California State University, Fullerton

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April, 1993

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Available at: https://works.bepress.com/dswanson/43/
News Media Narratives of Interethnic Isolation and Confrontation in Post-Andrew Dade County, Florida

Douglas J. Swanson


Abstract

Hurricane Andrew was the costliest natural disaster to strike the United States, and the strongest hurricane since the 1920s. Andrew permanently changed the landscape by wiping out entire communities and scattering the people who lived in them. At least 20 deaths were directly attributed to the storm. Property damage was calculated into the tens of billions of dollars. We can lessen the impact of such a future event upon people by gaining a greater understanding of the communication patterns that develop among survivors after a hurricane or other natural disaster has passed--particularly, survivors of differing ethnic and cultural backgrounds. By understanding the isolation that these people perceived as a result of the disruption of their physical environment--and then noting their communicative interactions that followed--we may be able to develop more effective strategies to help future victims cope. This article examines nationally circulated newspaper accounts of the actions of members of differing ethnic groups in Dade County, Florida. Narratives studied were taken from nationally-circulated newspapers based in close proximity to the hurricane - damaged area: The Dallas Morning News, The New York Times, USA Today, The Christian Science Monitor, and The Wall Street Journal. The author examined articles that appeared in the ten days immediately after the storm--between August 25, 1992 and September 3, 1992. Through the analysis and examination of the papers' narratives, the author shows show how the hurricane resulted in de facto social segregation of members of ethnic minority groups. The author shows how members of these minority groups were unable to communicate effectively and have their needs met by rescue and relief workers--and how these people found themselves engaged in conflict as a result of their isolation from effective electronic communication, isolation from the geographic centers of power, and isolation from the financial mainstream within which the ethnic majority competes to obtain services and supplies. By studying the narratives and examining the outcome of the ethnic isolation they identify, it is hoped that we can better understand why people find themselves in conflict after a natural disaster--and what we can do to minimize this isolation and conflict cycle in the future.

Warning: The findings of this paper have been considered dangerous. I wrote this paper in 1993, while I was in graduate school. Three years later, I was in my first full-time teaching job - at Oklahoma Baptist University. A newspaper reporter learned about this paper, and came out to interview me. The story was published. I then received a terse memo from OBU's president, Mark Brister. Seemingly unaware that I produced the research before OBU hired me, Brister informed me that research with "negative" findings reflected poorly on OBU. I was instructed not to perform such "negative" research in the future (as if the results of research can be foreseen before the initiation of the research). I was also told never again to speak with a journalist without the permission of the President's Office. (I held OBU's endowed chair in journalism. Oh, the irony.)
Current Understandings

Ethnicity is a term that refers to "the use of some aspect of a group's cultural background to separate [the group] from others" (Gudykunst & Kim, 1992, p. 69). Conflict is "anything that prevents, restricts, or impedes the convergence of meaning... between two or more persons in a social setting (Tafoya, 1983, p. 213).

Interethnic conflict, though difficult to generalize, results from a disparity of meanings that others attribute to our use of shared symbols within the context of our human interactions across ethnic group boundaries in the environment (see also Fisher, 1978). Kim writes that interethnic conflict is a "group and an individual phenomenon" (Kim, 1989, p. 105)—a phenomenon which builds as a result of our fear and uncertainty about communicating with others whom we do not know. Gomperz finds that interethnic conflict arises from the use of "habitual verbal and nonverbal strategies that subconsciously affect judgements of [our own and others'] attitudes and abilities" (Gomperz, 1978, p. 29); a conflict which arises as a consequence of differing cultures coming into contact with each other (Kim, 1991). In an earlier work Kim cites Glazer and Moynihan (1975) and Gordon (1981) when she writes that interethnic conflict is an effect which can result from social separations and scarce resources (Kim, 1989).

Such was obviously a major contributing variable in post-Andrew Dade County, Florida, following the 1992 storm. Members of different ethnic groups found themselves isolated from each other. They found themselves in an environment where they had little control over the distribution of scarce resources, in an area with a history of ethnic and racial "marginalization" (Allman, 1987), in a state where the quantity and quality of municipal services to minority neighborhoods has consistently fallen behind that offered to whites (Button, 1989). As a consequence, these people of different ethnic and cultural backgrounds found themselves in conflict situations.

Through study of some of these conflict situations, the author believes we can build a greater understanding of how people of different backgrounds interact following a natural disaster. An understanding of the phenomena at work could lead to better distribution of relief efforts after future environmental disasters—so people of differing social groups will feel less threatened by their surroundings and less isolated from their communities.
To gather data on interethnic conflict in the aftermath of hurricane Andrew, the author examined articles published in nationally circulated newspapers between August 25, 1992 and September 3, 1992—the first ten days after the storm. All articles related to the storm from The Dallas Morning News, The New York Times, USA Today, The Christian Science Monitor and The Wall Street Journal were read by the author; articles containing narrative accounts of conflict among people of differing ethnic backgrounds in Dade County were pulled for rhetorical analysis in this study. The author's analysis takes the narrative perspective as espoused by W.R. Fisher (1987), in that it assigns relevance and worth to "stories of living" portrayed in the narrative (Fisher, 1987, p. 58).

The narrative paradigm implies that human communication should be viewed as historical as well as situational, as stories or accounts competing with other stories or accounts purportedly constituted by good reasons, as rational when the stories satisfy the demands of narrative probability and narrative fidelity, and as inevitably moral inducements (Fisher, 1987, p. 59).

The Setting

Dade County, Florida is one of the largest and most ethnically diverse metropolitan areas in the United States. It encompasses 1,955 square miles and includes Miami, Miami Beach, Coral Gables and outlying communities of Kendall, Cutler Ridge, Florida City, Homestead and the Florida Keys—the southeastern tip of the state.

Dade County's population, like that of many coastal "sun belt" areas, grew dramatically during the 1980s. The current population of 1.9 million grew by 19.2% between 1980 and 1990, making Dade County the tenth most populated county in the U.S. (Slater & Hall, 1992).

Dade County's population is racially mixed, according to Slater and Hall (1992):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Population</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>522,000</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>398,000</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>26,000</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>953,000</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Clements claims 36% of Dade County's residents were born on foreign soil (Clements, 1987).
Isolation and Confrontation

Much of the population is comprised of elderly and retired people. More than 360,000 residents are older than 60 (Castaneda & Sharp, 1992; Nordheimer, 1992)—a figure that represents "more than the total elderly populations of 19 states" (Castaneda & Sharp, 1992, p. 2A). At least 265,000 Dade County residents are Social Security pension recipients (Slater & Hall, 1992); many of these people moved to Dade County to enjoy the temperate climate or to live near the medical and social facilities and services offered to retirees at Homestead Air Force Base (Nordheimer, 1992; Weiss, 1992).

Dade County's per capita income in 1987 was $12,401 (Slater & Hall, 1992)—as a consequence many of the homes are modest. But most of the 771,000 housing units in Dade County are well-built, as a result of "relatively tough" building codes (Applebome, 1992, p. 3A). Still, the county's structures sustained significant damage as a result of Andrew.

The eye of Hurricane Andrew hit land almost 30 miles south of Miami at Turkey Point, on Dade County's eastern coastline, at approximately 5 a.m. EST on Monday, August 24, 1992. Nearly every home in Dade County was damaged; hundreds of businesses were wrecked. Sustained winds of 140-mph peeled off roofs, shattered windows and leveled entire buildings (Belsie, 1992b; Garcia, 1992; Potok, 1992). At least 250,000 people became homeless; the damage total was said to exceed $15 billion in Florida alone—and included the estimates of damage to 63,000 homes (Belsie, 1992b). The insurance industry expected to receive at least 685,000 claims for damages resulting from the storm (Brannigan & McQueen, 1992).

An estimated 1 million people who evacuated prior to the storm's arrival (Potok, 1992c) returned, to find roadways blocked by high water, downed trees and power lines. Electrical service was interrupted; telephone service was spotty at best. Municipal water service was unavailable in most areas; sewer lines were overflowing and piles of insect-infested garbage were everywhere (Davis, 1992a; Potok, 1992b; Rohter, 1992b).

Patterns of Conflict

Most of the articles which reported on the storm's aftermath broke down the Hurricane Andrew story into manageable narrative by focusing on the damage, the rescue effort, relief supply distribution, clean-up work, federal assistance for rebuilding, plans for the future, etc. Since this author's study concentrates on
patterns of interethnic confrontation which were reported in the ten days immediately following the storm--
and in a variety of situations and locations--it will proceed by looking at the apparent causes of conflicts
among peoples of different ethnic backgrounds as they sought out what they most needed in the days
following Andrew: Healing Rhetoric; Physical Rescue; Medical Care; Food, Water and Vital Supplies; and
Shelter.

**Healing Rhetoric**

For many Dade County residents, the most immediate need was to believe that their suffering would
not go unnoticed--that the nation would respond, first with healing rhetoric and then with appropriate
disaster relief. The nation did respond, but the rhetoric was not geared toward healing and the aid shipments
were painfully slow. The federal government seemed locked in inertia; it could not get relief efforts into
action immediately after Andrew.

President Bush suffered harsh criticism from Floridians--and Dade County residents in particular--
who claimed the federal government and the Federal Emergency Management Agency were slow to respond
to the disaster (Cauchon, 1992; Disorganization hinders relief... , 1992; Lewis, 1992). Initially, the closest
Bush came to healing rhetoric was a five-minute Presidential address urging Americans to "pitch in any way
you can" on relief efforts. Dade County residents were not impressed. "It sounds very good but a little too
late" said resident Elsa Marenco. "I personally feel it's a political speech," said John Esquivel, who said he had
been told by federal relief administrators not to expect any government help for at least ten days. Others,
however, were more favorable. "If it wasn't for the federal government getting involved here, we'd be in big
trouble," said Rick Prave of Leisure City (Leubsdorf, 1992, p. 16A).

Local government representatives, already feeling the heat from their constituents, also were
growing impatient. "Where's the cavalry?" cried Dade County Emergency Management Director Kate Hale
(Kanamine, 1992, p. 2A). "We need food, we need water, we need people. If we do not get more food into the
south end [of the county] in a short period of time, we are going to have more casualties" (Slevin & Fiedler,
1992, p. 1A). At the same time, Hale expressed her fear that after the initial outpouring of support would
come indifference. "We're scared to death that the rest of the world is going to forget us... when it's no longer fresh news" she said (Kanine, 1992, p. 2A).

"It's a disgrace, a national disgrace," surmised Charleston, S.C. Mayor Joseph Riley, who has extensive experience in dealing with FEMA and testified before Congress to FEMA's failings in regard to disaster relief for Charleston's victims of Hurricane Hugo in 1989. "I'm not surprised with the problems they're having in Florida," Riley said on September 1 (Keen & Hoversetin, 1992, p. 1A). "Babies are crying, they need diapers, old people need water. Get the help in there--this is America."

The President worked hard to not assign or accept blame for FEMA's perceived lack of response expediency. "I am not going to participate in the blame game, and nor is Governor [Lawton] Chiles," Mr. Bush was quoted on August 29 (Dunn, 1992, p. 1A). "What we're trying to do is help people, and it doesn't do any good to go into who-shot-John." The President continued his rhetorical first-aid to attempt to heal a perceived rift between his administration and the Florida Governor over the speed and efficacy of relief efforts: "I think the governor would agree that when he asked for this massive movement of force, it was only within a few hours that we responded to that. ...[W]e want to move forward here" Bush said (Dunn, 1992, p. 1A).

Still, policy analysts predicted the public perceptions of the FEMA response could hurt Bush's re-election effort. "Disasters are times when people expect government to do something," said American Enterprise Institute analyst William Schneider. "If there's any delay or reluctance to act, then people really get angry--and not just people who live there." Schneider's comments were echoed by political analyst Stuart Rothenberg, who said citizens could perceive FEMA's inertia "as a failure of government" which would hurt a president "who already was being criticized for not understanding life's real problems" (Lewis, 1992, p. 24A).

Instead of articles relating what Floridians wanted to hear immediately after the storm--healing, comforting rhetoric--the nationally-circulated newspapers examined for this report displayed only bitter conflict. In fact, the conflict over FEMA's management of the disaster relief was the single most referenced issue among the publications examined; nearly every article made reference to the agency's perceived disorganization and the negative impact it was having on disaster management.
Isolation and Confrontation

Physical Rescue

The need for rescue response was apparent even before the storm had passed through the Dade County area, and well before President Bush says he was contacted to order federal assistance for hurricane victims. For some, however, this rescue response never came--or came too late.

Treaster (1992c) wrote that rescue workers determined--by telephone contact alone--that 9-1-1 calls which "were not life threatening...did not justify venturing out into the storm" while Andrew was moving across the peninsula (Treaster, 1992, p. A14).

In the 24 hours immediately following the passing of the storm, Dade Metro Fire Rescue received 8,000 calls, though most were said to be for minor problems. Crew response times were slowed as a result of roadways blocked by debris; all crews were ordered to carry chainsaws to allow them to clear downed limbs and other materials blocking their paths (Potok, 1992b).

Although few detailed reports of actual rescue efforts were published, at least one journalist (Potok, 1992a) did describe the rescue work as starting closer to the affluent, middle-class suburban areas and radiating outward--reaching the neighborhoods of ethnic minority groups and migrant workers last, days after the storm had passed.

While suburban Miami residents were benefiting from extensive rescue and relief operations, Potok says residents of the rural Everglades Labor Camp "got almost nothing" (Potok, 1992a).

"[B]y the time the effort petered out at the remote rubble of what three days earlier had been the Everglades Labor Camp, a hamlet of 1,000 migrant workers just outside impoverished Florida City, all there was left for Guillermo Rodriguez, his wife and four small children was a few cups of water. That left Mr. Rodriguez, 26, a bitter man. "About 30 minutes ago, there were some people who brought water. ...And that was the first help we got during this hurricane. Up north, they've got people out helping people who are complaining that they have no electricity or water. Well, we ain't got no home." He shrugged and scuffed the ground with a dirty work boot. "Migrant workers don't have a say in the government," he said. "It's always been this way" (Potok, 1992a, p. 26A).

Ironically, although the local authorities seemed unable to provide food and medical care to those in this migrant camp, they were able to spare no fewer than a dozen police cars to circle what was left of the settlement to search for bodies--again, days after the hurricane passed through.

About midafternoon, 12 police cars screeched into the Everglades [migrant workers] camp, sending children and their parents scattering. Metro Dade police Lt. Tony Socarras
explained later that there had been a mixup in communications. He had thought there was a crowd control problem in the camp. Actually, he had just received orders to empty the camp and search for bodies. . . . Police hurried [the migrant workers] off, saying they couldn’t promise when or if, they would be allowed to return to their humble town. "Now they’re throwing us out on the streets because there are some dead people in there," [a worker] sighed. "All we wanted to do was go home" (Potok, 1992a, p. 26A).

A FEMA spokesman defended the searches which began days after the storm, saying that rescue workers were still finding bodies at least 48 hours after Andrew had passed. Some of the bodies "have had to be left for the time being," he said--presumably as a consequence of a lack of heavy equipment to remove them from where they were found (Potok, 1992b, p. 13A).

Other journalists mostly overlooked what was apparently a primary source of conflict immediately following the hurricane--the belated effort to rescue people from collapsed buildings. Still, corroboration for the concerns raised by Potok can be identified in Potok (1992b), Treaster (1992c), Treaster (1992a) and Belsie (1992c). These accounts of the immediate aftermath, like the Potok piece (1992a), portray a rescue effort which failed to target migrant workers, rural dwellers and others whose homes were distanced from metropolitan Miami.

Medical Care

Pat Smargiassi stands before the half-homes left by the hurricane. She raises a thin-armed fist at a jet bearing disaster aid flying over. She takes this personally--help going to somewhere, but not to her. She tries to stay defiant and optimistic, but sometimes she gives out. When her toddler heaves with asthma and she can't get him oxygen. When her 6-year old brings her 9 cents to help buy food. Jobless, divorced, raising three kids on welfare--life was tough enough. But after Andrew, she finds survival is a daily struggle and even the easy things have become hard (Edmonds, 1992, p. 1A).

Although the official death count for Hurricane Andrew was recorded as 13 by the end of the week immediately following the storm, medical examiners performing autopsies on victims in Dade County believed many more deaths were directly attributable to the storm.

Several people died after their calls for help from the Dade County fire and rescue service went unanswered in the hours immediately before the storm. One of these victims was a 22-year old woman about to give birth. Elada Vargas of the Dominican Republic telephoned authorities at 3 a.m. with a complaint of a
severe headache. The fire and rescue service did not respond; Ms. Vargas and her unborn child were found dead the next morning of a cerebral hemorrhage (Treaster, 1992c, p. A14).

Other victims included a 51-year old Cuban exile who suffered a heart attack after seeing his business demolished; an 81-year old homeless woman who died of a heart attack; and three other elderly women who died of unknown causes while being evacuated from the nursing home where they lived (Treaster, 1992c, p. A14).

Treaster reported that as many as 30 other deaths occurred as a result of anxiety and stress, as well as a result of high winds which kept emergency workers from reaching victims (1992c, p. A14).

Days after the storm, still others were in need of medical care--but not getting it, either because they could not get to where medical care was being dispensed or because it did not come to them (Potok, 1992a; Potok, 1992b). Many of the victims most in need of care were elderly people who were scattered by the storm, left wandering along public thoroughfares, or "dumped" at shelters, hospitals, schools and nursing homes (Nordheimer, 1992; Weiss, 1992).

Even 48 hours after the storm there were problems with getting doctors and nurses out to people who needed them. Dr. Joe Greer, medical director of Camillus Health Concern, said he had been calling the Florida Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services since Tuesday to offer help. Dr. Greer said he was willing to offer the services of physicians, interns, nurses and nurse practitioners--along with vans, medicine and portable equipment. Unfortunately, he could not get authorization to send in his people and supplies. "We're available to go anywhere. But I've called and called, and nobody's calling me back. Everybody's having a meeting!" (Slevin & Fiedler, 1992, p. A1).

These meetings apparently were not very productive. Various accounts detail conferences between various state and federal officials over medical care--conferences which turned to bickering over "who was in charge" (Reyna, 1992, p. 1A), "finger-pointing" (Slevin & Fiedler, 1992, p. A1), a lack of organization (Disorganization hinders relief. . . , 1992) and delays (Potok, 1992b). One state official accused federal officials of "playing like a bunch of kids" (Kanamine & Puente, 1992, p. 1A).

Surprisingly, there was no significant attention given in the narratives to the demands placed upon
the emergency rooms, clinics and hospitals in the Dade County area—or the people who gave and received treatment there.

Pat Smargiassi said her family needed hope—and Monday, they got that and more. After reading about the Homestead, Fla., hurricane victims in Monday's USA Today, nearly 100 people from around the country called offering food, clothes, cash—and much-needed medical aid for Smargiassi's son, Drew, 3, who has asthma (Someone knows we're... , 1992, p. 2A).

Food, Water and Vital Supplies

"I'll follow anybody who's in charge. But we need somebody in charge right now!" said Coast Guard Lt. Mike Anderson, trying to get a supply-filled plane unloaded at Tamiami Airport. "I can't even get hold of the front gate" (Many still lack... , 1992, p. 1A).

Reports of the distribution of food, water and needed supplies in the days immediately following the hurricane portrayed an effort which—at best—was disorganized and not evenly dispersed. In some areas closer to metropolitan Miami, "a series of food convoys bumped into each other... though other areas were untouched" (Weiss, 1992). Meanwhile, isolated rural populations and members of ethnic minority groups found themselves receiving aid last—or not at all (Potok, 1992a; Potok, 1992b; Kanamine & Puente, 1992; Rohter, 1992b). In at least one case, ethnic minority members in the metro area did not receive adequate assistance, as "[t]wo black legislators publicly complained that black areas weren't getting adequate relief" (Belsie, 1992a, p. 4).

At the Everglades Labor Camp, for example, residents told of an elderly woman crying for water—and then drinking the dirty water released from a fire hydrant because that's all there was. "We have been starving," pleaded Maria Cortes, 30. "We have no money... we need water, food, formula for the babies, diapers. We need help." Another resident, Veronica Burgos, 14, talked of cooking the only food her family had left—a few pounds of rice to feed her extended family of about 30 people (Potok, 1992a, p. 26A).

Authorities claimed neighborhoods were unsafe to enter. "We've been turned away from dispensing food because of people fighting or people with guns," said Perry Ligon, a volunteer for the Red Cross. "I don't understand when everything is devastated why they don't help each other instead of stealing, fighting and
arguing" (Kaname & Puente, 1992, p. 1A). "It was like a bunch of ants trying to find food," one resident observed. There was pushing and fighting" (Kaname & Puente, 1992, p. 1A).

As was the case with the immediate rescue effort, the further victims were from metropolitan Miami, the longer it seems they had to wait for food and water. "We’re not getting much help from Dade County down here," said a municipal spokesman in Florida City, a community of 6,000 which is the southern-most town in Dade County. "We’re sort of forgotten." Many residents in Florida City picked through garbage for canned goods and other non-perished foods (Davis, 1992a, p. 2A).

Many who needed supplies, and went out to obtain them at disaster relief centers, were unable to find what they needed. "I’m shuffled here, there and there," said Dade County resident Mike Phipps. "I go to the Army and ask for a tent, they say go to City Hall. I go to City Hall, they said go see the Army" (Reyna, 1992, p. 7A).

Some people perceived an inequity in the distribution of relief supplies. "...Mr. Rodriguez and his fellow hispanics and blacks gather around a North Carolina church van for food and clothes, [as] three suspicious whites look on 20 feet away. "A lot of people are getting things they don’t need," huffs Henry Morris, a retired Army man. "These people don’t need this stuff," adds Bill Leeper, a maintenance man. "They are following these trucks around... that’s all they’re doing. Scavengers!"" (Belsie, 1992a, p. 4).

Much of the confusion seems to have been caused by a lack of understanding—even among disaster relief workers—of who was in charge of distribution of the supplies. Army spokesman Lt. Col. Bill Reynolds reportedly said U.S. Secretary of Transportation Andrew Card was in charge. Governor Lawton Chiles’ Chief of Staff, Tom Herndon, maintained that state and federal agencies were operating separately from each other and that there "is no single boss of all bosses" (Reyna, 1992, p. 7A).

To a certain extent, the delivery of needed supplies and assistance was delayed by roadways which were clogged with sightseers and an already damaged communication network which was badly overloaded. Telephone lines which can accommodate 1.5 million calls per hour were overtaxed with as many as 4.7 million calls (Disorganization hinders relief..., 1992).
Isolation and Confrontation

Shelter

If you're lootin' We're a shootin'
-- Sign hanging in Leisure City, Fla.
(Davis & Puente, 1992, p. 1A)

Much of the confrontation which was chronicled by the newspapers' narratives had to do with shelter. In many cases, conflict developed as a result of people defending their shelter--even though the shelter may have been reduced by the storm to nothing more than a pile of splintered lumber and aluminum.

Army spokesman Lt. Col. Steve Ritter was among disaster coordinators who confirmed that many residents were refusing to leave their homes out of fear of looting (Disorganization hinders relief . . ., 1992; Reyna, 1992). Although the Disaster Research Center at the University of Delaware has found over the past 30 years that "looting is relatively rare after natural disasters in the United States" (Davis & Puente, 1992, p. 1A), residents of Dade County seemed to take the threat of looting very seriously--and were equipped to act accordingly. Davis and Puente wrote that more than 129,000 Floridians held gun permits; more than 20,000 permits were thought to have been issued in Dade County. Police were taking no chances. "Since the storm we assume everybody is armed," said Fred Taylor, Director of Metro-Dade Police (Davis & Puente, 1992, p. 1A.

Residents reported that the sound of gunfire was not uncommon; several police and National Guard officers had been shot at as residents defended what remained of their homes (Davis & Puente, 1992; Kanamine & Puente, 1992; Lee, 1992).

At least one Bush administration official seemed to understand. "With all due respect to the tremendous job the Army is doing to set up tent communities," said HUD Secretary Jack Kemp, "folks want to protect their castle, their palace, that which they own or control" (1st tent cities . . ., 1992, p. 4A). "I don't feel comfortable with people I don't know in a tent [city]," one survivor concurred. "About now, you don't know who might hit you in the head and who might turn around and kill you" (Sharp & Puente, 1992). Others expressed similar fears, stating that they were "not about to leave their possessions behind" and that they would "rather be in my house than in a tent city" even if the house was nothing more than walls and a floor (Sharp & Puente, 1992).
Isolation and Confrontation

But not all the narratives were so fear-filled and negative. Several stories focused on members of families or groups of neighbors who huddled together during the storm and stayed together afterward (Davis, 1992; Edmonds, 1992; Garcia, 1992). A Florida City family, for example, rode out the storm in a ceiling-less closet before moving to a shelter (Garcia, 1992).

Members of four African-American families left their neighborhood the night before the storm, then remained together in a shelter afterward—having no homes left to return to (Barringer, 1992).

Residents in a Cutler Ridge neighborhood "where Florida-born families live in casual harmony with Jamaicans, Trinidadians, Haitians, Cubans and Nicaraguans" met in the home of Ronald Bruscia on the evening before the storm and "vowed to stick it out together" (Sontag, 1992, p. 1A). Afterward, members of the group ventured out together to search for gasoline and water in the ruins of their neighborhood.

**Analysis**

This study of published narratives was conducted so that we might be better prepared to deal with future natural disasters. The author believes that by understanding the threat that disaster survivors perceive in their environment, and by recognizing the feelings of isolation that these people suffer after a natural disaster, we will be able to explain why interethnic conflict is so prevalent in affected areas such as Dade County. As a result, we should be better able to develop strategies to help future victims cope. In this particular case, the author was able to confirm—through study of the narratives—a number of interethnic conflicts which arose as a result of people's perceptions of threat in their environment and inability to be recipients of healing rhetoric, physical rescue, medical care, food, water, vital supplies, and shelter.

Unfortunately, even though the narratives point to unusual communicative situations that resulted from a unique disruption in the physical environment, Florida is a multi-cultural state with a history of interethnic conflict (Hero, 1992; Button, 1989; Gann & Duignan, 1986). In Florida, Allman writes, there's a long history of isolation of disenfranchised groups—which is sometimes, but not always, a result of premeditated conflict. "They call it marginalization—[a] tendency to shove whole categories of human beings aside as we create new worlds" (1987, p. 130). This author does not find this unusual—Florida's history of
social segregation and isolation of ethnic racial and ethnic minority members does not seem to differ substantially from its neighboring states.

Certainly this small survey of newspaper narratives can’t hope to allow for a complete understanding of all the communication variables at work. Even though the author analyzed dozens of articles, they were gleaned from only a small sample of publications that detailed human events in the aftermath of Andrew. These newspapers tended to cover the story of the hurricane by looking at facts and figures of the rescue and relief effort--rather than reporting the drama of human interaction which is often best shown on television and heard on radio (Whetmore, 1982; Gans, 1972; Shales, 1972). Still, the newspaper accounts do offer sound portrayals of human action in the days immediately following the storm. Their narratives allow for". . .a way of interpreting and assessing human communication that leads to critique, to a determination of whether or not a given instance of discourse provides a reliable, trustworthy, and desirable guide to thought and action in the world" (Fisher, 1987, p. 90--italics as in the original).

The author finds the narratives to be reliable and trustworthy, with "quality of veracity" Fisher says narratives must have to be accepted as appropriate knowledge of human action in the world (1987, p. 78--italics as in the original). Through these reliable and trustworthy narratives we can easily see some of the immediate--and latent--causes of interethnic communication in specific situations and events which resulted from the storm:

**Needs could not be communicated electronically.** Nearly everyone in Dade County was in need of food, water, medical attention or shelter in the seven days immediately following the storm. The communication of these important needs was blocked by a land-wired telephone system that was not functioning in many areas and overloaded with non-emergency calls in others (Belsie, 1992b; Disorganization hinders relief. . ., 1992; Many still lack. . ., 1992; Potok, 1992b). People, especially those in the remote areas where migrant farm workers and other ethnic minority groups live, were simply unable to telephone anyone for help because they did not have access to wireless electronic communication. George Bush's Transportation Secretary, Andrew Card, could tour the devastation and still keep in touch with his family in
Washington on his cellular phone--but Dade County's migrant farm workers didn't have that luxury (Treaster, 1992a).

**Ethnic minority members remained together in groups.** Several narratives told of how ethnic minority groups assembled to ride out the storm--and then remained together in the days afterward, either in shelters or in what was left of their homes (Barringer, 1992; Kanamine & Puente, 1992; Potok, 1992a; Sontag, 1992). Whereas the newspaper narratives featured numerous stories of White hurricane survivors venturing out alone to obtain food or assistance (Belsie, 1992a; Belsie, 1992c; Reyna, 1992; Rohter, 1992a; Rohter, 1992b), only one published narrative was found which could detail such an organized effort by ethnic minority group members (Sontag, 1992).

**Ethnic minority groups lived in outlying areas, away from the base of power.** When rescue and supply crews left metropolitan Miami to bring assistance to Dade County, it was the ethnic minority groups in rural and southern-most areas who received the assistance last or not at all (Kanamine & Puente, 1992; Potok, 1992b; Potok, 1992b; Rohter, 1992b; Weiss, 1992). Ironically, it was the southern-most areas which were hardest hit by the storm (Potok, 1992c).

**Many members of the ethnic majority had the financial means to evacuate prior to the storm.** Of the 1 million or more people who evacuated, most who fled "appeared to have made the decision to evacuate Saturday night or early Sunday" (Potok, 1992c, p. 1A). This would indicate that these people had both the physical and financial means at their disposal--automobiles, gasoline, cash and credit cards--to leave immediately. At least some members of ethnic minority groups, such as the residents of the Everglades Labor Camp, for example, did not have this luxury (Potok, 1992a). They had to ride out the storm because they had no means by which to leave.

**Many members of the ethnic majority had greater financial resources at their disposal upon their return to Dade County.** Within hours after returning, many members of the ethnic majority were portrayed in the narratives as able to drive from place to place to purchase needed supplies (Belsie, 1992b; Rohter, 1992b; Treaster, 1992b). They had the means to pay the going rate for "critically needed supplies"--$900 for a chainsaw, $2 per gallon for gasoline, $15 per gallon for water and $8 for a single can of tuna.
(Treaster, 1992b). Members of the ethnic majority were portrayed as insured homeowners who were able to make claims against their property insurance (Wrolstad, 1992). Often, they received checks almost immediately (Brannigan & McQueen, 1992). In fact, as checks were being handed out, insurance companies had video crews in the area "to shoot footage for possible commercials," wrote Brannigan and McQueen, who quote a State Farm adjuster who said "Storms sell" (Brannigan & McQueen, 1992, p. 4A). The checks handed out by insurance agents were relatively easy to get cashed by local banks, which sent out "recreational vehicles loaded with cash" to many Dade County communities (Brackey, 1992).

There certainly were many more stories of human interaction than revealed in the newspaper articles that came under scrutiny for this report. But the narratives that were examined portray situations which helped open the door to interethnic confrontation. This confrontation was brought about as the result of: (1) lack of access to effective means of electronic communication; (2) isolation from the geographic centers of power; and, (3) isolation from the financial mainstream within which the ethnic majority competes to obtain services and supplies.

It is inevitable that hurricanes will again strike the Gulf Coast of the United States--and that tornadoes, earthquakes, fires and other disasters will on occasion ravage communities in this country. In order that we can better prepare for these eventualities and better equip ourselves to deal with communication problems that result, we should pay as much heed to the communication conflicts which result from the isolation of ethnic group members as we do to the number of portable kitchens and tents which are ready to be brought in to disaster sites. We cannot afford not to.


Barringer, F. (1992, August 26). Huddled in shelter, clan that can never go home. The *New York Times*, p. 21D.


Brackey, H. J. (1992, September 1). Florida banks deliver cash to neighborhoods. *USA Today*, p. 3A.


Castaneda, C. J., & Sharp, D. Many elderly still can’t cope. *USA Today*, p. 2A.


Davis, R. (1992a, September 1). As garbage piles up, so do health risks. *USA Today*, p. 2A.


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Lee, J. (1992, September 1). Bush makes return for a look-see. USA Today, p. 3A.


Many still lack basic necessities in S. Florida. (1992, August 31). The Dallas Morning News, p. 1A, 5A.


Reeves, L. D. (1992, September 1). Workers miss daily routine after hurricane. USA Today, 2B.

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Someone knows we're out here. (1992, September 1). USA Today, p. 2A.


Weiss, J. (1992a, September 2). Hurricane's aftermath is hardest on elderly. The Dallas Morning News, p. 1A, 16A.


1st tent cities open in Florida. (1992, September 3). The Dallas Morning News, p. 4A.