Research Article

Why Did They "Choose" to Stay?

Perspectives of Hurricane Katrina Observers and Survivors

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ABSTRACT—Models of agency—powerful implicit assumptions about what constitutes normatively "good" action—shaped how observers and survivors made meaning after Hurricane Katrina. In Study 1, we analyzed how 461 observers perceived survivors who evacuated (leavers) or stayed (stayers) in New Orleans. Observers described leavers positively (as agentic, independent, and in control) and stayers negatively (as passive and lacking agency). Observers' perceptions reflected the disjoint model of agency, which is prevalent in middle-class White contexts and defines "good" actions as those that emanate from within the individual and proactively influence the environment. In Study 2, we examined interviews with 79 survivors and found that leavers and stayers relied on divergent models of agency. Leavers emphasized independence, choice, and control, whereas stayers emphasized interdependence, strength, and faith. Although both leavers and stayers exercised agency, observers failed to recognize stayers' agency and derogated them because observers assumed that being independent and in control was the only way to be agentic.

Etched in Americans' collective memory of Hurricane Katrina are images of survivors standing on rooftops awaiting help. With these images came the claim that survivors failed to take appropriate actions. Responding to the rising death toll in New Orleans, Federal Emergency Management Agency Director Michael Brown said, "That's going to be attributable a lot to people who .... chose not to leave" (CNN Weather, 2005). Similarly, Secretary of Homeland Security Michael Chertoff

explained, "Officials called for a mandatory evacuation. Some people chose not to obey that order. That was a mistake on their part" (CNN Transcripts, 2005). Brown and Chertoff assumed that survivors who stayed "chose" not to evacuate and were therefore to blame for their suffering. We suggest that these common reactions to survivors were grounded in and legitimized by a powerful, yet often tacit, set of assumptions about what constitutes normatively "good" action—a model of agency. As Brown's and Chertoff's comments suggest, this implicit model led observers to interpret action in a context-specific way that fostered a lack of empathy for survivors who stayed.

Attribution theory and system-justifying tendencies—such as victim blaming, stereotyping, and belief in a just world—provide useful frameworks for understanding observers' responses to survivors (Adams, O'Brien, & Nelson, 2006; Napier, Mandisodza, Andersen, & Jost, 2006). Attribution theory predicts that observers will locate the causes of survivors' divergent outcomes in their individual attributes (Ross & Nisbett, 1991), but it does not answer the question of why observers' perceptions took the particular forms they did. Highlighting another important feature of the explanatory sequence, the research we report here addresses not observers' explanations of the causes of survivors' behavior (i.e., attribution), but instead how observers perceive and make sense of survivors' actions. In two studies, we contrasted observers' and survivors' perspectives to illuminate the contextually derived models of agency that shape how people make sense of behavior and what people perceive as sensible, culturally appropriate action.

We suggest that observers' responses to Katrina survivors were predominantly grounded in the *disjoint* model of agency—the most prevalent model in mainstream middle-class White contexts (Markus, Uchida, Omoregie, Townsend, & Kitayama, 2006; Savani, Markus, & Conner, 2008). The disjoint model assumes that agency emanates from within the individual and defines "good" actions as those that influence the environment

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according to individual motives, goals, and preferences (Markus & Kitayama, 2003). According to this model, a good Hurricane Katrina survivor should have influenced the situation, overcome situational constraints, and—through independence, choice, and control—found a way to evacuate.

The disjoint model is not the only model of agency. As a growing literature on culture and agency has revealed, there are many ways to act in and respond to the world (Holland & Quinn, 1987; Morling, Kitayama, & Miyamoto, 2002; Morris, Menon, & Ames, 2001). Defined in a socioculturally neutral manner, agency is acting in the world (Markus & Kitayama, 2003) and need not—as is often assumed in Western middle-class contexts—involve influence or a commitment to an individualist model of the person in which agency is a force that derives solely from within the individual (Gould, 1999). Agency can also involve adjusting the self to the world. Prior research has identified a *conjoint* model of agency, which assumes that agency is "responsive to obligations and expectations of others, roles, and situations" (Markus & Kitayama, 2003, p. 7) and defines "good" actions as those that adjust to the environment and promote interdependence with other people. Although a conjoint model is often associated with East Asian contexts (Miller, 2003), some elements of this type of model, such as an emphasis on connecting with others, also pervade working-class American contexts (Markus, Ryff, Curhan, & Palmersheim, 2004; Stephens, Markus, & Townsend, 2007).[1]

SOCIAL CLASS AND AGENCY

Contexts that are stratified by social class and race, and that vary substantially in their resources, provide one important source of models of agency (Markus & Kitayama, 2003). Survivors who evacuated prior to Katrina (*leavers*) lived in primarily middle-class White contexts, whereas survivors who stayed (*stayers*) lived in primarily working-class Black contexts (Dyson, 2006). Compared with stayers, leavers had more education and income, greater access to news, more reliable transportation, and more geographically extended social networks (Lieberman, 2006).

Given the influence-enabling resources (i.e., material advantages and cultural capital, including knowledge, skills, and advantages based on societal status) associated with middle-class White contexts (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977/1992), we hypothesized that leavers' firsthand accounts of their experiences would emphasize choice, independence, and control—themes associated with a disjoint model. By contrast, people in working-class Black contexts often lacked the necessary resources to evacuate and effectively enact a disjoint model. Despite these constraints, we hypothesized that stayers were not passive but *agentic* (i.e., acting in the world), in ways that were appropriate to their contexts. Building on prior research, we

anticipated that narratives of stayers would reflect elements of a conjoint model, including an emphasis on interdependence and connection with others (Nobles, 1991; Stephens et al., 2007), as well as emphases on being strong and maintaining faith in God (Ryff, Singer, & Palmersheim, 2004; Snibbe & Markus, 2005).

Hurricane Katrina provides an opportunity to examine how people in different contexts make meaning in response to the same historically significant event. We present two studies that illuminate Katrina observers' and survivors' models of agency. In Study 1, we analyzed how two samples of observers—relief workers and lay observers—perceived leavers and stayers. Given the prevalence of the disjoint model in mainstream American contexts, we predicted that both samples of observers would rely on the disjoint model, and thus perceive leavers as influencing agents and stayers as lacking agency.

In Study 2, we examined survivors' accounts of their own experiences. Because stayers' and leavers' contexts differed substantially in resources and opportunities for action, we predicted that leavers' accounts would emphasize themes associated with disjoint agency, and stayers' accounts would emphasize themes associated with conjoint agency. Thus, we expected to find that leavers and stayers were both agentic, but in different ways, and that observers derogated stayers because they assumed that influencing the environment was the only way to be agentic.

STUDY 1

For Study 1, we recruited observers to complete an on-line survey. If observers view survivors through the disjoint model, they should view leavers, who conformed to this model, as sensible and influencing agents, and they should view stayers, who deviated from this model, as not sensible and lacking agency.

Method

Participants

To examine whether direct contact with survivors affected observers' perceptions of them, we selected two samples of observers. First, we recruited 144 relief workers who had direct contact with survivors and spent an average of 3.5 weeks in the hurricane-threatened area. To obtain a diverse sample, we recruited participants through Red Cross Listservs, as well as through forums and advertisements on Web sites for Katrina relief workers. This sample included employees and volunteers from nonprofit and governmental organizations (e.g., Salvation Army), doctors, counselors, firefighters, and police officers. Second, we recruited lay observers (161 adults and 156 students) who had no direct contact with survivors and observed the consequences of the disaster from afar. We recruited adult lay observers through on-line ads and student lay observers through dorm Listservs. Because the adult and student samples did not differ in any analyses, we present results of analyses in which

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[1]Models of agency are not fixed properties of people. They derive from the context and change upon exposure to contexts where other models are prevalent (Heine, Lehman, Markus, & Kitayama, 1999).

these two groups were combined. Table 1 presents demographic information about the Study 1 participants.

Procedure

We used responses on two within-subjects tasks as our primary dependent variables. After completing these tasks, participants also reported demographic information and answered questions about their political orientation and religious views.

First, a *person-description task* assessed observers' perceptions of survivors. We asked participants to provide three words describing people who evacuated from the hurricane-affected area and three words describing people who stayed in the hurricane-affected area. We counterbalanced the order of these two questions.

Second, a *vignette task* assessed whether participants perceived survivors' actions as sensible. Each participant read two vignettes, one about a leaver and one about a stayer (in counterbalanced order). Personal characteristics and family structure were consistent across the vignettes (i.e., a "friendly, responsible, and hardworking" survivor "lives with two kids and a spouse"). In the leaver vignette, survivor "K" had resources and evacuated (i.e., went to another state to "stay with a friend until the hurricane passed"). In the stayer vignette, survivor "D" lacked resources and stayed (i.e., "didn't have any close friends or family to stay with who lived outside of the hurricane-threatened area"). Participants were asked, "Given the situation, to what extent did the survivor's behavior make sense?" The response scale ranged from 1 (*not at all*) to 4 (*a lot*).

Results

Person-Description Task

Two research assistants who were blind to our hypotheses coded each word for valence (positive or negative) and thematic con-

tent (mean $\kappa = .93$). To capture the thematic content of the person descriptions, we created a code for each distinct theme that occurred in at least 5% of responses.

Although observers described stayers as lacking resources and leavers as having resources (see Table 2), they still viewed leavers as influencing agents and stayers as lacking agency. As hypothesized, descriptions of leavers were more likely than descriptions of stayers to include positive attributes that reflect the cultural ideals of a disjoint model of agency. For example, leavers were described as independent (e.g., self-reliant, in control) and responsible (e.g., hardworking, conscientious). Descriptions of leavers were also more likely than descriptions of stayers to refer to high-arousal emotions (e.g., angry, agitated) and action-requiring states (e.g., being prepared, planning). By contrast, observers were more likely to describe stayers as having negative attributes that together connote inaction and lack of agency. For example, stayers were described as passive (e.g., lazy, dependent), irresponsible (e.g., careless, negligent), and inflexible (e.g., stubborn, uncompromising). Descriptions of stayers were also more likely than descriptions of leavers to refer to low-arousal emotions (e.g., sad, depressed) and inactive states, such as being unprepared (e.g., disorganized, ill-equipped) and defeated (e.g., hopeless, devastated).

To assess whether participants' perceptions were moderated by their experience as either a relief worker or a lay observer, we used the valence coding to create a positivity index. For each response (comprising three descriptors), we subtracted the number of items coded as negative from the number coded as positive. As expected, observers described leavers more positively ($M = 0.72$) than stayers ($M = -1.75$), $t(460) = 19.83$, $p < .001$. A repeated measures analysis of variance with between-subjects factors revealed a significant interaction between sample (relief worker vs. lay observer) and survivor group

TABLE 1

Demographic Characteristics of Observers in Study 1

Variable	Relief workers (n = 144)	Lay observers	
		Adults (n = 161)	Students (n = 156)
Gender	52% female, 48% male	81% female, 19% male	73% female, 27% male
Age (mean)	39.9	36.0	20.8
Race-ethnicity			
White	86%	63%	44%
Latino	4%	7%	6%
Asian	2%	12%	19%
Black	1%	5%	10%
Other	7%	12%	21%
Middle class[a]	99%	98%	85%
Annual household income			
(median; thousands of dollars)[b]	50–75	50–75	100–200
Number of children (mean)	2.5	1.6	0.0

[a]Middle class was defined as having some college education (for relief workers and adult lay observers) or as having at least one parent with a college education (for students). [b]Household income was assessed on a categorical scale.

TABLE 2

Percentage of Descriptions of Leavers and Stayers Coded for Each Category in Study 1

Coding category	Examples	Leavers (%)	Stayers (%)
Positive attributes			
Smart	Intelligent, sensible, wise	28	0
Responsible	Responsible, cautious, conscientious	13	0
Independent	Independent, in control, self-reliant	9	2
Negative attributes			
Stupid	Dumb, ignorant, foolish	0	15
Irresponsible	Irresponsible, careless, negligent	0	7
Passive	Dependent, helpless, lazy	3	9
Inflexible	Uncompromising, stubborn, strong-headed	6	27
Active states			
High-arousal emotions	Angry, stressed, agitated	26	14
Prepared	Prepared, planned, organized	21	0
Inactive states			
Low-arousal emotions	Sad, depressed, grateful	21	31
Unprepared	Ill-equipped, uninformed, disorganized	0	10
Immobilized	Isolated, cramped, trapped	3	12
Defeated	Defeated, devastated, hopeless	12	18
Luck			
Good luck	Lucky, fortunate, good luck	18	0
Bad luck	Unlucky, unfortunate, bad luck	2	7
Resources			
Have resources	Well-off, rich, privileged	26	0
Lack resources	Poor, broke, no transportation	11	52
Demographics			
White race	White, Caucasian, European American	10	0
Non-White race	Black, African American, minority	5	18
Poor health	Sick, dying, ill	2	7
Other demographics	Elderly, female, male	2	7

Note. McNemar's tests of homogeneity between percentages of leavers' and stayers' descriptions coded for a given category were all significant at the $p < .001$ level, except in the case of "defeated," $p < .05$, and "bad luck," $p < .01$.

(leaver vs. stayer), $F(1, 459) = 16.18$, $p < .001$. Relative to lay observers, relief workers viewed stayers less negatively, $t(306) = 2.34$, $p = .02$, and leavers less positively, $t(239) = 3.13$, $p = .002$ (see Fig. 1). In follow-up analyses, we found that participants' liberalism, conservatism, and religiosity were not significant covariates.

Fig. 1. Mean positivity of relief workers' and lay observers' perceptions of Katrina survivors as a function of whether survivors stayed in New Orleans or left. Error bars denote ±1 *SE*.

Vignette Task

For the vignette task, we compared observers' ratings of the extent to which each survivor's actions made sense. A paired-samples *t* test revealed that both relief workers and lay observers perceived leavers' actions as making more sense ($M = 3.87$) than stayers' actions ($M = 2.65$), $t(460) = 25.91$, $p < .001$. Vignette order did not affect responses.

Discussion

As hypothesized, both samples of observers portrayed leavers as influencing agents and stayers as lacking agency and saw stayers' actions as less sensible than leavers' actions. We suggest that these perceptions arose because observers assumed that influencing the environment through independence and control was the only way to be agentic. Thus, stayers' actions, which deviated from the disjoint model, were viewed as not making sense and as lacking agency. Notably, observers derogated survivors who stayed as stupid and passive, despite clearly recognizing reasons why stayers could not evacuate (e.g., lack of money or transportation).

Relief workers, like lay observers, derogated stayers as lacking agency. The convergent perspectives of these different populations underscore the power and prevalence of the disjoint model of agency in mainstream American contexts. In their person descriptions, however, relief workers derogated stayers somewhat less than lay observers did. This divergence could have occurred because relief workers and lay observers had different views (e.g., racial attitudes) prior to the hurricane. Our theory, however, suggests that exposure to the contexts of survivors shaped relief workers' models of agency and their perceptions of survivors.

Observers' derogation of stayers is consistent with the assertion that psychological biases, such as prejudice and belief in a just world, shaped responses to Katrina. Our purpose, however, is to take a broader sociocultural perspective by illuminating the disjoint model that underlies observers' perceptions and contributes to these more specific biases. Numerous psychological theories predict that observers would locate the cause of stayers' unfortunate outcomes in stayers' own individual attributes and thus view stayers negatively. Models-of-agency theory predicts more specifically how stayers will be derogated—that they will be judged on the basis of whether their actions deviated from the disjoint model's assumptions about what constitutes normatively good action. Given the pervasive negative representations of African Americans (Oyserman & Harrison, 1998), observers could have derogated stayers in myriad ways, such as by describing them as immoral, crazy, dangerous, or devious. However, guided by the assumption that normatively good actions are those that influence the environment, observers in our study derogated stayers using a socioculturally specific subset of terms (e.g., *lazy*, *passive*, and *careless*) that together connote inaction and the absence of agency.

STUDY 2

Moving beyond observers, Study 2 examined firsthand accounts of Katrina survivors. Three months after Katrina, we asked survivors to describe their hurricane-related experiences. We hypothesized that leavers' and stayers' narratives would reflect divergent models of agency.

Method

Participants
Seventy-nine participants were interviewed for 1 hr and compensated $50. To obtain a diverse sample, we sent study invitations to survivors on a Department of Housing and Urban Development mailing list and posted flyers in New Orleans and San Antonio, Texas. We also used on-line advertisements and Listservs to recruit survivors who evacuated before Katrina. Our samples of stayers and leavers (see Table 3) were demographically comparable to the overall populations of Katrina survivors who stayed and evacuated, respectively (Center for American

Progress, 2005). We conducted 57 interviews in person and 22 over the telephone. All interviews were audiotaped with permission and transcribed.

In this study, we contrasted the perspectives of leavers and stayers. We did so for two reasons. First, such a focus allowed us to compare the results of Study 1 (observers' perceptions of leavers and stayers) with survivors' understandings of themselves. Second, because most middle-class White participants were leavers and most working-class Black participants were stayers, the experiences of leaving and staying provided a conceptually meaningful proxy for social class and race. Further, our focus on leavers and stayers helped to specify some of the social experiences that produce the divergent life outcomes tied to the categories of social class and race (Helms, Jernigan, & Mascher, 2005; Markus, 2008). It is these differential social experiences that shape and maintain models of agency.

Procedure
We matched the race of interviewers and survivors to help participants feel comfortable sharing their experiences (Schaeffer, 1980). The interviewers asked participants to describe their experiences by saying, "Start from the beginning. I'd like to hear what happened to you before, during, and after the hurricane." Participants subsequently provided demographic information and answered questions about their well-being and mental health.

Coding
Three coders who were blind to our hypotheses read the transcripts and identified explicit agency-related themes present in survivors' descriptions of what they did and why. Thirteen non-mutually exclusive codes that each required minimal inference and occurred in at least 10% of narratives were included in the coding scheme (see Table 4; mean $\kappa = .90$).

TABLE 3

Demographic Characteristics of Leavers and Stayers in Study 2

Variable	Leavers (n = 38)	Stayers (n = 41)
Gender	71% female, 29% male	73% female, 27% male
Age (mean)	40.3	45.8
Race-ethnicity	78% White, 22% Black	29% White, 71% Black
Middle class[a]	90%	39%
Annual personal income (mean)	$35,000	$19,500
Number of children (mean)	1.4	2.8
Born in New Orleans	49%	78%
Has flood insurance	40%	18%
Owns a vehicle	100%	54%

[a]Middle class was defined as having some college education.

Results

To illuminate leavers' and stayers' models of agency, we contrasted their narratives (see Table 4). The two groups were equally likely to refer to family, engage in downward comparison, mention race or class, and describe their attachment to home. Beyond these similarities, survivors' narratives revealed different models of agency.

Themes Among Leavers

The themes more common among leavers than stayers supported our hypotheses. Consistent with observers' perceptions, leavers' narratives emphasized choice, independence, and control, reflecting a disjoint model of agency. Enabled by the resources available in middle-class White contexts, leavers generally described themselves as agents who sought to influence and exert control over their environments. Compared with stayers, leavers more often placed an emphasis on choice in describing their efforts to control the situation. One leaver explained, "I wanted to beat the hurricane, so we decided to leave early to beat traffic." Leavers also described assessing the risk related to the

hurricane and focusing on the future more often than stayers. Revealing this future focus, one leaver said, "I started making plans. I immediately got on the phone and called hotels." Finally, compared with stayers, leavers more often emphasized a fear of losing independence in the hurricane's aftermath. As one leaver said, "Being away from home means you've lost your independence and feel totally dependent on others."

Themes Among Stayers

As hypothesized, and in stark contrast to observers' perceptions, stayers' narratives emphasized interdependence with others, faith in God, and strength, suggesting that stayers had a different way of acting in the world than leavers did. Given the limited material resources available in working-class Black contexts, stayers more often than leavers emphasized the importance of connection to and caring for others. Highlighting the value of interdependence, one stayer said, "We're all in this world together, and we're stronger together." Stayers also more often placed an emphasis on strength and not giving up than leavers did. One stayer explained, "You have to be so strong-minded to

TABLE 4
Percentage of Leavers' and Stayers' Interviews Coded for Each Category in Study 2

Code	Sample responses	Leavers (%)	Stayers (%)
	Shared themes		
Reference to family	I always try to be with my family during emergencies.	92	85
Attachment to home	I'm not used to going nowhere. I'm a homebody, period, you know. I like to stay at home.	26	17
Downward comparison	We had savings that could help us to evacuate. A lot of people don't have anything.	55	61
Attention to race or class	For the government to treat people different by class and race is a disgrace in this country.	30	48
	Themes significantly more common among leavers than among stayers		
Emphasis on choice**	You've got to make choices and it's hard . . . . I'm stuck with a decision here or there. 'Cause I made a decision.	50	22
Assessing risk***	After experiencing Hurricane Betsy, I was fearful of what would happen to me. I didn't feel like I was safe there.	79	32
Future focus***	We began making plans to evacuate the area. We contacted family and friends to find someone to stay with.	84	27
Fear of losing independence**	Being away from home meant that I lost my independence.	45	12
	Themes significantly more common among stayers than among leavers		
Emphasis on strength*	I try not to let it get me down. I just let it make me stronger . . . 'cause I had to take care of my two sons.	21	49
Caring for others*	We had a good community. All the people here help one another.	16	37
Maintaining faith*	The hand of God took care of me and that's why whatever I do, wherever I go, I just trust in God . . . . And have faith in my family, my daughter, holding on to my faith.	24	51
Connection to others***	I was worried and not only for myself, but for a lot of the people.	21	66
Underestimated hurricane**	We thought the storm wasn't going to come. We really were underestimating the storm. It always passes through.	58	88

Note. For each theme, a chi-square test ($df = 1$, $N = 79$) was used to test the significance of the difference between the percentages of leavers and stayers whose interviews were coded as including that theme.
*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

survive. You do the best you can do, and if you fail, you get up again. That's all you can do." Additionally, stayers more often adjusted to their limited options by having faith and by actively maintaining hope despite hardship. One stayer stated, "Through much prayers and faith in God, that's how we made it."[2]

Well-Being and Mental Health

Leavers and stayers did not differ on measures of mental health (Prime-MD mood, anxiety, and alcohol- and substance-abuse scales: Spitzer et al., 1994) or well-being (life and self-satisfaction, positive and negative affect: Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988), all $ps > .15$. These results suggest that survivors' divergent responses to Katrina did not reflect differences in well-being, but rather were conditioned by and appropriate to survivors' contexts.

Discussion

Leavers' and stayers' divergent ways of making meaning in response to Hurricane Katrina reveal different models of agency. Among leavers, the disjoint model's focus on independence, choice, and control was likely afforded by the influence-enabling resources (e.g., money, transportation) that are available in middle-class White contexts. These resources enabled people to evacuate. Most stayers, however, lacked these resources and could not effectively enact a disjoint model. Instead, they needed to adjust to the constraints of their contexts by enacting a different model of agency—one that involved connecting to others, being strong, and maintaining faith in God. The different models of agency observed in leavers' and stayers' narratives were likely reinforced and further amplified by the experiences of evacuating from or staying in the hurricane-threatened area.

The agency observed among stayers focused on adjusting the self to the world and maintaining interdependence with other people.[3] Labeling this form of agency will require further analysis. We suggest that stayers' agency reflects some elements of conjoint agency and that it may also reflect compensatory secondary control (Heckhausen & Schulz, 1999), hard indi-

vidualism (Kusserow, 2004), or emotion-focused coping (Folkman & Lazarus, 1980). What is clear is that stayers' agency diverged markedly from the disjoint model, the model of agency that is pervasive in middle-class White contexts and that is the most well documented in the psychological literature.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

Theoretical Contributions

Our studies are the first to analyze both observers' and survivors' meaning making in response to Katrina. With a models-of-agency analysis, we have gone beyond an analysis of people's understandings of why people behave as they do (i.e., attribution) to illuminate how people in different sociocultural contexts make sense of behavior and what people perceive as culturally appropriate action. Our studies demonstrate that although stayers were agentic (i.e., acting in the world), two different samples of observers—relief workers and lay observers—derogated stayers as lacking agency. They did so by evaluating survivors using one particular set of assumptions about the culturally "right" way to act—a disjoint model of agency.

Observers assumed that disjoint agency—being independent and in control—was the only right way to act, presumably because this model was most prevalent in their own middle-class White contexts. Unlike explicit racism or classism, derogating people on the basis of one's own implicit cultural norms may not be experienced or identified as prejudice, but may instead seem like a straightforward logical inference from the facts of the situation. However, because disjoint agency is often possible only for people in contexts with an abundance of resources (e.g., middle-class Whites), devaluing other forms of agency may be a powerful mechanism for prejudice or discrimination against people in contexts with limited resources (e.g., working-class Blacks), who lack the resources to be the "right" kind of agent. Notably, this type of unintended cultural discrimination may be even more potent and pernicious than traditional forms of prejudice because it is built into and legitimized by the cultural fabric of American society and is thus particularly difficult to recognize (Adams, Biernat, Branscombe, Crandall, & Wrightsman, 2008; Fryberg, Markus, Oyserman, & Stone, 2008).

Like all models of agency, the disjoint model is promoted by a context arranged in specific ways. However, the disjoint model in particular fosters a form of double blindness that limits individuals' ability to understand people in different cultural contexts. First, with respect to the self, the basic tenet of the model—that actions derive from within the individual—can prevent people from recognizing that their own perspectives and actions are indeed contextually afforded, thereby hindering their ability to acknowledge other sensible ways to be a person. Second, with respect to other people, the disjoint model can conceal the relationship between others' actions and the resource structure of the environment. Notably, understanding survivors' actions requires realizing that what can be done is

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[2]Despite limitations of using race and social class as predictors, we tested whether these social distinctions could account for additional variation in survivors' models of agency. We created a dependent measure of agency by subtracting the sum of indicators of disjoint agency (emphasis on choice, assessing risk, future focus, and fear of losing independence) from the sum of indicators of conjoint agency (emphasis on strength, caring for others, having faith, and connection to others). A two-way analysis of variance revealed main effects of survivor group (stayer vs. leaver), $F(1, 51) = 14.54$, $p < .001$, and of race and class (working-class Black vs. middle-class White), $F(1, 51) = 4.15$, $p < .05$, but no interactions. Narratives of leavers and of middle-class Whites contained more indicators of disjoint agency than narratives of stayers and of working-class Blacks, respectively. These findings support the claim that models of agency are associated with social experiences attached to race and class.

[3]Although stayers lacked material resources, their focus on interdependence with others suggests that they were not without social resources (e.g., family, community), as is often the case in extreme poverty (Steele & Sherman, 1999).

contingent on the resources that people have available to them (e.g., leavers were able to plan, stayers were able to maintain strength).

Future Directions

Future research should examine the models of agency that shape how people make sense of others' behavior outside of middle-class White contexts and should explore the specific content of the resulting prejudices (Cuddy, Fiske, & Glick, 2007). In contexts where the conjoint model is more prevalent, are people more likely to empathize with others and less likely to engage in victim blaming? Our sample did not include enough working-class or Black observers for us to address this question. Nevertheless, we predict that these groups would be more likely to view stayers using a conjoint model of agency and thus less likely to blame them for negative outcomes. For example, in East Asian and Asian American contexts, the conjoint model is prevalent, and people more readily explain other people's actions by referring to situations and past experiences (Choi & Nisbett, 1998; Cohen, Hoshino-Browne, & Leung, 2007).

Conclusion

Why did some survivors "choose" to stay? Grounded in a disjoint model of agency, this question framed the American public's initial response to the Hurricane Katrina tragedy and implied that survivors were "free" agents who were unconstrained by their contexts. The studies presented here, however, demonstrate that survivors' agency was powerfully shaped by the resource structure of their environments. If relief efforts are intended to help as many people as possible, questions about choice, which locate agency as the private property of individual actors, are the wrong place to start. Rather than ask why stayers made bad "choices" or inquire what was wrong with stayers, relief workers should perhaps have asked, "What actions were possible in the resource-limited contexts of stayers?" This alternate question acknowledges that all action is—and should be understood as—a product of what the individual can do given the resources of the sociocultural context. Understanding that many people who stayed in the hurricane-affected area could not simply choose to evacuate could have promoted a more timely and effective disaster-prevention and relief effort.

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