to provide adequate care to the residents of New Orleans in a timely manner because they were unaware of their needs.

### *Responsibility*

As seen with the chain of command for deploying federal funds, there are a lot of people in the government who have a role to play, from the local level to the state level to the federal level, especially in a disaster as big as Hurricane Katrina. Each level of the government had their

own responsibilities; however, as things went wrong with the government's response each level began to point the finger at one another to avoid getting the blame.

During the initial aftermath of the storm, government officials at the local, state, and federal level all started to criticize one another for what was a disastrous response to the hurricane, rather than admit to their own mistakes. New Orleans mayor Ray Nagin and Louisiana governor Kathleen Blanco blamed each other, FEMA, and the federal government for its response. At the same time, officials at FEMA like Michael Brown blamed Nagin and Blanco. For example, in late September during the congressional investigations into the government's response during Katrina FEMA Director Brown said that "my mistake was in [not] recognizing that, for whatever reasons, ... Mayor Nagin and Governor Blanco were reluctant to order a mandatory evacuation." In response to Brown's comments, Mayor Nagin said that "the former FEMA chief was trying to deflect attention" (Barrett, 2005). Moreover, in email documents shared with Congress during the investigations, Governor Blanco says that "her biggest mistake was believing the promises of the Federal Emergency Management Agency" (CNN, 2005).

First, notice that Director Brown seems to place the blame solely on the state and local governments, citing his main mistake to be something that they did. As seen throughout this paper, Director Brown and FEMA had their own fair share of issues and mistakes that occurred days after the storm, which Brown does not acknowledge. Additionally, both Governor Blanco and Mayor Nagin in turn place most of the blame on FEMA. However, both received their own fair share of criticism after the hurricane, mostly around how they waited before deploying New Orleans' disaster plans and requesting federal aid. While FEMA did make a lot of errors, the local and state governments did as well, and waiting around before making such decisions also impacted the citizens of New Orleans. When they assumed a government position, each of these

individuals became responsible for the needs of the people their offices looked over, and each of them failed in some way to provide adequate care to the people of New Orleans, Louisiana. As someone in a position of power, it was their responsibility to do so, and instead of taking responsibility for their mistakes they blamed one another.

## **Conclusion**

Using the framework of care ethics, I have argued that several government officials in charge of the response to Hurricane Katrina failed to provide adequate care to the people of New Orleans, Louisiana. In particular, the components of practicing care that they failed to provide were competence, attentiveness, and responsibility. Evidence from their actions made after the storm passed showed an absence of these components and resulted in a disastrous response to one of the nation's worst hurricanes, at a time when that sort of care was needed most. Therefore, these components are absolutely vital for practicing good and efficient care and without them the consequences can be quite severe.

While this concept is important for government officials to understand, it is a necessary topic for anyone in a role where they are responsible for the lives of others. In any asymmetrical relationship, like government officials to their constituents, there is an imbalance of power between parties and one will depend on the other. Hence, in such a role one should use care ethics to ensure that they are practicing good care by being competent, being attentive, and taking responsibility for their actions.

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