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In the days following Hurricane Katrina, the media portrayed the people inside New Orleans as a threat rather than a population in need. It was looters, in particular, who were portrayed in this deviant light and they were well publicized in the media coverage in Katrina's aftermath. However, sociological research is limited in terms of examining looting, especially in the wake of a disaster. This research explores how looters were socially constructed after Hurricane Katrina within three prominent US newspapers: *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post* and *Chicago Tribune*.

This research addresses three questions. First, how have Hurricane Katrina looters been framed by the news media? Second, how have Hurricane Katrina looters been differentially framed by these three powerful continuum of voices? Lastly, were media frames of perceived Katrina looters instrumental in re-establishing social order?

Based on a frame analysis of newspaper articles in *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post* and *Chicago Tribune*, four primary looting frames emerged: property crime, lawlessness, policing, and race. The extracted looting frames provide insight into how the media portrayed those who looted after Hurricane Katrina. The unfolding of the analysis told a unique sociological story by bringing the New Orleans looter to life.

The underlying idea of the looter after Katrina took on an ill-famed or villainous tone. According to media reports, looters vandalized, ran wild among the city and required "tough policing" in order to contain their behavior. It was the media that served as a social force that helped create and move these ideas about looting.

The portrayal of the looter in this light becomes of great importance in the moment after a disaster takes place: the moment in which society realizes that utter chaos has replaced the normal social order. It is at this time when people pull together and set aside their differences. However, this warm and fuzzy feeling of wanting to pull together as one does not sustain itself for long. After Katrina, it was the claims of looting that broke this romanticized feeling of social justice for all. Looting rumors at this time contribute to the re-establishment of social order or in another way, bring back old societal order. This is accomplished because looters are a way of establishing us (the good guys) and them (the bad guys) once again in a time in which all social order is for a moment lost. In other words, singling out the looter becomes a way to make sense of the chaos; brings back stratification; brings back something that is familiar and maybe even comforting to those that hold more power in society. Claims of looting were powerful in this way because it was based on the age old struggle between the “haves” and “have-nots.”

KATRINA'S AFTERMATH: THE NEW ORLEANS  
"LOOTER" AS FRAMED BY THE MEDIA

by

Jessica Lynn Priesmeyer

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Approved by

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Committee Chair

To the victims of Hurricane Katrina.

APPROVAL PAGE

This thesis has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of The Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

Committee Chair \_\_\_\_\_

Committee Members \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date of Acceptance by Committee

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date of Final Oral Examination

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Disasters seem to fascinate the American public. Newspapers dedicate a substantial amount of space to them and numerous books have been written on the subject (Platt, 1999; Bates and Swan, 2007 and Brunnsma, Overfelt and Picou, 2007). Hurricane Katrina in 2005 is an example of a disaster that created such media frenzy. The research presented here considers how the looter was framed in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina. By employing frame analysis I analyzed newspaper articles to uncover how the “looter” in this particular disaster was portrayed by the news media.

Hurricane Katrina’s effect on New Orleans was catastrophic. It was one of the deadliest natural disasters in American history. On August 29, 2005, Hurricane Katrina made landfall. Approximately eighty percent of the metropolitan area was flooded, with some parts of the city under twenty to thirty feet of water (Knauer, 2005). The flooding of the city was the direct result of a powerful storm surge (CNN News, 2005). The storm surge breached the levees, which were protecting New Orleans in numerous places. Strong easterly winds pushed water into Lake Pontchartrain, creating the lake water to rise (CNN News, 2005). In the end, the city of New Orleans had merged with Lake Pontchartrain, leaving most of the city submerged in water. (Knauer, 2005).

In the days to follow, media broadcasts of the disaster began to hit the air. They showed images of flooded streets, blown-out office windows, ruined homes, images of

victims being rescued from rooftops and people searching for their lost loved ones (see Fox News and CNN broadcasts from August 29, 2005 to August 31, 2005). The media also showed an endless number of individuals carrying stolen goods through the streets of New Orleans. These individuals have come to be known as “looters,” and they have been well publicized in the media coverage in Katrina’s aftermath.

Soon after the hurricane made its way out of New Orleans, broadcasts began to circulate that some residents and even police officers were looting stores (Fisher, 2005). As reported by David Fisher (2005), resident looters included gangs of armed gunmen, and gunfire was heard in parts of the city. The Sixth District of New Orleans was hit hard by looters. Much of the looting was confined to the lower-income neighborhoods (Dwyer and Drew, 2005). Kathleen Blanco, the Governor of New Orleans, warned the looters and the general public that the National Guard had been sent in to reinforce the laws and they had M-16s loaded and ready to fire if needed. The guardsmen were given specific orders to restore civic orders with a shoot-to-kill policy (BBC, 2005).

In the days following Hurricane Katrina, the media portrayed the people inside New Orleans as a threat rather than as a population in need. It was looters, in particular, who were portrayed in this deviant light. However, the instances of looting that took place during and after Hurricane Katrina are very unusual. Looting only happens occasionally and because it is such a rare phenomenon, the average person will never come into direct contact with looters or the act of looting. As a result, most people must turn to other sources for information on what looting entails and who looters are. One of these top sources includes the news media. Since the news media is the main source of

information on looters, this research project examined newspaper articles dealing with the disaster of Hurricane Katrina. Newspapers played a significant role in constructing the problem of looting within the days following Hurricane Katrina. It is important to examine media portrayals of looters during Hurricane Katrina because these media constructions have very likely fashioned collective sentiment and led to collective ideas about looters and their affects on society.

In this thesis, I analyzed the social construction of “looters” during disasters. Employing frame analysis I analyzed newspaper articles to uncover how the “looter” was portrayed by the media. I have chosen *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post* and the *Chicago Tribune* due to their distinguished and established reputation of being well respected and prominent American newspapers. By examining Hurricane Katrina a more lucid and comprehensive understanding of the “looter” as a category of person, as constructed through the media, can be established.

Tierney, Bevc and Kuligowski (2006) point out the analyses on data collected in Katrina’s aftermath are still ongoing. The research community, the media, and the nation as a whole still do not know with any degree of certainty what actually did occur in the days following Hurricane Katrina. In an effort to understand the social implications of Hurricane Katrina, the images produced by the media during and after the disaster can provide vital data in this endeavor.

The questions I sought to answer were threefold: First, how have looters in Hurricane Katrina been framed by the news media? Second, how have looters in

Hurricane Katrina been differentially framed by these three powerful continuum of voices? And third, were media frames of perceived Katrina looters instrumental in re-establishing social order?"

Based on a frame analysis of *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post* and *Chicago Tribune*, four primary looting frames emerged; property crime, lawlessness policing, and race. Furthermore, the time directly following the hurricane when devastation and desperation in the city was at its highest; when for the most part, only the poverty stricken population, rescue workers and various government officials had access to the city; the point in time in which looters were put under a lens and made front page news all across America played an extremely important role in the analysis.

Prior to analysis of the data I first reviewed the existing literature on disasters and looting and the media as it relates to Hurricane Katrina which is detailed in Chapter two. In Chapter three I discuss the methodology employed in this research. In the remaining chapters I present the results of my qualitative analysis and discuss these findings in greater detail.

## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Disaster research, for the most part, has been devoted to small scale events. Examples include Cordova, Three Mile Island and Buffalo Creek. Smaller scale events are easier to grasp and researchers are more inclined to see and understand the whole disaster (Erikson, 2007 as cited in Brunnsma, Overfelt and Picou, 2007: xvii). However, Katrina has left the research community with a much different feeling. The impact that Hurricane Katrina has left in its wake is immeasurable (Erikson, 2007 as cited in Brunnsma et al., 2007: xvii). Kai Erikson (2007) reminds us that in order for us to begin the process of understanding the story of Katrina we must “come at it with different vantage points” (cited in Brunnsma et al., 2007: xviii). The vantage point of this research uncovered how the media constructed looters in the days that followed the hurricane.

To aid in the understanding of the social construction of the looter after disasters, an appropriate review of the literature must be conducted. For this research project three areas of literature become central to understanding disasters. These areas include an overview of previous disaster research, looting literature, and other studies that have been conducted on Katrina that closely related to this research.

## **Disaster Research**

Katrina has proven to be the most destructive disaster of our time when considering how much harm it did, and it has proven to be the most enlightening disaster when considering all the knowledge that can be gained from it (Erikson, 2007 as cited in Brunnsma et al., 2007: xviii). However, before we can analyze what can be gained we must consider what has already been found. Exploration of existing disaster research can help us to situate or guide all the complexities of Katrina. In the section to follow I will explore the definitions and types of disaster. My aim here is to provide a starting point, a place to situate Katrina so that further, more complex analyses can grow.

### *Defining Disaster*

Early disaster research definitions were generally left incomplete (Perry, 2007). In 1932 L.J. Carr acknowledged a disaster as a product of its consequences, arguing that if the walls withstand the earthquake and the dam retains water, there is no disaster. Here Carr looks at disaster as the “collapse of the cultural protections” (Carr, 1932: 211 as cited in Perry, 2007: 4). The definition of disaster is situated within events of the natural environment, technical incidents and wartime incidents that generate significant negative consequences (Dombrowsky, 1981 as cited in Perry, 2007: 4). The approach of looking at disasters as primarily negative in consequence can still be found in research today even though early work in the field distinguished disasters from other events (such as civil disturbances) associated with negative consequences (Barton 1963; Quarantelli, 1966; Warheit, 1972 as cited in Perry, 2007: 4). Quarantelli (1982) was among the first scholars

to challenge the defining of disasters by surface characteristics of the agent (cited in Perry, 2007: 4). Charles E. Fritz in the 1960's proposed a formal social scientific definition of disasters (Perry, 2007). These definitions were followed by Barton's seminal examinations of disasters and creation of a typology in 1963 (Perry, 2007).

Using the examples above, Perry (2007) argues that when someone proposes a definition of disaster, they do not start from scratch. They are influenced by those that set out before them. Definitions, in large part are the product of an inductive process (Perry, 2007). Thus, in creating a definition you must look backwards to gather research (Perry, 2007).

Last, Perry (2007) argues that definitions of disasters often emerge as complex and elaborate because those that conduct research do not make their cause, consequences and characteristics of the event they are investigating clear (Perry, 2007). Stallings (2005) points out that definitions are not intended to be a collection of informal statements (cited in Perry, 2007; 4). Similarly, Quarantelli (2005) argues that researchers must separate the conditions, characteristics and consequences of disasters when developing definitions (cited in Perry, 2007: 4).

Moreover, Quarantelli (1987) has argued that there is little basis in logic in devising a single definition of disaster that is universally accepted and useful (cited in Perry, 2007: 2). With that in mind, disaster can have many different definitions to many different people and the description can serve many different purposes. Thus, there will be many different definitions of disaster. What becomes important in defining a definition is the audience in which you are speaking to. Quarantelli (2005) further

explains that when defining disasters sociologists need to devote attention to the sociological context (cited in Perry, 2007: 2).

### *Types of Disaster*

J. Steven Picou and Brent K. Marshall (2007) discuss the four original types of disaster and then discuss a fifth identified as “worse-case” disasters that emerged from the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina (cited in Brunnsma et al., 2007). The four categories of disaster that existed previously include natural, technological, natural-technological and terrorism (Picou and Marshall, 2007 as cited in Brunnsma et al., 2007: 4). All four types are seen as separate from one another.

In the past, disaster researchers, government agencies, the legal system and emergency management responders have all acknowledged that disasters can be either natural or technological (Cuthberston and Nigg, 1987 as cited in Brunnsma et al., 2007: 4). Since the late 1940’s social researchers have documented that natural disasters (hurricanes, floods and earthquakes) are severe, life-treating events that destroy customized environments (Fritz, 1961 as cited in Brunnsma et al., 2007: 4). Natural disasters hold a political and societal consensus that a disaster took place, victims were involved and federal, state, and local government agencies as well as volunteer organization should automatically support with recovery, restoration and rescue efforts (Dynes, 1998; Picou, Marshall, and Gill, 2004 as cited in Brunnsma et al., 2007: 4). Disruptive social consequences are usually short lived and the recovery is considered to be therapeutic (Barton, 1969 as cited in Brunnsma et al., 2007: 4). The outcome of the therapeutic community consists of a quick recovery, and usually there are vast



improvements in the construction of the modified environment (Drabek, 1986; Mileti, Drabek, and Haas, 1975 as cited in Brunnsma et al., 2007: 4).

Technological disasters take on a different shape. Technological disasters are considered to be toxic events created by humans. They involve the breakdown of technology and as a result end up impacting vulnerable human populations (Couch and Kroll-Smith, 1985 as cited in Brunnsma et al., 2007: 4). While the modified environment usually remains intact the biophysical environment is severely damaged and even uninhabitable. An example of this would be Chernobyl (Picou and Marshall, 2007: 4). Ecological systems can also be contaminated to the point that cultural and socioeconomic damage is irreparable. An example of this would include the Exxon Valdez oil spill (Picou and Marshall, 2007: 4). Technical failure on a massive scale and an enormous amount of contamination of the biophysical environment set the stage for a devastating and difficult process for victims and their families for many years, if not decades (Baum and Fleming, 1993; Edelstein, 1988; Erikson, 1994; Freudenburg, 1997; Gill and Picou, 1991; Kroll-Smith and Couch, 1993; Picou and Gill, 2000; Picou and Rosebrook, 1993 as cited in Brunnsma et al., 2007: 4). Technological disasters produce six outcomes. First, they produce a contested discourse regarding who was responsible; second, a chronic social disruption, anger, mental health problems, and the loss of resources for victims; third, delayed restoration and recovery from impacted communities; fourth, harm and ambiguity; fifth, sociocultural disruption; and last, litigation stress (Freudenburg, 1993, 1997, 2000; Marshall, Picou, and Schlichtmann, 2004; Picou, Marshall and Gill, 2004 as cited in Brunnsma et al., 2007: 5).

The third type of disaster is natural-technical or “na-tech” disaster. Picou and Marshall (2006) suggest that Hurricane Katrina could be conceptualized as a na-tech disaster. As a natural disaster, Katrina was an extremely powerful hurricane that destroyed a large area along the Gulf Coast. As a technical disaster, Katrina was an event that created a large amount of contamination. In a na-tech disaster, a natural disaster directly or indirectly releases hazardous material into the environment (Showalter and Myers, 1994 as cited in Brunsma et al., 2007: 5). Young et. al (2004) note that hazardous materials releases can result directly from a natural disaster (dioxin from forest fires) or indirectly from unintentional disruptions like Katrina’s impact on oil refineries or through purposeful recoveries like pumping polluted water into Lake Pontchartrain (cited in Brunsma et al., 2007: 6). Hazardous materials resulting from Katrina were both unintentional and purposeful (Picou and Marshall, 2007: 6).

The fourth type of disaster discussed by Picou and Marshall (2007) includes terrorism. The characteristics and impacts of natural and technological disasters, as well as hybrid na-tech events, are pertinent for understanding the risk and social consequences of modern terrorism (Marshall, Picou, and Schlichtmann, 2004 as cited in Brunsma et al., 2007: 7). Marshall and associates (2004) suggest the 9/11 attacks manifested many similarities to natural and technological disasters (cited in Brunsma et al., 2007: 7). These similarities include the role of the government, the consequences of litigation and mental and physical issues (Marshall, Picou, and Gill, 2003 as cited in Brunsma et al., 2007: 7). Following the 9/11 attack the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) was criticized. This was due to unequal distribution of funds and the ignorance of low-income

areas, such as Chinatown (Picou and Marshall, 2007: 7). This type of blame, which is usually seen in terrorist events, has been echoed ever since by the survivors of Hurricane Katrina. After the 9/11 attacks and Katrina FEMA did not fulfill their role “as the agency to coordinate care for those who were victims of circumstances beyond their control” (as cited in Bates and Swan, 2007: 358). In addition, survivors of 9/11 have had emerging health problems since the attack. First responders have suffered elevated rates of cancer, and many have been disabled by various types of illness (Picou and Marshall, 2007: 8). Katrina survivors have also endured health related issues. Respiratory problems directly related with associated piles of contaminated debris, hazardous dust, and widespread mold in the impact area (Picou and Marshall, 2007: 8). Indeed, these similarities, highlight the fact that technological, na-tech and terrorism all manifest similarities in long-term mental and physical risks to communities. These risks are important for understanding the diverse consequences of Katrina (Picou and Marshall, 2007: 8).

The fifth type of disaster discussed by Picou and Marshall (2007) called “worst-case” disaster combines all four types of past disaster events (10). Katrina fits this category. Picou and Marshall (2007) state that “Katrina reawakened the sociological imagination for many and provided an enlightened signal that reintroduced the need for understanding modern risks and promoting a more public sociology that is relevant to the social challenges that will confront society in the twenty-first century” (18). Picou and Marshall (2007) argue that Katrina calls for a shift in the conceptualization of disasters. They state that risk in the modern world is changing thus refocusing sociological inquiry. Hurricane Katrina produced maximum damage to the built and modified environments,

contaminated the biophysical environment, caused widespread mortality, produced serious physical health impacts for survivors, endangered severe mental health impacts, and relocated a massive segment of the population from the impact area (Picou and Marshall, 2007: 10). As mentioned before, “worst-case” disasters combine elements of the previous four disasters. Natural forces, technological failure, ecological contamination, the response failure of human institutions, and the massive displacement of people have all amplified the severity of the impacts to the human community (Picou and Marshall, 2007: 10). Worst-case disasters invite a broader sociological understanding of the organization of social vulnerability, resiliency, manufactured uncertainty and socioenvironmental policy in “risk society” (Beck 1992, 2006 as cited in Brunsma et al., 2007: 10).

The present study has adopted the fifth “type” (worst-case disaster) to conceptualize Katrina. It is hard to place such a massive disaster with its many different outcomes into one category. In order to account for all the different social dimensions of the storm a more complex type should be negotiated, such as the one put forth by Picou and Marshall (2007).

#### *Importance of Exploring Culture in Disasters*

Gary R. Webb (2007) points out that disasters have a cultural dimension and social scientists should dedicate more time to studying it (cited in Rodriguez, Quarantelli, and Dynes, 2007: 430). Culture is important and shapes how people view the world that they live in, what they come to value and what they do (Webb, 2007 as cited in Rodriguez, Quarantelli, and Dynes, 2007: 439). Webb (2007) also points out that it is

impossible to study any aspect of social life without also studying the influence of culture (cited in Rodriguez, Quarantelli, and Dynes, 2007: 439).

Popular culture provides us with a plentiful scene of disasters. For example, when disasters strike news crews flock to the scene and provide around the clock the coverage and film producers make millions of dollars on special effects that tell stories of man against nature (Webb, 2007 as cited in Rodriguez, Quarantelli, and Dynes, 2007: 430). Cable networks provide continuous coverage of the weather and periodic recollections of past storms and video games give people the opportunity to be the hero and save an entire city from complete ruin and disaster (Webb, 2007 as cited in Rodriguez, Quarantelli, and Dynes, 2007: 430).

Researches know far less about the above cultural dimensions of disasters than they do about human response to disaster, particularly in terms social structure (Webb, 2007 as cited in Rodriguez, Quarantelli, and Dynes, 2007: 439). Webb (2007) finds this problematic and promotes further work in culture and disaster (cited in Rodriguez, Quarantelli, and Dynes, 2007: 439). The present study aimed to do just that. By examining newspapers a more comprehensive understanding of the cultural dimension of the looter in disasters can be obtained.

### **Looting: What Do We Know?**

Sociological research is limited in terms of examining looting, especially in the wake of a disaster. According to Kelly Frailing and Dee Wood Harper (2007) disaster research literature, for the most part, only provides speculation regarding the core causes of antisocial behavior, focusing almost entirely on crowd behavior or individual

motivation (cited in Brunnsma, Overfelt, and Picou, 2007: 54). Further, there is no systematic qualitative research that accounts for looting in the larger sociological context (Frailing and Harper, 2007 as cited in Brunnsma, Overfelt, and Picou, 2007: 54-55). Nevertheless, the literature that does exist is important and contributes to our understanding of the looter.

### *Looting Occurrences*

Quarentelli and Dynes (1970) argue that actual looting incidents after disasters are rare. Walker (2005) suggests that when looting does occur it usually happens in small groups that are covert rather than in large groups of people that are out in the open. Factors that can alter this include basic needs (food and water) not being met, a disaster area characterized by widespread poverty, and a poorly managed response to disaster (Walker, 2005). These types of conditions existed during and after Katrina, and in the year following the Hurricane. However, many of the reported accounts of violent criminal behavior proved false. This is not to say that criminal activity was nonexistent, but rather to suggest that the crisis created many stories that were later refuted (Bates and Swan, 2007). According to Bates and Swan (2007) many looters were not criminals engaged in breaking the law. Instead, they were people trying to survive a catastrophe in which normal means of obtaining necessities had been withdrawn and where government had failed to help people sustain life.

### *Disaster vs. Civil Disturbances*

In contrast to other disaster literature, Frailing and Harper (2007) argue that looting may be the most common crime to occur after a natural disaster takes place (cited

in Brunnsma, Overfelt, and Picou, 2007: 53). For example, Frailing and Harper (2007) mention looting followed the San Francisco earthquake of 1906 (Morris, 2002); the flood of Buffalo Creek, West Virginia, in 1972 (Erikson, 1976); the flood caused by Hurricane Agnes in Wilkes Barre, Pennsylvania, in 1972 (Siman, 1977); and the earthquake that hit Tangshan, China, in 1976 (Zhou, 1997). Moreover, Frailing and Harper (2007) also conclude that looting did occur in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in 2005 (cited in Brunnsma, Overfelt, and Picou, 2007: 53).

Moreover, within disaster literature, there is a widespread notion that looting is nonexistent in the wake of natural disasters. However, it does occur in civil disturbances, such as riots. Dynes and Quarantelli (1968) cite a review of natural disasters conducted by the Disaster Center of Ohio State University that found extremely low verifiable rates in forty natural disasters throughout the United States (Frailing and Harper, 2007 as cited in Brunnsma, Overfelt, and Picou, 2007: 54). Further, Dynes and Quarantelli (1968) argue that the little looting that does emerge may be due to a continual civil disturbance (Frailing and Harper, 2007 as cited in Brunnsma, Overfelt, and Picou, 2007: 54). In their study, Dynes and Quarantelli (1968) conclude that looting during civil disturbances in the 1960's was an attempt to redistribute property (Frailing and Harper, 2007 as cited in Brunnsma, Overfelt, and Picou, 2007: 54).

Later, Dynes and Quarantelli (1968) added to their research that looting during civil disturbances is usually done by local residents in full view of others with their support (Frailing and Harper, 2007 as cited in Brunnsma, Overfelt, and Picou, 2007: 54). On the other hand, Dynes and Quarantelli (1968) also argue that looting after natural

disasters is committed by outsiders with no support of the locals (Frailing and Harper, 2007 as cited in Brunnsma, Overfelt, and Picou, 2007: 54). The right to property during a civil disturbance becomes collective instead of individual. Therefore, Quarantelli and Dynes (1970) maintain looting becomes normative and as a result, looting in these types of circumstances is meant as a way of protest against the conditions that started the civil disturbance in the first place (Frailing and Harper, 2007 as cited in Brunnsma, Overfelt, and Picou, 2007: 54).

### **Media's Portrayal of Katrina**

#### *Images of Looting*

Many pictures shown in the media after Katrina were displayed with little or no interpretation. Benjamin R. Bates and Rukhsana Ahmed (2007) argue that this inconsistency was so great that, in some cases, information was dismissed when it contradicted the images (cited in Bates and Swan, 2007: 195). Bates and Ahmed (2007) provide an example of an exchange between Sean Hannity of Fox News and Louisiana Attorney General Charles Foti that drives home this point:

HANNITY: These images of looting have literally shocked a nation, how bad is it?

FOTI: I flew over the area myself today. And there were few people on the street at the time I flew over. But we will aggressively...

HANNITY: Can I interrupt you, Charles? You seem to be minimizing it, but the images that we have and that we have been showing, do not really back up what you are saying. (Hannity and Colmes, 2005 as cited in Bates and Swan, 2007: 195)

What happened in the above was passage was a difference of observation. Foti, an eyewitness, reported there was little looting, while Hannity relied on only images from



his studio in New York which may not have been representative (Bates and Ahmed, 2007 as cited in Bates and Swan, 2007: 196). In addition, the same images were shown over and over, even though more cases of looting may not have occurred. Foti recognized the limits of his observation, but Hannity did not recognize similar limits. Instead, Hannity claimed the images were more real than Foti's direct observations (Bates and Ahmed, 2007 as cited in Bates and Swan, 2007: 196).

In sum, Bates and Ahmed (2007) argue that the media portrayal of Katrina in the first seventy-two hours following the event was problematic (cited in Bates and Swan, 2007: 197). They refer to the way particular news networks (CNN and Fox News) framed the reporting on Katrina as “disaster pornography” (cited in Bates and Swan, 2007: 197). Viewers that tuned in could not consider themselves “well-informed” (Bates and Ahmed, 2007 as cited in Bates and Swan, 2007: 197) People not only watched for information but for entertainment purposes. In the end, media viewers fell victim to “voyeurism” (Bates and Ahmed as cited in Bates and Swan, 2007: 197). In other words, Bates and Ahmed (2007) make the argument that the images of Katrina fancied the sense of sight, not cognition (Lester and Ross, 2003 as cited in Bates and Swan, 2007:197).

### *Chaos and Race Relations*

Shortly after Katrina made its way out of New Orleans, the national press painted the city as chaotic and being under siege. For the next week reports of looting and violence were highlighted in the Superdome and Convention Center (Agid, 2007 as cited in Bates and Swan, 2007: 67). Images in the press gave the impression that those that stayed in New Orleans were “out of control,” “wild,” “thugs” and “criminals” (Agid,

2007 as cited in Bates and Swan, 2007: 67). Shana Agid (2007) argues that these descriptions were mostly applied to the black residents of New Orleans who survived the storm (cited in Bates and Swan: 67). These were the individuals who lacked the resources to leave even when Mayor Nagin issued a mandatory order to evacuate. To drive the point home even further, two photographs circulated in the media of people making their way through chest-deep water with items they had taken from stores (Agid, 2007 as cited in Bates and Swan, 2007: 67). One photo featured two white or light skinned people with a caption stated that the pair had “found” the items. The other photo, that featured a black person, said he had “looted” the items (Agid 2007, as cited in Bates and Swan, 2007: 67). Agid (2007) argues that many felt these were clear signs that black New Orleans were being criminalized (cited in Bates and Swan, 2007: 68).

### *Exaggerated Claims*

Russell R. Dynes and Havidan Rodriguez (2007) argue that the media’s portrayal after Katrina was exaggerated, oversimplified and irrational (cited in Brunnsma, Overfelt, and Picou, 2007). Through their analysis they find and expose frames used by the media. Dynes and Rodriguez (2007) discuss five frames that emerged from their study. The frames identified include “finding damage,” “finding death,” “finding help,” “finding authority,” and “finding the bad guys” (cited in Brunnsma, Overfelt, and Picou 2007: 25). The latter frame becomes of interest for this study. The “bad guys” that Dynes and Rodriguez (2007) refer to, include those who looted during Katrina’s aftermath (cited in Brunnsma, Overfelt, and Picou, 2007).

Dynes and Rodriguez (2007) maintain that while it is common for rumors of all sorts of antisocial behavior and looting to emerge after a disaster, the sheer volume of rumors written in newspapers were unparalleled in Katrina (cited in Brunnsma, Overfelt, and Picou, 2007: 29). For example, reports from within the Superdome maintained that 200 dead bodies were inside. The actual total was six; of these, four died of natural causes, one committed suicide and the other from a drug overdose (Dynes and Rodriguez, 2007 as cited in Brunnsma, Overfelt, and Picou, 2007: 29). In reference to looting, different observers can draw different conclusions. For instance, is that person shifting through the belongings of a friend or relative or are they looting? Is the shopping cart that person is pushing filled with their own clothing that they savaged from their flooded home or did they steal it from a local clothing store? According to Dynes and Rodriguez (2007) claims of looting after a disaster are common but valid cases are rare (cited in Brunnsma, Overfelt, and Picou, 2007: 30).

Dynes and Rodriguez (2007) argue that the media frame disasters in terms of the themes described here (i.e. finding the bad guys) because the information they report (inaccurate or not) significantly impacts how organizations, governments and the general populations will perceive disasters (cited in Brunnsma, Overfelt, and Picou, 2007: 32). Dynes (1998) argues that the media define what a disaster is (Dynes and Rodrigeuz, 2007 as cited in Brunnsma, Overfelt, and Picou, 2007: 30). Dynes and Rodriguez (2007) claim that the media can play a positive role after disasters but they also can provide biased and inaccurate information that exaggerates human suffering and loss as well as physical destruction (Fisher, 1994; Perez-Lugo, 2001; Rodriguez et al. 2006 as cited in Brunnsma,

Overfelt, and Picou, 2007: 32). The media also frames a disaster in these terms because these types of stories are considered “newsworthy.” They purposely pick stories that will captivate their audience to increase viewer ship and increase ratings (Dynes and Rodriguez, 2007 as cited in Brunnsma, Overfelt, and Picou, 2007: 32).

Rodriguez also conducted research with Joseph Trainor and Enrico L. Quarantelli in 2006. In their work, *Rising to the Challenges of a Catastrophe: The Emergent and Prosocial Behavior following Hurricane Katrina*, suggest that the mass media presented a dramatic picture of how individuals, groups and organizations in New Orleans reacted to the impact of Hurricane Katrina. The images that were broadcasted in the media were those that portrayed Louisiana in a state of complete chaos and disorganization; regression to animal-like behavior; and a complete loss of social control, agencies and personnel. The major argument presented within their work is that emergent activities in New Orleans showed a different and opposite pattern of those suggested by the media. Throughout the article it is argued that emergent behavior surfaced during Hurricane Katrina. Due to the fact that most of the citizens in New Orleans were not able to act in traditional ways, most individuals and groups rose to the challenge by engaging in new but relevant coping behavior.

In *Metaphors Matter: Disaster Myths, Media Frames, and Their Consequences in Hurricane Katrina*, Kathleen Tierney, Christine Bevc, and Erica Kuligowski (2006) discuss how the images conveyed by the media during Hurricane Katrina and the days that followed left impressions on the general public and also provided justifications for official actions that were undertaken to manage the disaster. Tierney et al (2006) argue

that the media promoted images even when the media organizations themselves had little ability to verify what was actually going on in many parts of the impacted areas. The initial media coverage of Hurricane Katrina's impact was quickly replaced by reports that portrayed disaster victims as violent criminals and opportunistic looters (Tierney et al, 2006). The same media reports presented individual and group behavior following the Katrina disaster through the lens of civil unrest. Later, news reports shifted again and began to represent New Orleans as a war zone and drew parallels between the conditions of New Orleans to those of Iraq (Tierney et al, 2006). It is likely that these media frames helped guide and justify actions undertaken by law enforcement and military units that were given the responsibility to deal with the emergency response after the disaster. In general, the media coverage fueled further arguments that only military power is capable of efficient action during times of disaster (Tierney et al, 2006).

In sum, the overarching theme found in these works uncover that the media's coverage during the unfolding of Katrina's aftermath was based on inaccurate assumptions and rumor. Further, the media did little to verify the stories they released to the public. Thus, making its coverage deficient and deceptive. Other social researchers reveal similar findings. The following include studies that exemplify this point further about media coverage but in a different social context.

Lepre, Walsh-Childers, and Chance: Managed care. Carolyn Ringer Lepre, Kim Walsh-Childers and Jean Carver Chance (2003), in their work, *Newspaper coverage portrays managed care negatively*, suggest that the news media is responsible for explaining and providing the public with information surrounding national issues. When

the issue is as complex as the organization, delivery and financing of health care, news coverage is insufficient and misleading. When it comes to the debate of health issues, the news media determines whose viewpoints are put out for public consumption, what aspects of the health care system are discussed and in what context.

Hardin and Zuegner: Golf during the 1920's. In *Life, liberty, and the pursuit of golf balls: Magazine Promotion of golf during the 1920's*, Robin Hardin and Carol Zuegner (2003), argue that there were many factors that contributed to the rise of golf popularity in the 1920's. Their work demonstrates how national magazines contributed to the growth and popularity of the sport. How the media frames an issue determines how the public will perceive it. Thus, it was argued that magazines were one of the true mass media of the decade and it contributed to the sports growth by the way they framed it.

### *Conclusion*

The literature offers insight into the different frames that can be extracted from the news media. The news media are often responsible for explaining and providing their audiences with information about important national issues. A key theme found in the literature is that the media can often be misleading and give insufficient information. Despite this conclusion, the media has been and remains to be a prominent vessel for providing the public with information surrounding national issues. The way the media frames a public issue determines how it will be presented to the public at large.

## CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGY

#### **Method**

The act of looting, for the most part, is a poorly understood phenomenon within sociology research. While the focus of this research was not to uncover when, where or why looting occurs, it did aim to explain how the idea of the looter is situated in American culture. In other words, it did not seek to understand the logistics of looting itself; rather it sought to understand the perceptions that Americans have of looters during and after disasters. Specifically, the purpose of this research was to analyze the social construction of looters during and after Hurricane Katrina. In order to accomplish this, I employed three major United States newspapers to analyze the idea of the looter in America. These newspapers include *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post* and the *Chicago Tribune*.

It is my conviction that newspapers serve as a prominent distributor of ideas to American culture. But just as newspapers writers create ideas, they also reflect them. Newspapers provide a mirror of reflection of the public's fears and values. Newspapers expose collective thought on a particular topic or group. Therefore, reliance on newspapers is a useful tool in helping us understand how the looter fits into our society as a category of person. Other researchers who have used newspapers in published research

include: Welch, Fenwick & Roberts (1998), Chermak (1992), Best (1991), Fishman (1978) and Lofquist, (1997).

I have selected *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post* and the *Chicago Tribune* for three reasons. First, each newspaper provides national coverage of news. Second, each newspaper has a large circulation. Third, each newspaper represents a different political spectrum, with *The New York Times* taking a liberal slant, *The Washington Post* a moderate slant and the *Chicago Tribune* a conservative slant.<sup>1</sup>

For this research, the inclusion of three different politically oriented newspapers is important for two reasons. First, by including liberal, moderate and conservative perspectives a broader view of looting frames were obtained. Simultaneously, bias was reduced because all three prominent political persuasions within the United States were accounted for. Second, by selecting newspapers with different political persuasions, the possible influence of political bias in framing the looter was analyzed.

*The New York Times* is distributed in the United States and many other nations worldwide. It has won ninety-one Pulitzer Prizes; the most prestigious award for journalism in the US which is presented each year by Columbia University. When referring to people, it uses titles, rather than last names. Its headlines tend to be wordy, and, for major stories, come with subheadings giving further details. Some conservatives believe that *The New York Times*' reportage have a consistent and pronounced liberal

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<sup>1</sup> The political slant of each newspaper is of my own assessment.



slant, particularly on social issues. A 2005 study, conducted by Tim Groseclose and Jeffrey Milyo (2005) of media coverage over the past ten years ranked *The New York Times* as the third most liberal of twenty major media outlets ranked by Americans for Democratic Action's guidelines for lawmakers' votes on selected issues of importance to liberals. For the year ending December 2005, its average daily circulation was 1,135,800 and its Sunday circulation was 1,684,700 (Audit Bureau of Circulation). It is recognized as the top circulating newspaper in the United States.

*The Washington Post* is the largest and oldest newspaper in Washington, D.C. *The Washington Post* takes the position that its news coverage is politically neutral; an assertion that has supporters and critics. Though the majority of paper's political endorsements have historically been awarded to Democratic candidates, in recent years it has regularly published several right of center columnists, including George Will, Charles Krauthammer and Michael Kelly. As of September 2005, its average daily circulation was 715,181 and its Sunday circulation was 983,243 (Audit Bureau of Circulations). It is the fifth largest newspaper in the country by circulation, behind *The New York Times*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *USA Today*.

The *Chicago Tribune* is a major daily newspaper based in Chicago, Illinois. It is the principal daily newspaper of the Midwestern United States and one of the ten largest daily newspapers in the nation, with a Sunday circulation of 957,212 (Audit Bureau of Circulations). In a recent statement of principles published in the Tribune's print and online editions, the paper's editorial board described the newspaper's philosophy, from which is excerpted the following:

The Chicago Tribune believes in the traditional principles of limited government; maximum individual responsibility; minimum restriction of personal liberty, opportunity and enterprise. It believes in free markets, free will and freedom of expression. These principles, while traditionally conservative, are guidelines and not reflexive dogmas.

The Tribune brings a Midwestern sensibility to public debate. It is suspicious of untested ideas.

The Tribune places great emphasis on the integrity of government and the private institutions that play a significant role in society. The newspaper does this in the belief that the people cannot consent to be governed unless they have knowledge of, and faith in, the leaders and operations of government. The Tribune embraces the diversity of people and perspectives in its community. It is dedicated to the future of the Chicago region (ChicagoTribune.com).

In 2004, the *Tribune* endorsed President Bush for re-election. This decision was consistent with its unwavering support for the Republican Party (it has not endorsed a Democrat for President since 1872, when it backed Horace Greeley, a former Republican Party newspaper editor). It has endorsed Democrats for lesser offices, including recent endorsements of Barack Obama for the Senate and Democrat Melissa Bean, who defeated Philip Crane, the House of Representatives' longest-serving Republican. The *Tribune* also reported on the scandals surrounding Illinois governor George Ryan (a Republican) during Ryan's previous term as Secretary of State. The *Tribune* endorsed Ryan for Governor despite this reporting.

In this research I utilized a qualitative approach. Qualitative research, broadly defined, means “any kind of research that produces findings not arrived at by means of statistical procedures or other means of quantification” (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). Strauss and Corbin (1990) also claim that qualitative methods can be used to better

understand any phenomenon about which little is known (Hoepfl, 1997). Further, qualitative measures are appropriate when quantitative measures cannot effectively describe or interpret a situation. Research problems tend to be framed as open-ended questions that will support the possibility of new information (Hoepfl, 1997). Therefore, the qualitative approach was desirable when examining how newspapers described the “looter” during and after the event of Hurricane Katrina in 2005 because it allowed for the discovery of new information on a topic that lacks considerable sociological examination.

## **Research Procedure**

### *Study Design*

The type of qualitative research method this research utilized was frame analysis. Frame analysis is a research tool that focuses on which parts of reality are brought to our attention and which parts are excluded (Goffman, 1974). Goffman (1974) argued that individuals classify, organize and interpret life experiences to make sense of them. These frames, which inform our interpretations, enable people “to locate, perceive, identify, and label” events and occurrences, thus rendering meaning, organizing experiences, and guiding actions (Goffman, 1974). In other words, frames can be thought of as cognitive structures that guide the perception and representation of reality. Frames organize our subjective involvement, they tell us how to relate to and how to feel and think about self and others (Goffman, 1974).

In defining frame analysis, Goffman (1974) assumes that definitions of a situation are built up in accordance with principles of organization which govern events and our

subjective involvement in them. According to König (2006), frame analyses that researchers speak of today are only loosely connected to Goffman's original frame analysis. Since Goffman's time there are three subject areas within frame analysis that have developed. These include: management and organizational studies, social movement studies, and media studies (König, 2006). The lines separating these three domains are not clear cut. They all deal directly with cultural frames but they rest in different settings. Although all three subject areas are interconnected and create a foundation for this research, it is my belief that the area of media studies will provide the most lucid framework for the purpose of this project.

In media studies, Entman (1993) is credited with its starting point. Data are usually collected from the print media and different forms of qualitative and quantitative content analysis techniques are the preferred empirical methods. According to Tuchman (1978), the mass media are responsible for actively setting the frames of reference that viewers or readers use to interpret and discuss public issues. Neuman, Just and Crigler (1992) maintain that the media slants the stories they present to the general public. Meaning, the media takes into account the public's decision-making process and judgments (Neuman, Just and Crigler, 1992).

Others have defined framing on a more general level. Triandafyllidou and Fotiou (1998) argue that frames are identified as symbolic-interpretative constructs. These constructs include images, symbols or beliefs shared by people within society. Triandafyllidou and Fotiou (1998) argue that each society displays a unique set of interpretive schemes. These interpretive schemes are used by people to make sense of

the world. Thus, the concept of frames refers to everyday use of such schemes that give social reality meaning (Triandafyllidou and Fotiou, 1998). William Gamson (1989), refers to a frame as a “central organizing idea or story line that provides meaning” to events related to an issue (157). Framing can also be viewed as placing information in context so that certain elements of the issue get more attention from a person. Nelson, Oxley, & Clawson (1997) maintain framing involves the selection and highlighting of some information and the exclusion of other information. As quoted by Entman (1993), “...to frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communication text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, casual interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation (53).” Todd Gitlin (1980), labeled frames as follows, “Frames are principles of selection, emphasis and presentation composed of little tacit theories about what exists, what happens, and what matters (6).”

This research drew upon the definitions of frames from Goffman (1974), Gitlin (1980) and Entman (1993). For the purpose of this research, frames select, emphasize and present some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more significant in written text and pictures, which consequently highlight a particular social problem, causal interpretation or moral evaluation. Frames are not consciously manufactured but are unconsciously adopted in the course of communication. Frames organize an individual's perception of media, public, or private communication, in particular the meanings attributed to words or pictures. Frames define which words or pictures are selected, emphasized and presented as well as the words or pictures that are not. Media frames can

be created by the mass media or by specific political or social movements or organizations.

Thus, the way in which the media frames an issue sets an agenda of attributes and influences how the public will perceive community and nation-wide concerns. The slant or angle that the news media takes influences how the general public will think about and accept a particular event. Therefore, the ways in which newspapers portrayed the looting that took place during Hurricane Katrina shaped the perception of the public about the looter. The newspapers also contributed to the popularity of the subject of looting and helped situate the idea of looter in American culture. These frames represent one way of analyzing coverage during and after Hurricane Katrina. The following section provides a fully detailed description of how the frame analysis of this research was conducted.

### *Sample*

The sources used to investigate this research question include analysis of the two weeks following Katrina in *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post* and the *Chicago Tribune*. I have chosen to use the two weeks following Hurricane Katrina for two reasons. First, analyzing data for a two week span keeps the research manageable for a thesis size. Second, this period provides the most in-depth media coverage of the hurricane.

The ProQuest and LexisNexis websites were used to obtain and retrieve actual articles. Using ProQuest and LexisNexis achieves, I searched *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post* and the *Chicago Tribune* during the sample period. An advanced search was conducted. All articles containing the words or phrases “looter,” “looters,”

“looting” and “Hurricane Katrina” and were selected. Next, I read the headlines and abstracts and eliminated those articles that did not talk specifically about “looters,” or the act of “looting,” in reference to “Hurricane Katrina.” In other words, the key words “looter,” “looters,” and “looting” had to be mentioned simultaneously with the key words “Hurricane Katrina” in order to be kept for analyzing. Headlines, and abstracts when available, were copied from Internet pages into word files.

The analysis included 59 articles. Upon reading each article looting frames were extracted. Only the sentences that described the context in which looters or the act of looting occurred were saved for analysis. The following two passages serve as an example of the types of sentences that were used for investigation and thus creating the looting frames. These particular examples fell under the frame “lawlessness.” *The New York Times* article titled, *Bush Pledges More Troops as the Evacuation Grows* stated the following about looters in Hurricane Katrina:

Hundreds of newly arrived National Guard troops patrolled the lawless streets of New Orleans. Beginning with the task of wresting control from thugs and looters and restoring order in a city that had all but surrendered to death and disorder after Katrina.

Another article in *The Washington Post* described the aftermath of Katrina:

The hardship and suffering that attended Hurricane Katrina when it lashed the city Monday morning had devolved by yesterday into something between a disaster zone and state of nature: Officials said thousands may be dead; shots report fired at a rescue helicopter and a hospital trying to evacuate its patients; trash fires burned and fecal matter befouled the city; looters and carjackers, some of them armed, have run rampant.

A total of 11 frames were originally extracted from all three newspapers. None of the frames were specific to just one newspaper. In other words, the original 11 frames were universal throughout each newspaper. They included: Age of the looter, chaos/lawlessness created by looting, crime committed by looters (other than looting itself), fear of the looter, gender of the looter, morality of the looter, race of the looter, violence perpetrated by the looter, punishment of those involved in looting, protection sought from looting and financial strain of home owners and store merchants due to looting.

Next, for each newspaper, frames were typed and saved into word files. I conducted a count to tally how many times each frame appeared in each newspaper for each event. For example, in the *Chicago Tribune* the “chaos/lawlessness” frame was extracted 17 times for Hurricane Katrina, rendering it the number one frame for that newspaper. The top three frames for each newspaper remained in the sample for additional analysis. The remaining frames fell out of the study.

### *Study Limitations*

According to Dietram A. Scheufele (1999), Entman (1993) referred to framing as “scattered conceptualization.” Previous studies have lacked clear conceptual definitions and have relied on context-specific, rather than generally applicable operationalizations (Entman, 1993). Brosius and Eps (1995) argue that frames are not generally applicable concepts. It is argued that research on framing is characterized by theoretical and empirical vagueness (Scheufele, 1999). As quoted by Scheufele (1999), “Partly because



of these vague conceptualizations, the term *framing* has been used repeatedly to label similar but distinctly different approaches.”

König (2006) maintains that qualitative frame analysis studies rarely reveal the type of measurement that was used. Even in studies that are well documented, it is hard to pull out which mechanisms were used to arrive at particular frames and how they have been measured empirically. However, also König (2006) argues that frames do not limit, rather they enable the perception of and communication of physical and social reality. For Goffman, Gitlin and Gans frames are mandatory for communications. Frames are scaffolds needed for any type of creditable story (König, 2006).

Frames analysis looks for key themes within a text and shows how cultural themes shape our understanding of events. Within the media, frame analysis shows how aspects of the language and structure of news items emphasize certain aspects and omits others. As a result, frame analysis gives us a unique understanding of how the looter has been characterized within the event of Hurricane Katrina in a way that would otherwise be unreachable with more traditional qualitative methods.

## **Conclusion**

Limited literature exists on the social and ideological notions of the looter in American culture. This study expands our sociological understanding of the looter as a category of person in Hurricane Katrina. By conducting a frame analysis of *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post* and *the Chicago Tribune* a more lucid understanding of the looter during and after disasters is fashioned and thus contributing to the field of

sociology. The following chapter uncovers the results of the frame analysis in an attempt to answer the research questions put forth by this examination.

## CHAPTER IV

### RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to identify how major U.S. newspapers framed the problem of looting in New Orleans during Hurricane Katrina. The papers examined include *The New Times*, *The Washington Post* and *Chicago Tribune*. The papers selected represent three political voices in American social life: liberal, moderate and conservative. Articles were collected between August 29, 2005 and September 11, 2005, a period representing the onset of the disaster and its immediate emergency period.

The questions I sought to answer were threefold: First, how have looters in Hurricane Katrina been framed by the news media? Second, how have looters in Hurricane Katrina been differentially framed by these three powerful continuum of voices? And third, were media frames of perceived Katrina looters instrumental in re-establishing social order?

When the answers to these questions are pieced together a truly unique sociological story can be told. One in which Katrina can be “understood as collision between a natural force and what turned out to be a strangely vulnerable social order” (Erikson, 2007 as cited in Brunnsma et al., 2007: xx). The piecing together of this story takes root within the newspapers. It is here the idea of the looter emerges and so the story begins.

## **Looting Frames**

Certain pragmatic themes or frames emerged around the perceived problem of looting in newspaper articles. Eleven looting frames were extracted from the entire sample. In other words, 11 frames were extracted universally throughout each newspaper; *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post* and *Chicago Tribune*. I conducted a tally to see how many times each frame appeared in each newspaper. The top four frames for each newspaper remained in the sample for additional analysis identified here as property crime, lawlessness, policing, and race. The following provides specific descriptions of each frame as well as representative articles that appeared in one of the three newspapers; *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post* and *Chicago Tribune*.

Before moving into the specifics of each frame I would like to stress four points. First, the following frames were not the only ones employed by the newspapers. Instead, I make the argument that these frames and their associated discourses were among the most prominent. Second, these frames should not be considered independent of each other. They are, in most cases, tightly intertwined and mutually dependent. Third, the included newspaper excerpts provide examples of the common themes found throughout the newspapers, so less common frames fell out of the analysis. Forth, the following frame analysis should not be confused with a textual analysis. Instead, the aim here is to describe the cultural frames that lay below the surface of the text. In other words, I have deconstructed the text to find the existing themes. Next, I discuss each of these four prominent frames separately.

### *Property Crime*

Looting was associated with violent crime and property crime. Examples of these crimes include murder, rape, mugging, carjacking, arson, robbery, vandalism and burglary. Although looting was associated with numerous acts of violent crime, property crime was associated most frequently with looting. Specifically, looting and vandalism, in most cases, were grouped together. For example, on September 1, a *New York Times* story emphasized the forced entry by looters into various stores:

“...looters brazenly ripped open gates and ransacked stores for food, clothing, television sets, computers, jewelry, and guns.” (McFadden and Blumenthal, 2005)

A few weeks later, another *New York Times* story was published that reinforced the problem of the vandalistic looter. Here, looters struck before the city flooded. Looters tore open store doors, broke windows, forced their way into banks and destroyed vending machines in the convention center:

September 29: “The actual, serious crime began, in the recollection of many, before the catastrophic failure of the levees flooded the city, and much of it consisted of crimes of opportunity rather than assault. On the morning of Monday, Aug. 29, in the half hour or so that the eye of Hurricane Katrina fell on the city - an illusory moment of drawn breath, sunshine and fair breezes - the looters struck, said Capt. Anthony W. Canatella, the police commander in the Sixth District....Using a chain hitched to a car, they tore open the steel doors at the back of a pawn shop called Cash America on Claiborne Avenue.... At dusk on Aug. 29, looters broke windows along Canal Street and swarmed into drugstores, shoe stores and electronics shops, Captain Anderson said. Some tried, without success, to break into banks, and others sought to take money from A.T.M.'s.... ‘I saw Coke machines being torn up - each and every one of them was busted on the second floor,’ said Percy McCormick, a security guard who spent four nights in the convention center and was interviewed in Austin, Tex.” (Dwyer and Drew, 2005)

*The Washington Post* published a similar story of how looters broke into department and grocery stores:

August 31: “Even as the floodwaters rose, looters roamed the city, sacking department stores and grocery stores and floating their spoils away in plastic garbage can, watched unmolested in many cases by patrolling police and National Guardsmen....Looting began on Canal Street in the morning, as people carrying plastic garbage pails waded through waist-deep water to break into department stores. In drier areas, looters raced into smashed stores and pharmacies, and by nightfall the pillage was widespread.” (Gugliotta and Whoriskey, 2005)

*Chicago Tribune* followed suit. Once again, looters were caught up in acts of vandalism. They damaged vehicles and crashed a forklift through a local pharmacy:

September 1: “But the streets of the city, already awash in a toxic brew of sewage and seawater, faced another danger from roving bands of looters. They commandeered vehicles, crashed a forklift through the doors of a shuttered pharmacy and helped themselves to food, drugs, clothing, electronic equipment and firearms from ravaged stores across the city. Gunfire was heard throughout the day.” (Witt and Martinez, 2005)

All four of these excerpts illustrate the “vandalistic” qualities of the New Orleans looter as put forth by the newspapers. In many cases, those who looted were also sure to destroy property. Looters not only stole goods from various stores they did so in a destructive and threatening manner.

### *Lawlessness*

Looters were frequently described as uncivilized and unpredictable. Their actions were irresponsible, impulsive and in some instances life threatening. In the days following Katrina media reports constructed the victims in New Orleans “as lawless, violent, exploitative, and almost less than human (Tierney et al., 2006: 63).” A direct link

existed between the behavior of the looters and the atmosphere of the city. The impression was that the individuals who looted were not reacting to their hostile environment (i.e. trying to survive); instead they were deviants contributing to the chaotic scene by stealing what did not belong to them. In this way, looters were depicted as abnormal and lacking moral fiber. Looters were seen less as human beings trying to survive a devastating tragedy and more like heartless, robotic villains using the disaster to their advantage. For example, on August 31, a *New York Times* story categorized the looters as “opportunistic thieves.” Further, the looters irresponsible and life threatening behavior is highlighted when the shooting of a police officer is addressed:

“Looting broke out as opportunistic thieves cleaned out the abandoned stores for a second night. In one incident, officials said a police officer was shot and critically wounded.”... “These are not individuals looting. These are large groups of armed individuals.” (Treaster and Kleinfeld, 2005)

*The Washington Post* depicted looters as having a one mind track to steal. Instead of being concerned about the tragedy in which they just endured looters were painted as heartless villains using the disaster to their advantage:

September 2: “What could be going through the minds of people who survive an almost biblical tragedy, find themselves in a hellscape of the dead and the dispossessed and promptly decide to go looting? Obviously, not much: Stealing a rack of fancy clothes when there’s no place to wear them or a television when there’s no electricity does not suggest a lot of deep, subtle forethought.” (Robinson, 2005)

One day later, *The Washington Post* depicted looters as “the lowest form of human being haunting the Earth”:

September 3: “Looting is pretty bad. People are taking clothing, liquor -- things that aren’t life-surviving, material items. I don’t have a problem if someone is trying to get food or water, but beyond that, we’re bustn’em...What we’re getting worried about is people are starting to shoot us now...That’s the lowest form of human being haunting the Earth.” (Vedantam and Klein, 2005)

*Chicago Tribune* described the uncivilized atmosphere of the city after Katrina. In particular, looters were again described as “opportunistic” and taking advantage of the disaster:

August 31: “Across New Orleans, the rule of law, like the city’s levees, could not hold out after Hurricane Katrina. The desperate and opportunistic took advantage of the overwhelmed police force and helped themselves to food and water, as well as television sets, sporting goods and firearms.” (Barringer and Longman, 2005)

A couple days later a *Chicago Tribune* article questioned the moral fiber of looters. They were seen less as human beings trying to survive a devastating tragedy and more like abnormal, unashamed criminals:

September 2: “I have always been slightly amused by looters. They’ve always seemed unashamed to show off their lawlessness even with TV crews in helicopters recording their actions.... The criminal looters of New Orleans need to be held responsible for making matters worse in a city already overrun by hunger, desperation and disease....Even in the gravest situations, we need to maintain our humanity. Unfortunately, many people in New Orleans have failed the character test. When everything gets back to normal, I hope they are ashamed of themselves. And I hope they spend time in rebuilt prisons.” (Greenfield, 2005)



## *Policing*

Within the articles there was an underlining urgency to bring in as many police and military personnel as possible in order to combat out of control looting. The need for additional troops and police was directed at protecting the city from looters rather than helping citizens in life threatening situations. Articles frequently highlighted that search and rescue missions were to be put on hold so that police could divert more of their attention to protecting the city from widespread looting. For example, on September 7, a *New York Times* story emphasized the large number of troops it took to secure New Orleans from looters:

“With assistance from 4,000 National Guard troops and another 4,000 troops from the 82nd Airborne, New Orleans was now secure and ‘locked down,’ with looting reduced to minimal levels, said Warren J. Riley, the deputy superintendent of the New Orleans police.” (Longman and Chan, 2005)

A *Washington Post* article highlighted that search and rescue missions were to be put on hold so that police could divert more of their attention to protecting the city from widespread looting:

September 1: “Things have spiraled so out of control [in New Orleans] that the city’s mayor ordered police officers to focus on looters and give up the search and rescue efforts.” (Coats and Eggen, 2005 as cited in Tierney et al., 2006: 67)

*Chicago Tribune* published a story that discussed the deployment of National Guard troops from eight states to help with looting occurrences. Again, search and rescue efforts were to be put on hold so that police could focus even more attention to the problem of looting:

September 1: “The Defense Department deployed 11,000 National Guard troops from at least eight states to help with law enforcement, communications and cleanup amid reports of widespread looting, marauding gangs and gunfire....Blanco said she asked the White House to send more rescue teams, allowing National Guardsmen to help beleaguered New Orleans police stop the looting....‘Once we get the...National Guardsmen in here, we’re locking this place down,’ said Nagin, who late Wednesday said he was ordering some 1,500 police to halt rescue efforts and begin patrolling the streets to stop looters.” (Witt and Martinez, 2005)

### *Race*

In order to understand the issue of race in its entirety, as put forth by the newspapers, an understanding of how the news media first portrayed perceived Katrina looters becomes essential. As the hurricane made its way out of New Orleans, immediate news reports (primarily from television news media) alluded to the idea that blacks were the main perpetrators of looting. Of course, these very words were not spoken but they did not need to be in a country where strong racial divides still exist. This idea was seen, noticed, but unsaid.

Specifically, what was found in the newspapers was a reaction: a reaction to “make good” or to recover from the embarrassment of how Katrina looters were covered by the media immediately after the storm. In other words, the newspapers made an effort to neutralize hyperbolic language of the looter as this kind of “villainous” person. What the newspapers tried to accomplish, then, was a refinement of the initial media frenzy. In yet another way, newspapers were trying to clear the air or sweep away the mess of initial news reporting. And their way of dealing with the mess or embarrassment was to simply state the obvious: skin color had nothing to do with looted and who did not.

The newspaper articles were careful not to project racially charged stereotypes onto those that looted. A strong effort was made to debunk the notion that blacks were the main perpetrators of looting. An overall consensus and awareness existed that skin color was not a determining factor of who looted and who did not. While the newspapers' aim was to deflate the issue of race around looting they were forced to acknowledge its presence. Demographically, New Orleans, is made up of approximately 67 percent African American, 28 percent white, 3 percent Latino and 2 percent Asian (U.S. Bureau of the Census 2005 as cited in Brunsma et al., 2007: 99). With African Americans representing more than half of the population the discussion of race within the newspapers became unavoidable. For example, on September 3, a *Washington Post* story brought attention to the negative news reporting of blacks after Katrina. The underlying idea being that the individuals who stole material goods in the majority-black city did not do it because they were black. In other words, the article made it clear that race was not an indicator of who loots:

“And it was the looting in New Orleans that prompted M.J. of Laurel to e-mail me on Wednesday with this message: ‘Most people, especially non-blacks like me, cannot understand what makes black people go ‘berserk’ after a hurricane. Seems the media’s cameras only show blacks looting Foot Lockers, Wal-Marts, etc. Is that possible??? Is that something that only happens in poor black neighborhoods? Is it a race thing or poverty thing? Why don’t we see Asians, whites, or other races doing this or is this something the media only shows when blacks do it??? Either way, this sight disgusts most reasonable people...’ ...But M.J. wasn’t asking why people loot. He wanted to know why in this time of misery and ruin, black people are doing all the plundering....First, to state the obvious: The people caught stealing on camera in that majority-black city weren’t doing it because they were black. Just as raiders of corporate treasuries don’t do it because they are white. Skin color has nothing to do with the urge to take what doesn’t belong to you. Poverty also isn’t the reason the liquor gets stolen in a storm-ravaged city.” (King, 2005)

A *Chicago Tribune* article touches on this same notion:

September 4: “Coverage of Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath, particularly the focus on looting, may have created an impression that black New Orleans was on a rampage. It wasn’t. It is true that the vast majority of those that had no way out the city are black, but the images and reports of violence was unfortunate.” (Martinez, 2005)

On September 6, another *Chicago Tribune* article made this point yet again; blacks were not the main perpetrators of looting:

“I am worried that the first inclination of TV viewers of these events [looting] might be to say, ‘It’s all those black kids. They just don’t know how to behave,’ and so on, as though they were some kind of racial component to misbehavior. I’m here as an old white guy with baggage to say don’t go there. It’s not about race. It’s about where you come from in life.” (Madigan, 2005)

Now that I have established a description or a code of understanding for each of the key frames I will now illustrate their relationship with the newspapers. The following section ranks each frame within its specified newspaper.

### **Top Three Looting Frames Ranked by Newspaper**

#### *The New York Times*

The number one frame extracted from the *The New York Times* includes property crime. Lawlessness was number two, followed by policing in third place.

#### *The Washington Post*

The number one frame extracted from the *Washington Post* includes property crime. Lawlessness was number two, followed by race in third place.

*Chicago Tribune*

The number one frame extracted from the *Chicago Tribune* includes lawlessness. Property crime was number two, followed by policing in third place.

The following table illustrates these results. The numbers denote the ranking of the listed frame within the specified newspaper.

Table 1. Top Three Looting Frames

Looting Frames	<i>The New York Times</i>	<i>The Washington Post</i>	<i>Chicago Tribune</i>
Property Crime	1	1	2
Lawlessness	2	2	1
Policing	3		3
Race		3	

As shown above, *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* share their top two frames, with property crime taking first place and lawlessness taking second place. *The New York Times* also shares its third frame with *Chicago Tribune* which includes the policing frame. Property crime and lawlessness were extracted from all three newspapers. Policing was extracted from two, *The New York Times* and *Chicago Tribune*. Race was extracted from only one, *The Washington Post*.

These looting frames provide the groundwork for the rest of the discussion. From the extracted looting frames additional insight was gained into the looter as an idea, as presented by the media. But before I proceed I would like to shift my voice from a purely technical, analytical tone to that of a narrative. In other words, instead of treating the rest of the discussion as a series of outcomes and consequences of the extracted looting

frames, I will treat the analysis as a way of telling a story. The telling of the discussion in this way is important. Most who have studied the media would agree that what the media produces as news can be understood as a type of story or an interpretation of some sort. In order to convey the ideas of the looter as determined by the media a narrative approach is helpful and captures the atmosphere in which the looter was manufactured.

The use of the narrative in this way will link the most important ideas together in a linear, easy to follow manner. The scaffolding of a narrative will be used as a way of conveying the emergent ideas of the thesis. The sections to follow, then, are the beginning of something important.

### **The Arrival of Hurricane Katrina: Introduction of the Setting**

Early morning on August 29, 2005, Hurricane Katrina made landfall at the mouth of the Mississippi River near New Orleans. The hurricane came ashore as a Category Four storm on the Saffir-Simpson scale<sup>2</sup> (Drye, 2005). A hurricane of Katrina's magnitude hitting the Big Easy as long been feared by emergency management and government officials (Drye, 2005). In 2005, approximately 500,000 people resided in New Orleans and many of these residents lived below sea level surrounded by the Mississippi River, Lake Pontchartrain, and even several bays (Drye, 2005).

In the days leading up to the arrival of Katrina hundreds of thousands of residents began to evacuate the city (Drye, 2005). However, some residents remained behind and weathered what Mother Nature had in store. Bill Quigley (2006), a civil and human rights

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<sup>2</sup> The Saffir-Simpson scale ranks hurricanes from one to five according to wind speeds and destructive potential.

lawyer and Professor of Law at Loyola University New Orleans School of Law and his wife Debbie were among those that stayed. He writes of his experience in his article, “Six Months After Katrina: Who was Left Behind-Then and Now.” Quigley’s wife worked as an oncology nurse in a New Orleans hospital. She volunteered to work during the hurricane so that the nurses with children could evacuate with their families (Quigley, 2006). He explains the scene at the hospital as something out of a horror film, “There were about 2000 people huddled in the hospital - patients, staff and families of staff and patients. Plate glass windows exploded in the lobby and on crosswalks and on several floors. Water poured in through broken windows, ceilings, and down the elevator shafts. Eight feet of brown floodwater surrounded us.” Quigley (2006) and his wife soon realized evacuating the city safely was going to be a difficult endeavor. According to Quigley (2006) if you wanted to leave the city then it was solely your responsibility; “self help” as he termed it. Quigley (2006) recalls what he saw on that frightful day from the hospital after the storm ravaged the city:

In the hospital, we could not see who was left behind because we did not have electricity or TV. We certainly knew the 2000 of us were left behind, and from the hospital we could see others. Some were floating in the street - face down. Some were paddling down the street - helping older folks get to high ground. Some were swimming down the streets. We could hear people left behind screaming for help from rooftops. We routinely heard gunshots as people trapped on rooftops tried to get the attention of helicopters crisscrossing the skies above. We could see the people trapped in the Salvation Army home a block away. We could hear breaking glass as people scrambled to get away from flooded one story homes and into the higher ground of several story office buildings. We saw people swimming to the local drugstore and swimming out with provisions. But we had no idea how many were actually left behind. The poor, especially those without cars, were left behind. Twenty-seven percent of the people of New Orleans did not have access to a car. Government authorities knew in advance that 100,000 citizens of New Orleans did not have means of personal transportation.

Greyhound and Amtrak stopped service on the Saturday before the hurricane. These are people who did not have cars because they were poor - over 125,000 people, 27% of the people of New Orleans, lived below the very low federal poverty level before Katrina.

The poverty stricken citizens of New Orleans that Quigley describes above were not only fighting for survival after Katrina (and arguably before Katrina as well) but some of them also became a target for the media. The media portrayed many of the trapped citizens of New Orleans as a threat rather than a population in need. News reports portrayed many of these individuals as deviants that were acting out and taking advantage of the devastation within the city. Among these reports was that of wide-spread looting. In fact, claims of looting created such media frenzy that it became a central theme in news coverage in the days following the disaster. This is the point in which the current story begins or grows. The time directly following the hurricane when devastation and desperation in the city was at its highest; when for the most part, only the poverty stricken population, rescue workers and various government officials had access to the city; the point in time in which looters were put under a lens and made front page news all across America. This moment is truly unique and plays an important role in the story. I shall return to the importance of this moment a little later but right now I will introduce the main character of the story; the New Orleans looter as a social kind.

### **The Main Character**

#### *The Looter as a Social Kind*

Rather than moving directly into the characteristics or qualities that make up the New Orleans looter I would first like to establish the looter as a “social kind.” This will



help to situate the looter conceptually. It provides the foundation for how the looter in the rest of the analysis or “story” should be approached and thought about.

Steve Kroll-Smith, in his study of the 2005 flooding of New Orleans and the 1906 earthquake and fire in San Francisco, draws on the early Chicago School of Sociology and the more recent work of Ian Hacking and Douglas Massey among others to argue for the importance of the “social kind” in urban centers. For Hacking a social kind is not a physical person. Rather, a social kind is a type of social construction or idea (Hacking, 1999 as cited in Kroll-Smith, forthcoming). Charles Tilly (1998) considers a category as a socially and culturally organized system of distinction (cited in Kroll-Smith, forthcoming). The distinctions of a category such as “looter” and “finder” are created by groups of people who hold the power and control the means within society. As a result, these categories aid in the resolution of organizational problems within society (Tilly, 1998 as cited in Kroll-Smith, forthcoming). Massey (2007) takes this one step further and argues that creating and sustaining different social categories are important to the order of urban life (cited in Kroll-Smith, forthcoming).

Specifically, Kroll-Smith (forthcoming) argues that densely populated areas negate “close and personal ties with all but a few.” As a result, people or groups that reside outside of our habitual social circles become “known only by their most elemental or categorical features.” These features include but are not limited to language or dialect, skin color, type of dress and spatial location. In other words they become known as “those people” or “others” (Kroll-Smith, forthcoming). Kroll-Smith (forthcoming) refers to these others as “categories” or “kinds.” These categories or kinds are not specific of

any one person or group. Kroll-Smith (forthcoming) argues that these ideas or social kinds serve a valuable purpose; “they organize thinking about and acting within the always intricate web of human life.” Moreover, it is collective social and cultural forces that create the ideas of a specific kind or category.

In sum, I propose that the looter is an example of a social kind created in part by news media framing. Examining the looter in this light establishes how the looter in this research or “narrative” should be approached. The main character should be thought about as an abstract idea instead of a physically present human being. The main interest of the story is centered on the ways in which the looter was thought about and described, not of the actual looter as an individual. In the unfolding of the rest of the narrative the “ideas” associated with the looter, not of the actual people who looted will be the concern. The main character then, is not a living, breathing entity. Rather, the main character encompasses the social and cultural “ideas” of the looter as determined by the news media.

Now that this important distinction has been made I can now move into the characteristics of this “kind” as determined by the three newspapers used in the current research. The extracted looting frames (property crime, lawlessness, policing and race) provide us with a guide or an understanding of how the media portrayed looters after Katrina. Each frame represents an underlining quality of the looter. As we will see, the property crime frame represents the destructive nature of the looter; the lawlessness frame represents the out of control or chaotic elements of the looter, the policing frame represents society’s need to combat the looter and the race frame represents our nations

racial divide. In this way, the frames, as extracted from the newspapers, bring the main character, the looter, to life.

### *Characterization of the Looter as Presented by the Media*

Looters as established by the media took on a “villainous-foil” quality in New Orleans. Herein, the “problem” or the “conflict” of the story. Looters were categorized as the bad guys. In their role as adversary, looters served as an obstacle for government officials, the New Orleans police and United States military to overcome. In their role of foil, looters embodied morals and values that were diametrically opposed by those that held power. As a result, perceived looters were recognized as the villains while government officials, police and military were the notable heroes. In other words, a distinction was made in the newspapers between “us” the good guys and “them” the bad guys. In yet another way, a division was established among the “haves” and “have-nots.”

Examples of these villainous traits are illustrated by the extracted looting frames within the current research; property crime, lawlessness, policing and race. Instead of thinking of the frames in their technical or analytical nature think of these frames as traits or qualities of the looters. Again, imagine the looters as part of a story and their role is one of adversary. The most interesting stories have bold and unique characters that help thicken the plot and looters in this case do just that. The frames or traits as created by the media contribute to the “villainous” narrative of the looters.

In the following section I re-interrupt the persona of the looter as identified by the three newspapers; *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post* and *Chicago Tribune* by using the extracted frames. In other words, just as I extracted or pulled apart the looting

frames from the newspapers for analysis, I will now refashion them or put them back into the “story.” The aim here is not only to tell the story of the looter as achieved through the media but to drive the point home that the looting frames are not independent of each other. That each frame or characteristic of the perceived looter transcends into the next and vice versa.

### **The “Bad Guys” in Action: Making Sense of the Extracted Looting Frames**

#### *Chaotic and Destructive Nature of the Looter (Lawlessness and Property Crime Frames)*

News articles made it seem as if New Orleans had lost all social control and had surrendered itself to the lawless behavior of thugs (Tierney et al., 2006: 67). *The Washington Post* describes the televised news reports in the days following Katrina, “looters have pretty much taken over the Gulf Coast in the aftermath of Katrina. ‘The fear, of course’ said talk show host Tucker Carlson... ‘is that looting contributes to the sense that things are out of control, and that lawlessness begins to snowball, and that stealing becomes murder’” (Weeks, 2005). Carlson was not the only one to make the connection between looting and other forms of criminal behavior. According to other reports looters were not only participating in various acts of collective theft, they were also acting out in violent and deadly ways. Some articles even compared the Crescent City to that of a war zone (Tierney et. al., 2006). *The New York Times* described war-like events in the streets; “gun battles, fistfights, holdups, carjackings and marauding mobs of looters” (McFadden, 2005). A different *New York Times* article described the thoughts of a man who had volunteered his fishing boat to search and rescue missions, “A shotgun rested in the boat next to Mr. Lovett, who said shots had been fired near him on occasion

during the past week. ‘I don’t feel like I am in the U.S. I feel like I’m in a war. All the guns, the chaos’” (Longman, 2005 as cited in Tierney et. al., 2006: 72).

Some articles targeted the large amount of property crime committed by looters to help backup their claim of the lawless and dangerous behavior of looters. According to *Chicago Tribune*, “On New Orleans’ flooded Canal Street, The Associated Press reported, dozens of looters ripped open the steel gates on clothing and jewelry stores...” (Witt, 2005). Another *Chicago Tribune* article reported, “They commandeered vehicles, crashed a forklift through the doors of shuttered pharmacy and helped themselves to food, drugs, clothing, electronic equipment and firearms from ravaged stores across the city. Gunfire was heard throughout the day” (Witt and Martinez, 2005). *The Washington Post* reported, “Windows are smashed. Huge dudes muscle into an abandoned store and hustle out with stolen TV’s and boom boxes” (Weeks, 2005).

To add even more fuel to the fire, articles not only described the looters lack of control and destructive behavior; reports also touched on the looters lack of respect for authority figures such as the police. Some looters were brave enough to steal items in plain view of National Guard troops (Martin, 2005). *The Washington Post* reported that even the U.S. Coast Guard was helpless against ill-behaved looters, “Hurricane Katrina wiped out Coast Guard stations in Gulfport and Pascagoula, Miss., and looters wrecked part of its New Orleans base” (Barr, 2005). *The New York Times* interviewed Col. Terry Ebbert, the chief of homeland security for the city, “We have a major looting problem. These are not individuals looting; these are large groups of armed individuals” (Treater, 2005).

*Zero Tolerance for Ruthless Looters (Policing Frame)*

According to numerous articles the behavior of looters within New Orleans was so horrific that the only way to stop them was through aggressive policing and military action. To successfully combat looters the city New Orleans had to bring in additional police and troops. *The New York Times* reported, “Despair, privation and violent lawlessness grew so extreme in New Orleans by late Thursday that the city’s mayor issued a ‘desperate’ plea for help and other local officials, describing the security situation as horrific, lambasted the federal government as responding too slowly to the disaster.... ‘We need additional troops, food, water,’ said Joseph Matthews, director of the city’s Office of Emergency Preparedness. ‘We need personnel, law enforcement. This has turned into a situation where the city is being run by thugs’” (Treaster and Sontag, 2005). *Chicago Tribune* reported, “The Defense Department sent 11,000 National Guard troops from at least eight states to help with law enforcement, communications and cleanup amid reports of widespread looting, marauding gangs and gunfire” (Witt and Martinez, 2005).

Some police were even taken off search and rescue missions to help combat looting. *The New York Times* reported, “Things have spiraled so out of control that the city’s mayor ordered police officers to focus on looters and give up the search and rescue efforts” (Coates and Eggen, 2005 as cited in Tierney et. al., 2006: 67). Additionally, *Chicago Tribune* reported that “Because New Orleans police were preoccupied with search and rescue missions, sheriff deputies and state police from around Louisiana began to patrol the city, some holding rifles as they rolled through the streets in armed

vehicles....but on Wednesday night the mayor ordered 1,500 city police, nearly the entire force, back to traditional roles” in order to combat looters (Witt and Martinez, 2005).

It was obvious that those in power, such as the New Orleans Mayor and Governor, exhibited a zero tolerance attitude toward anyone that looted and they were going to make it their duty to ensure drastic measures would be taken by local police and military to stop looters. *The Washington Post* reported, “New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin said yesterday, ‘Once we get the 3,000 National Guardsmen here, we’re locking this place down’ .... ‘I have instructed the Highway Patrol and National Guardsmen to treat looters ruthlessly. Looting will not be tolerated, period. And the rules of engagement will be as aggressive as the law allows’” (Weeks, 2005). *The New York Times* reported, “Kathleen Babineaux Blanco, the governor, called people who committed such crimes ‘hoodlums’ and issued a warning to lawbreakers: Hundreds of National Guard troops hardened on the battlefield in Iraq had landed in New Orleans and had orders to shoot to kill. ‘They have M-16s, and they’re locked and loaded,’ she said. ‘These troops know how to shoot and kill, and they are more than willing to do so, and I expect they will (Treaster and Sontag, 2005)’”

*The Elephant in the Room (Race Frame)*

Last, but certainly not least was the issue of race. Michael Eric Dyson (2005) poses an interesting question, “How can race possibly be quarantined from a consideration of Katrina when it so thoroughly pervades our culture—the choices we make, the laws we adopt and discard, and the social practices that are polluted by its pestering ubiquity?” (19). The answer to this question, I presume, is that we can’t

quarantine race, especially in a disaster such as Katrina where 67 percent of the population were African American. But the issue of race, as told by the newspapers was not as prevalent as one may think. In fact, race was only extracted from one newspaper, *The Washington Post*, where it placed third; last place. However, because the issue of race is very much intertwined in our culture, especially within the Deep South, the issue could not be avoided. Dyson (2005) suggests white innocence and black guilt has been woven “into the fabric of cultural myths and racial narratives” (165). And is deeply embedded in society and affects every American institution, including the media (165). As a result, issues surrounding race in the Big Easy were sure to surface in media reporting.

Unlike the frames of property crime, lawlessness and policing, newspapers did not use race as a way to sell the looter as a “villain.” Instead, race was used as a way to acknowledge the “elephant in the room.” *The Washington Post* reported “First, to state the obvious: The people caught stealing on camera in that majority-black city weren’t doing it because they were black. Just as raiders of corporate treasuries don’t do it because they are white. Skin color has nothing to do with the urge to take what doesn’t belong to you. Poverty also isn’t the reason liquor gets stolen in a storm ravaged city....The looter on Canal Street in New Orleans and the corporate looter on Wall Street have a similar motive: greed. That is their taproot. And greed is no respecter of pigmentation, income, status or social class” (King, 2005).

Instead of pointing the finger at the looters, newspapers opted to debunk the myth that many Americans were thinking; that blacks were responsible for the wide-spread



looting. This myth was established, in part, from the initial media coverage of Katrina's aftermath. The newspapers wanted to offset the immediate hyperbolic language geared towards the New Orleans looter. The newspapers aim was to recover from the shame of how Katrina looters were portrayed by the media immediately after the storm. In the end, newspapers wanted to sweep away the mess of initial news reporting. And their way of dealing with the mess or embarrassment was to simply state the obvious: skin color had nothing to do with looted and who did not.

Further, when a primarily black population is put under the microscope in the United States the issue of race is sure to follow regardless of whether race has anything to do with the current situation or underlying problem. The newspapers' approach to facing the race issue was simply to debunk the myths that looting was dominated by skin color. According to Bates and Swan (2007) many looters were not criminals engaged in breaking the law. They were people trying to survive a catastrophe in which normal means of obtaining necessities had been withdrawn and where government had failed to help people sustain life. In other words, most individuals who partook in looting after Katrina were driven to do so in order to survive not because of their race. The newspapers' felt an overwhelming need to drive this point home; that race has no bearing on who loots and who does not.

In sum, looters were described by the media as uncontrollable and dangerous. They destroyed property and their behavior resembled that of war-like activities. Their behavior could only be detained by an excessive amount of police and troops. Articles reported that an additional 11,000 National Guard troops were called in from eight states

to help with law enforcement issues, the main culprit being that of looting. When it came to profiling looters the newspapers were careful not to step on any toes. Profiling was very rarely mentioned, but when it was, the newspapers were careful to avoid racial stereotyping. With over half of New Orleans' population being African American the issue of race became the "elephant in the room." It was something that had to be attended to in a country where strong racial divides still exist. Instead of falling victim to racial stereotypes of looters, much like initial media reporting did, the three newspapers, *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post* and *Chicago Tribune*, worked to debunk the myth that looting was based on race. Their way of "dealing" with the issue of race was to state the obvious: skin color has nothing to do with who loots and who does not.

Now that the media's narrative of the looter has been told, I can return to the unique moment in which the "villainous" looter as described above makes its first appearance; the special moment that allowed the main character to thrive.

### **When Looters Took Center Stage: A Unique Moment**

Disasters create a unique moment; the moment that directly follows the end of the disaster itself. In the case of New Orleans, this moment took place immediately after hurricane Katrina made its way out of the city and an awareness of the disorder it caused was recognized. It is the moment where society realizes that normal social order has been disturbed. It is this disorganization of order that I am interested in.

During this moment social stratification temporarily disappears. Survival takes center stage and all else fades. Black and whites, rich and poor are for a moment equal. "Us" and "them" are all of sudden dropped into the same playing field. Social order has

become so confused or non-existent that the social categories that were very much alive pre-disaster are for a moment voided for the sake of survival.

What makes this moment unique is the opportunity it presents. It provides us with the chance to refocus inequality within society. It creates a moment in which things could change or be otherwise. For example, on September 15, 2005 President Bush addressed the nation on the recovery of New Orleans. Part of his speech focuses on this very notion of refocusing inequality and race relations in society:

Our third commitment is this: When communities are rebuilt, they must be even better and stronger than before the storm. Within the gulf region are some of the most beautiful and historic places in America. As all of us saw on television, there's also some deep, persistent poverty in this region as well. That poverty has roots in a history of racial discrimination, which cut off generations from the opportunity of America. We have a duty to confront this poverty with bold action. So let us restore all that we have cherished from yesterday, and let us rise above the legacy of inequality. When the streets are rebuilt, there should be many new businesses, including minority-owned businesses, along those streets. When the houses are rebuilt, more families should own, not rent, those houses. When the regional economy revives, local people should be prepared for the jobs being created (CNN.com).

In sum, disasters create a unique moment unlike any other. It creates a time and place where all bets are off. Everyone shares the same goal of survival and rebuilding. Thus, class and race issues subside and a unity bordering on nationalism emerges. For the time being, working together with your fellow American, no matter what his or her place in society was before, makes perfect sense. This moment offers a great deal of promise and creates the opportunity to change stratification that existed prior to the disaster. The human spirit and the welcoming of social change are at its highest. It is here where we see the looter first emerge. Where the presence of the looter is most anticipated and

where the looter complicates the storyline even further.

The hospitable vision explained above does not persist for long. Somewhat ironically, it is the onset of civic and government relief itself that initiates a return to hierarchy and difference. To follow is a discussion of how the social construction of the “villainous” looter served as a means to end the invitation to change and begin the process of recovery which inevitably involves the recovery of an “us” vs. “them” social fabric. Recovery from disaster, as Brown-Jeffy and Kroll-Smith (2009) argue, by definition always includes the recovery of inequality. It is at this point of the story that we reach the climax or the height of conflict and struggle; where the idea of the looter interrupts the romance of *communitas* and the urge to help thy neighbor.

### **What the Role of the Looter Accomplished: Initiating Recovery and Reinvention of Inequality**

It is within this moment that the looting claims and rumors as described by the media are in full force. Bates and Ahmed (2007) argue that the way in which the media portrayed New Orleans within the first seventy-two hours following Katrina were problematic (cited in Bates and Swan, 2007: 197). Images in the press gave the impression that those who stayed in New Orleans and looted were “out of control,” “wild,” “thugs,” and “criminals” (Agid, 2007 as cited in Bates and Swan, 2007: 67). Shana Agid (2007) argues that these descriptions were mostly applied to the black population of New Orleans (cited in Bates and Swan, 2007: 67).

It is within this moment that these looting rumors helped to reclaim the social order that was momentarily lost immediately after Katrina. The rumors of looting were a

way to make some sense of the chaos. It created a type of structure, something society could grasp to and understand. These claims of looting were a way of establishing “us” vs. “them” once again. Looting claims re-emphasizes social categories and re-focused our way of thinking pre-disaster. In other words, social categories were re-established in an attempt to create some type of social order in a moment that was guided by utter chaos. It was the looter, or the claims made of, that provided the re-establishment of order after Katrina.

The story does not end here. It goes one step further to tie up some of the loose ends by asking the following questions; what did this re-claim of order suggest and why were looting claims of this nature such a powerful antidote in establishing social order again? I suggest there are two reasons for this: American materialism and the continuing legacy of racism. It is here that we come to the resolution of the story. Where I hope to bring clarity on why these claims of looting occurred. In other words, the following section serves as a way of unraveling the previous complexities of the story by providing a reason of why the rumors were so powerful.

### **Why Claims of Looting Were Powerful: The Resolution**

#### *A Functionalist Approach*

The resolution of this story uses a functionalist view to explain why claims of looting were powerful in the re-establishment of order in New Orleans after Katrina. Specifically, the views of Emile Durkheim are identified. In relation to crime and deviant behavior, Durkheim believed that crime served an important function. He viewed deviance in society as normal and argued that society couldn't and shouldn't rid itself of

crime because it contributes to the health of society. Crime is a necessary ingredient for social change as it represents a positive manifestation of social cohesion. It makes people aware of the interests they have in common. Further, deviant behavior offends the conscience of everyone in the community, which fosters a tighter bond among community members. Thus, crime offers society with an opportunity to draw a line or boundary between us (the good and moral) and them (the bad and corrupt). Durkheim's theory can easily be applied to the unfolding of Katrina. In particular, what I want to emphasize from Durkheim's theory is that crime can provide social cohesion or bonds among certain groups of people within society.

#### *Social Bonds and Boundaries*

The deviant behavior of the looters served an important function in New Orleans. It is evident within the newspapers that the looters' untamed and even dangerous behavior offended the conscience of many in the Crescent City. Newspapers revealed the community's disgust or dislike of the looters' behavior. This in turn, fostered a tighter bond among the "good" community members. The dislike for the looters created a sense of social cohesion at a time when the city seemed to be spiraling out of control. It helped to re-establish "us" vs. "them." In another way, the idea of the looter was used as a platform in which the re-building of social hierarchy or stratification could be re-built.

Although the bond interrupted the "unique moment" in which things could be otherwise (where social stratification could be eliminated) it did promote a quick fix to the chaos. It was something that made sense when all else fell victim to disorder and confusion. Using the looter to pit the "good" citizens against the "bad" was readily

understood and provided some type of normalcy. Thus, from a Durkheimian perspective the looter proved to be functional because the idea of the looter as described by the newspapers was able to bring social cohesion (or a social bond) of the “haves” or the “good” members of the community.

Next, these social bonds established social boundaries between the “haves” and “have-nots.” And what this boundary is primarily based on is material culture. Or in another way, the boundary between these two groups reflect what the other has or does not have; a wealth of material goods. What the looter represents to the “haves” is the fear of their “stuff” being taken away or threatened in some way by the “have-nots.” The next section reflects on this notion of materialism.

#### *American Materialism and the Legacy of Race*

When looking back over history the “haves” for the most part have been made up of whites and the “have-nots” have been made up of blacks. What this suggests then is that from a historical standpoint whites have held the control and power of the distribution of material goods (Henricks, 2009). Many would agree, this distribution as not been exactly equal. This uneven distribution of material resources by race shapes the behavior of social structures such as the media and consequently arranges social hierarchy. That is, inequality orders society by racial rank order (Henricks, 2009). To demonstrate the contemporary racial hierarchy sociologist Charles Gallagher (2007) demonstrates an array of social disparities in the following areas: home ownership, poverty, accumulated wealth, earned income, white collar employment, unemployment, among others (Henricks, 2009). Atop this racialized ladder stand white people. As racial

disparities indicate, the group position of being white translates into comparatively better living conditions and social standing in society. Therefore whites represent the privileged, and this position is accommodated by circumstances of social advantage (Henricks, 2009).

Within Katrina this social advantage of whites is illustrated by two famous pictures that circulated many media venues; the picture of the white person “taking” goods from a grocery store while the black person “loots” food from a grocery store. The caption paired with the white residents claimed, “Two [white] residents wade through chest-deep water after *finding* bread and soda from a local grocery store after Hurricane Katrina came through the area in New Orleans...” While the caption paired with the black man claimed, “A young [black] man walks through chest deep floodwater after *looting* a grocery store in New Orleans...” These pictures and their captions can be viewed on the *Infoshop News* website: <http://news.infoshop.org/article.php?story=20050830195514688>.

By using Durkheim’s theory we are able to see or make sense of the racial boundary that exists in American society. And crimes, such as looting, or the very rumor of it, were a way of re-establishing that boundary after Hurricane Katrina. The boundary is not just the establishment of the “haves” vs. the “have-nots” it also serves as a reminder of how much value we put on material culture. The looter, then, in its unique way, as Durkheim would argue, was a necessary ingredient in re-building social structure in New Orleans.



## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSION

Returning to the work of Picou and Marshall (2007) found within the literature review, Katrina calls for a shift in the conceptualization of disasters. As I approach the end of this research I concur with their affirmation. Katrina opened the eyes of sociologists of all backgrounds (Picou and Marshall, 2007). Sociologists interested in social stratification and race relations found issues of inequality and racism publicly visible in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. Social psychologists observed personal and collective trauma. Criminologists turned their attention to criminal activity such as looting, and the list goes on and on (Picou and Marshall, 2007). No matter what your sociological interest, the wake of Katrina was sure to draw your attention. Picou and Marshall (2007) state it best, “Katrina reawakened the sociological imagination for many and provided an enlightenment signal that reintroduced the need for understanding modern risks and promoting a more public sociology that is relevant to the social challenges that will confront society in the twenty-first century” (18).

The research presented here provides an initial step in this direction by addressing how one of the most prominent media outlets (newspapers) in the United States framed the perceived problem of looting after the storm ravaged New Orleans. Furthermore, with the occurrence of two major disasters (the earthquake in Haiti on January 12 and Chile on

February 27) already in 2010, where reports of wide-spread looting have again surfaced, looting does prove to be a problem worth investigating in the twenty-first century.

I started this project with a brief description of the imagery of Katrina's aftermath put forth by the news media. In particular, I painted a picture of how the media portrayed the New Orleans looter. This picture portrayed individuals trapped in New Orleans as a threat to society rather than survivors in need of help. As exemplified in the literature review, Tierney, Bevc and Kuligowski (2006) maintain that initial reports characterized victims as opportunistic looters and violent criminals. However, sociological research is limited in terms of examining looting, especially in the wake of a disaster. The current investigation was an attempt to help lessen the void within the literature by exploring how the looter was socially constructed by the media after Hurricane Katrina.

Based on a frame analysis of the *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post* and *Chicago Tribune*, four primary looting frames emerged from the current work: property crime, lawlessness, policing, and race. The extracted looting frames provide insight into how the media portrayed those who looted after Hurricane Katrina. The unfolding of the analysis told a unique sociological story by bringing the New Orleans looter to life.

The underlying idea of the looter after Katrina took on an ill-famed or villainous tone. According to media reports, looters vandalized, ran wild among the city and required "tough policing" in order to contain their behavior. It was the media that served as a social force that helped create and move these ideas about looting.

The portrayal of the looter in this light becomes of great importance in the moment after a disaster takes place: the moment in which society realizes that utter chaos

has replaced the normal social order. It is at this time when people pull together and set aside their differences. However, this warm and fuzzy feeling of wanting to pull together as one does not sustain itself for long. After Katrina, it was the claims of looting that broke this romanticized feeling of social justice for all. Looting rumors at this time contribute to the re-establishment of social order or in another way, bring back old societal order. This is accomplished because looters are a way of establishing us (the good guys) and them (the bad guys) once again in a time in which all social order is for a moment lost. In other words, singling out the looter becomes a way to make sense of the chaos; brings back stratification; brings back something that is familiar and maybe even comforting to those that hold more power in society. Claims of looting were powerful in this way because it was based on the age old struggle between the “haves” and “have-nots.”

### **Study Limitations**

This study possesses a few limitations. First, the frame analysis used a sample focusing on only the two weeks following Hurricane Katrina. An analysis that explores a different time period or a longer time period may produce different results. Second, the frame analysis only accounted for *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post* and *Chicago Tribune*, which limits its usefulness in generalizing beyond these three newspapers. Third, newspaper accounts written on disasters are one of the most accessible documentary sources but often the least valid. Because of the many uncontrolled bias of reporters and editors, particularly their tendency to overemphasize

the dramatic, newspapers stories must be used with caution (Killian, 1956 as cited in Stallings, 2002: 81).

### **Future Research Directions**

The phenomenon of looting is rare and has yet to be examined with much detail. This is even more so the case after disasters. Based on the current examination, continued inquiry into looting after disasters in our society is warranted. Further research could expand upon the current work by conducting a comparative study of Hurricane Katrina with recent disasters such as the earthquake in Haiti on January 12, 2010 and/or in Chile on February 27, 2010. Just as we saw in Katrina, reports of looting after each earthquake surfaced almost immediately. These disasters offer us real time looting opportunities to explore. A comparative study such as this would help the research community and society as a whole better understand looting during and after disasters in recent time.

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