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Cover Page Footnote

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Representative Bureaucracy, Street-Level Bureaucrats, and Bureaucratic Discretion in Federal Disaster Assistance

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This paper explores the role of representative bureaucracy and bureaucratic discretion in the allocation of federal disaster assistance to Hurricane Sandy survivors. Through the analysis of focus groups and key informant interviews, this study finds that FEMA home inspectors are not diverse in reference to race and gender; however, inspectors are found to be diverse in reference to place of origin. Although the role that race and gender play in the allocation of resources is found to be unclear, the region from which inspectors come from is found to be influential in the allocation of aid to survivors. As such, this research argues that the study of representative bureaucracy should not be limited to issues of race and gender, but be expanded to include other potentially important characteristics.

Because federal disaster assistance has such a profound influence on communities' ability to recover from disasters within the United States, researchers have questioned whether there are individual characteristics amongst disaster assistance applicants that have an influence on whether they are granted aid by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). Generally, most disaster research indicates that lower-income and minority communities face greater challenges in recovering from disasters (Peacock et al. 1997; Bolin and Stanford 1998; Hewitt, 1995; Brunsmma et al. 2010); however, there is little research that attempts to investigate how demographic characteristics of an individual disaster aid applicant influences disaster aid allocations (Loukaitou-Sideris and Kamel 2004; Kousky 2013). Although Loukaitou-Sideris and Kamel (2004) and Kousky (2013) attempt to observe the potential influence of race, they are limited by their inability to specifically measure the individual characteristics of FEMA applicants, which does not allow for full discussions of the potential issues associated with the equitable distribution of resources at the individual level.

Even if individual demographic characteristics of applicants may influence the allocation of aid across different social groups within American society, observing the race or ethnicity of an applicant in relation to whether or not they received aid may not provide a true depiction of what is actually occurring. Past research has pointed out that the main, if not only, person-to-person contact that disaster aid applicants have with FEMA occurs with home inspectors (McEntire et al. 2012). As a result, home inspectors operate as FEMA's street-level bureaucrats, representing the bureaucracy of FEMA to the public in addition to playing the role of gatekeeper to federal disaster recovery resources. Although the damage assessments generated by these street-level bureaucrats are not totally deterministic of whether or not an individual is approved for aid, these bureaucrats have a great deal of influence due to their role in assessing the level of damage inflicted on a property, and

determining whether that damage is covered by FEMA's disaster assistance programs. When these street-level bureaucrats are not representative of client communities, the influence of street-level bureaucratic discretion can have potentially detrimental effects on the recovery of minority populations. Despite the potential relationship between the representativeness of FEMA street-level bureaucrats and individuals' success in garnering assistance, no study exists to explore this relationship.

As such, this research explores the influence FEMA home inspectors have on individuals' success of acquiring federal disaster assistance by using the theories of representative bureaucracy and bureaucratic discretion as theoretical frameworks. In the following sections, I first provide a brief discussion of the theory of representative bureaucracy, the role of street-level bureaucrats, and how bureaucratic discretion has been shown to influence the provision of public service programs among different groups within society. I then provide a description of the context in which this study is situated, Hurricane Sandy. Then through the analysis of focus groups and key informant interviews I investigate the representativeness of home inspectors and then the potential influence that this representation has on FEMA's decision to approve an individual for assistance. Finally, contributions to the theory of representative bureaucracy are presented to progress the theory not only in reference to disaster recovery, but also more broadly within the field of public administration.

Representative Bureaucracy, Street-Level Bureaucrats and Discretion

The theory of representative bureaucracy maintains that the powers of a bureaucracy can be made more responsive to the interests of the public if the personnel that staff administrative agencies reflect the demographic characteristics of client communities (Krislov 1974; Meier 1975; Thielemann and Stewart 1996; Meier et al. 1999; Sowa and Selden 2003). The reason for this responsiveness to the public lies in the potential matching of values and beliefs between bureaucrats and respective clients that share demographic characteristics such as race, ethnicity, and gender (Krislov and Rosenbloom 1981). According to Sowa and Selden (2003), these values and beliefs harbored by bureaucrats directly influences their behavior and discretion in the administration of public programs. The work of Seldon et al. (1998), Hinderer (1993), Meier (1993), and Meier and Stewart (1991) all demonstrate that when minorities have access to positions within a bureaucracy there is a tendency within the respective bureaucracy to benefit minority clients. However, the potential benefits of a representative bureaucracy have been more recently challenged by the devolution of administrative control between the national government and state, local, private and third-sector actors (Lieberman and Lapinski 2001), which is epitomized by the outsourcing of government services. According to Keiser et al. (2004; McConnell 1966), the devolution of the state provides the potential for a loss of equity in the treatment of minorities participating and those seeking to participate in government programs.

Despite the contributions that representative bureaucracy as a theory has made to understanding the dynamics of organizational behavior, the theory alone is not able to adequately explain the direct consequences of a representative bureaucracy in reference to government program service and/or resource provision because the theory does not explain the role of administrative discretion (Meier et al. 1999). A number of studies have examined the impact of discretion on the provision of services by administrative agencies by studying the impact of discretion held by street-level bureaucrats (Lipsky 1980; Kelly 1994; Brodtkin 1997; Sandfort 2000). Lipsky (1980, p. 3) defines street-level bureaucrats as "public service workers who interact directly with citizens in the course of their jobs, and who have

substantial discretion in the execution of their work.” Examples of these workers include, but are not limited to teachers, police officers, welfare workers, health and safety inspectors, and other public employees who control access to public programs or enforce public laws and regulations (Meyers and Vorsanger 2003). In most cases these types of individuals are responsible for the central activities of public agencies, which range from determining eligibility for a program to allocating benefits, judging compliance, imposing sanctions and exempting individuals and businesses from potential penalties (Meyers and Vorsanger 2003). What is problematic about this situation stems from the devolution of government and the subsequent lack of oversight of these individuals’ decisions on the behalf of government agencies. According to Maynard-Moody and Musheno (2000), even though street-level work is saturated by rules, the work itself is not rule bound. Even the authority of a supervisor has little constraining influence over the decisions and actions of street-level workers. As such, they not only deliver services, but also shape policy and program outcomes by interpreting and allocating resources to individuals within society (Lipsky 1980).

The main defining characteristic of street-level workers is their direct contact and interaction with the public. Unlike other government officials and politicians, street-level workers see clients as individuals: “as clients, students, criminals, suspects, victims, and so on” (Maynard-Moody and Musheno, 2000, p. 334). As a result, Maynard-Moody and Musheno (2000) maintain that their interactions with clients are personal and emotional, and are rarely rational. This characteristic contributes to potential behaviors among street-level workers that are inclined to disregard the specific nature of a case or the individual they are working with for other characteristics they think are more important. Moreover, this can and typically does result in street-level workers identifying those who are “worthy” of services or treatment beyond the routine, in addition to identifying individuals who they perceive to require extra scrutiny or some form of punishment (Maynard-Moody and Musheno, 2003 and 2012). Subsequently, street-level workers act as “agents of social control” by forcing clients to conform to bureaucratic and majority social values and beliefs for the receipt of government services (Lipsky, 1980). As a result, street-level workers may have a tendency to favor clients who resemble themselves and discriminate against those from different racial, social class, and/or cultural backgrounds (Lipsky, 1980; Keiser et al. 2004).

As a byproduct of these past findings, this research specifically explores the potential relationship between the representativeness of FEMA street-level bureaucrats in reference to race and gender, and the influence that this dynamic has on an individual’s success of garnering aid from FEMA. I hypothesize that when disaster applicants are racially different than their home inspectors, minority applicants will perceive the bureaucracy to be detrimentally biased against them. Moreover, I hypothesize that when FEMA’s street-level bureaucrats are not representative of disaster assistance applicants, this will result in lower levels of benefits being bestowed to the applicant, even when assistance is granted. However, before testing these potential relationships an understanding of this study’s context, the aftermath of Hurricane Sandy, is important.

Hurricane Sandy and New Jersey

Sandy was tenth named hurricane during the 2012 hurricane season. The storm initially developed in the southwest region of the Caribbean on October 22nd, and became a hurricane on October 24th. Before making landfall, Sandy produced severe flooding along the Atlantic Coast from Florida to Maine as it moved north. The highest storm surges and greatest inundation on land occurred in the states of New Jersey, New York and Connecticut, especially along the coast of central and northern New Jersey, Staten Island, and the

southward-facing shores of Long Island. On the morning of October 29th, the storm's trajectory shifted northeast toward southern New Jersey, and by that evening Sandy made landfall near Brigantine, New Jersey as a post-tropical cyclone with winds up to 80 miles per hour. Sandy weakened as it moved west across southern Pennsylvania on October 30th, and by November 1st the wind and rains from the storm had diminished across the affected states.

The damages inflicted on the New Jersey coast were unprecedented in the state's history. According to New Jersey's governor Chris Christie, "I've called this experience New Jersey's Katrina because the damage to our state is nothing that we've experienced ever before" (Office of the Governor 2012). Although the entire state was affected, the most severe damage was sustained in Monmouth and Ocean Counties. Entire communities in the state were "inundated with water and sand, houses were washed from their foundations, boardwalks were dismantled or destroyed, cars were tossed about, and boats were pushed well inland from the coast" (Blake et al. 2013, p. 17). Power outages lasted for weeks in some New Jersey communities – in all affecting about 5 million residents. As of February 2013, the state's governor's office had reported that 346,000 housing units had either been damaged or destroyed by Sandy, with 22,000 of those units being classified as uninhabitable. In reference to the private sector, 19,000 businesses sustained damages of \$250,000 or more, and total business losses were estimated at \$8.3 billion. In addition, Sandy ruptured natural gas lines, which caused fires in some areas contributing to the loss of housing units. Power and gas line repairs were estimated to cost about \$1 billion and repairs to waste, water and sewer services were estimated to cost another \$3 billion. Overall, the governor's office estimated the cost of returning the state to normalcy to be upwards of \$36.9 billion (Office of the Governor 2012).

Methods

The data for this study was generated within the context of a larger project that sought to investigate the equitable distribution of federal home assistance aid to Hurricane Sandy victims (Rivera 2016). Data germane to the investigation of representative bureaucracy and potential bureaucratic discretion was collected through focus groups (Belzile and Öberg, 2012; Hacking, 1999; Kaplowitz et al., 2004; Marková et al., 2007; Morgan, 1997) and key informant interviews because these methods provided for the ability of the researcher to not only explore whether or not respondents perceived the FEMA bureaucracy to be diversified, but also how they perceived that level of diversity to influence their success of acquiring federal disaster assistance. Moreover, because of the sensitive nature of the concepts of diversity and potential discrimination, focus groups allowed respondents to express themselves in their own language, as opposed to that of predetermined responses developed by the researcher (Wilkinson, 1998; Morgan, 2012). As a result, the use of focus groups enhanced the face validity of data (Krueger 1988; Ryan et al. 2013).

Focus group sampling occurred regionally: one for northern New Jersey and one for southern New Jersey. To increase the probability of an individual being recruited that was affected by Hurricane Sandy, the sampling frame was confined to three municipalities in the north, Long Branch, Asbury Park and Ocean Township, and three municipalities in the south, Atlantic City, Brigantine and Pleasantville. These cities were chosen because they are located on the coast, and they all experienced similar disaster affects, such as damages due to flooding, storm surge, and windshear. Because funding limited the number of focus groups, and subsequently the number of individuals that could participate, screening participants on the characteristic of filing a FEMA claim was needed to ensure that participants would have had some level of experience with the FEMA bureaucracy. Moreover, this characteristic

ensured that participants had learned about FEMA assistance in some way, but the manner in which they gained the information was not important in the screening of participants.

The focus groups were conducted around a number of key questions within a stimulus survey. This provided three benefits. First, it allowed for the grouping of data within categories that were specific to the information of interest to the researcher for each respective survey question. Second, by using a semi-structured approach within the focus groups, the researcher was able to direct the generation of data appropriate to each question in such a way that non-pertinent data or the discussion of topics not germane to a question were avoided. Third, it allowed for the testing of survey questions that would potentially be used in the final administered instrument. Each focus group lasted approximately one and a half hours, everyone that started the focus group remained throughout the entire group meeting, and both focus groups were audio recorded for future transcription and analysis. Finally, a framework analysis (Ritchie and Spencer, 1994) strategy was used to analyze the data generated by the focus groups. Table 1 documents the descriptive statistics of participants in each of the two focus groups.

Table 1: Description of Focus Groups Participants (N=16)

Variable	Frequency		% of Sample	
	Northern	Southern	Northern	Southern
Race				
White	1	3	10.0%	50.0%
African American	9	3	90.0%	50.0%
Age				
26 to 34 years old	0	1	0.0%	16.6%
35 to 44 years old	1	1	10.0%	16.6%
45 to 54 years old	2	1	20.0%	16.6%
55 to 64 years old	2	2	20.0%	33.3%
65+ Years Old	5	1	50.0%	16.6%
Marital Status				
Married	6	3	60.0%	50.0%
Single	1	2	10.0%	33.3.0%
Divorced/Separated	2	1	20.0%	16.6.0%
Refused	1	0	10.0%	0.0%
Children in Household				
0	6	4	60.0%	66.6%
1	3	0	30.0%	0.0%
2	1	0	10.0%	0.0%
4	0	1	0.0%	16.6%
5	0	1	0.0%	16.6%
Employment Status				
Unemployed	3	1	30.0%	16.6%
On medical or disability leave	1	0	10.0%	0.0%
Employed full-time	5	5	50.0%	83.3%
Refused	1	0	10.0%	0.0%
Educational Attainment				
Some high school	1	0	10.0%	0.0%
High school diploma	1	0	10.0%	0.0%
Some college, no degree	4	1	40.0%	16.6%

Associate's degree	2	1	20.0%	16.6%
Bachelor's degree	1	2	10.0%	33.3%
Master's degree	0	2	0.0%	33.3%
Refused	1	0	10.0%	0.0%
Household Income				
Less than \$25,000	1	0	10.0%	0.0%
\$25,000 to \$34,999	2	0	20.0%	0.0%
\$35,000 to \$49,999	2	2	20.0%	33.3%
\$50,000 to \$74,999	1	2	10.0%	33.3%
\$75,000 to \$99,999	2	2	20.0%	33.3%
\$100,000 to \$124,999	2	0	20.0%	0.0%
Gender				
Male	6	4	60.0%	66.6%
Female	4	2	40.0%	33.3%
Country of Origin				
United States	10	5	100.0%	83.3%
Other	0	1	0.0%	16.6%
Primary Language				
English	10	6	100.0%	100.0%

In the northern focus group, 90 percent of the participants were African American and only ten percent (one participant) were white. This composition was completely unexpected based on the individuals that had previously confirmed attendance. Additionally, in reference to the southern focus group, although sixteen individuals had confirmed attendance, only six actually participated in the focus group. The southern focus group was more racially balanced than the northern group, with half the group self-identifying as African American and the other half self-identifying as white.

In order to provide a more holistic understanding on representative bureaucracy and bureaucratic discretion in the aftermath of Hurricane Sandy, key informant interviews were attempted with various New Jersey county emergency manager coordinators, county level Voluntary Organizations Active in Disasters (VOADs), and nonprofit organizations mentioned by focus group participants (Phillips, 2014). Interviews have been documented as being extremely useful in disaster research (Oliver-Smith, 1996; Phillips, 2014; Stallings, 2007), especially for gaining access to respondents that are difficult to access through traditional surveying techniques. Moreover, Phillips (2014) maintains that interviews offer an unobtrusive means of triangulating findings. In all, three county emergency management coordinators and two county VOAD coordinators participated in interviews. Although representatives from Helping Hands and various county chapters of the United Way in New Jersey expressed interest in answering questions, these individuals never completed the questionnaire sent to them. Attempts were made to recontact the representatives of these organizations through email and by phone, but they did not respond to secondary requests. The data generated from the interviews were analyzed using a framework analysis similar to the manner in which the focus group data were analyzed.

Analysis

Representativeness of Street-Level Bureaucrats

In reference to assessing bureaucratic representation among FEMA home inspectors,

the participants in each focus group were asked several questions in order to observe whether or not inspectors were representative of their client communities. One issue that became apparent within the focus groups was that most of the participants within each of the focus groups had interacted with several home inspectors, not just one. In some cases, participants had different opinions for each of the inspectors that they had experiences with. As such the analysis of participants' responses to these themes highlights this phenomenon.

Two questions that sought to observe aspects of representative bureaucracy among FEMA home inspectors did so in reference to the perceived racial/ethnic background of the inspector relative to a respective participant and whether or not the inspector was able to effectively speak the primary language of the respective participant. In reference to the latter question, all of the participants in both groups indicated that all of the inspectors that they had personally interacted with spoke their respective primary language, English. Although it seems that, as far as the participants in the focus groups were concerned, FEMA inspectors were representative of their clients in reference to client language efficiency; there was no variation within the sample of participants' use of another language as their primary mode of communication. Therefore, this observation should be taken skeptically because it may not represent the experiences of other FEMA assistance applicants that use English as a secondary language, especially when one observes the presence of non-English speaking households in the participants' communities as reported by the Census.¹

Alternatively, key informant interviews provided a different picture. According to one VOAD county coordinator, although home inspectors were not diverse, "they seemed able to get translators as needed." Moreover, the ability to utilize translators was also highlighted by county emergency management coordinators. One coordinator stated that within his jurisdiction "we did learn of a communication issue in a local community in which a particular neighborhood spoke Portuguese. As a result, FEMA was asked to bring in interpreters and develop handouts in this language, which they did, and we were able to get residents what they needed." Based on these observations, it can be inferred that inspectors may not be linguistically representative of their client communities; however, when this poses a complication to service provision inspectors do attempt to find translators to facilitate more effective service provision, which focus group participants would not have been exposed to due to their proficiency with English.

When asked to report whether participants perceived the inspectors that came to their homes were of the same racial/ethnic background as themselves, all of the participants overwhelming indicated that almost all of the inspectors were white. Only one participant reported that although several different inspectors had come to his home over the course of eighteen months, only one was not white. In this instance, he reported that the inspector was Hispanic/Latino; however, according to the participant,

I mean, you really couldn't tell he was Hispanic. The only reason I knew was because when he introduced himself his name sounded Hispanic. He didn't have an accent or anything really and he was really as fair [skinned] as I am.

¹ For the northern focus group, Asbury Park and Long Branch, New Jersey have 30.7 percent and 41.2 percent, respectively, of their populations that speak a language other than English at home. In the southern focus group, for Brigantine and Atlantic City, New Jersey these proportions are respectively 13.9 percent and 41.8 percent.

It is also interesting to note that when participants were asked this question, the white participants in the southern focus group seemed very hesitant to provide an oral response. One asked, “Why is that even relevant?”, while the others shook their head in a confirming way. This was very different from the African Americans’ responses in both groups. In both focus groups, the African American participants were very quick to respond that, “No”, the inspectors were not of the same racial background as themselves. This dynamic was mirrored by key informant interviews with county VOAD coordinators. Although the interviewees did not expand upon their perceptions, they did state that “The FEMA inspectors were not [racially] diverse...” Finally, it should be pointed out, that when attempting to triangulate these findings with county emergency management coordinators, each of the interviewees were either reluctant to discuss the issue of home inspector racial/ethnic diversity or they indicated they simply “don’t have much contact with any home inspectors” to provide an objective assessment.

Another question raised for discussion sought to observe representation of FEMA home inspectors in reference to gender. Participants were asked whether the inspector that came to their homes were the same gender as themselves. As previously mentioned, most of the participants had several inspectors come to their homes for various reasons; however, in all but one case, the inspectors that came to the participants’ homes were all male. Interestingly, the only case in which an inspector was reported as being female came from a female participant living in Brigantine.

Well, I thought it was strange [that the inspector was a woman], just because I just expected the inspector to be a man for some reason. But, she was away from her children. She was away from her family. She – I mean, I had – thought we connected. We talked about Thanksgiving dinner.

Although no one else reported a female inspector coming to their home, this does not necessarily indicate that this was necessarily an exceptional case. County VOAD coordinators also indicated that there was a lack of gender diversity amongst inspectors; however, this perception was a byproduct of their general experiences with inspectors and not necessarily in the aftermath of Hurricane Sandy. Specifically, VOAD coordinators could not recall whether or not home inspectors were diverse in reference to gender in the aftermath of Sandy when serving New Jersey residents.

Finally, many of the participants raised an interesting observation about all of their inspectors. In no case had any of the inspectors that participants interacted with originated from New Jersey. Participants indicated that all of their inspectors were from various states across the country. Not all of the participants could remember where their respective inspectors came from; however, they were all able to report that they were “from out of the area.” Some places that the participants could remember their respective inspectors coming from included, but were not limited to, Arizona, California, Louisiana, Texas, Mississippi, Missouri, and Oklahoma. As a result, many of the participants indicated that their respective inspectors had told them that it was the first time that they had had the opportunity to inspect home damages that resulted from a hurricane. Moreover, one participant succinctly described the issues associated with out of state inspectors that all of the participants agreed was the case for them as well.

...they [the inspectors] were from out of the area. So they had no concept of the cost involved to do the [repair and reconstruction] work in this area. I think my guy was

from Oklahoma, but he was looking at what the cost was in the Midwest not New Jersey, where maybe a sheet of sheetrock is \$10 less out there. I mean, I don't know, where labor is probably cheaper too, because you're not dealing with any unions or any of that. So they were off – and like he came back with a total cost of \$55,000 to renovate my house, to do everything. That was no appliances or anything else. So I had a local adjustor come and look at my house, and asked him what he thought the same renovations that the other guy said would cost a certain amount would cost according to him. The local adjustor came up with \$125,000, just to do everything that needed to be done on the house [the structure], and that was with no electrical or appliances or anything else.

Interactions with Street-Level Bureaucrats and Bureaucratic Discretion

In order to observe the perceived impacts of representative bureaucracy on an individual's success of being approved for aid, participants were asked whether or not they believed that they were treated fairly by their respective home inspectors. One reaction to this question was the general sentiment that they just were not sure. For example, one white woman from the southern cohort said,

I think at that point [when the inspector actually showed up] I was not prepared for the inspector, and I was just not knowledgeable enough to know what was happening. I think that's the truth. I think at that point I was more worried about nice or not nice, okay, I guess they're – I'm assuming they're doing their job. I'm assuming their doing their job.

In the northern cohort, more than half of the participants said that they did not know whether or not they were treated fairly. One African American woman summarized all of their feelings of ignorance by saying,

No, he [the inspector] was very polite and mannerable, but I don't know, since I didn't know what they were looking for, I don't know whether it was fair or unfair...

According to the participants, their lack of knowledge about the FEMA inspection process did not allow them to make a truthfully accurate assessment of the fairness of their inspectors. However, this was not the case for everyone.

The other general reaction to this fairness question was negative. Perceptions of unfairness were most prominent in the northern focus group. Interestingly, in both focus groups, the individuals that perceived the inspectors to be unfair were African American. One African American woman summed up most of their experiences by stating,

I think he was unfair. I don't even think he explained to me. He identified who he was. He did not explain the process, although I had known the process, because I had spoken to – the hearsay...I really honestly could say that I don't think my inspector cared. I think he – it was just a job that came up on his phone and he went to it...

As indicated previously, some participants said that although they had come in contact with some inspectors that they perceived to be unfair, because several different inspectors came to

their home they did not want to make blanket statements about all of them. In these cases, the participants did not necessarily attribute differences in damage assessments to an underlying issue of fairness, but a lack of standardized competence across all of the inspectors. Many of the participants in the northern focus group spoke about the fairness of different inspectors in relation to the FEMA assistance they received and the assistance that others in their neighborhood did not receive with similar damages to their home. One African American male participant in the northern focus group said,

I got some money for my damages, but my neighbors that got the other guy didn't get nothing. They basically had the same damage as I did, but didn't get no money. So they [my neighbors] called FEMA back and requested that the inspector I had come back out and speak to them because they were treated totally different...[T]he guy I had really explained the process to me. And I think I was lucky in that he explained what was going to happen.

Although participants viewed these differences among their neighbors as unfair, they were also wary of directly saying that the individual inspectors were intentionally unfair or whether the perception of unfair practices was a product of a lack of training and knowledge about the process among different inspectors.

Lastly, participants were directly asked whether they had felt that the inspector/inspectors they had had contact with discriminated against them in some way. The members of the northern focus group emphasized issues of perceived racial discrimination within the FEMA assistance application process. Moreover, the notion of discrimination was only prevalent in the minds of African American participants. White focus group participants did not feel that they had been discriminated against in any way, and even thought the researcher's questioning was leading and bias. Notions of discrimination were most prevalent within the discussions of the northern focus group; however, there were two reactions to the question on discrimination. The first was that participants did not feel that their inspectors were discriminatory, but rather they were emphatic that FEMA as an organization was. One female African American participant in the northern focus group said,

I felt the inspector was fair. I think FEMA was unfair, and even racist. I'm not going to blame him [the inspector] for what FEMA didn't do.

Additionally, one male African American participant in the southern focus group recounted,

My inspector was fair, even if he was a little cold. But, at the end of the process was a guy that calls me up from Austin, Texas for FEMA. I know this because he pissed me off and I didn't appreciate the conversation... He then asked me what my race was, and some other things, which really pissed me off! And I'm like, "Sir, this is really – I think this is unfair. And you might be in Texas and this flood is not affecting you, but I am in New Jersey, and this flood is affecting me. And currently I am homeless. We are kind of like counting on this... So in order to make a long story short, he hung up on me. Within I'd say about three hours, he disapproved me. It was FEMA, or whoever was working for or with FEMA that treated me like that, not the inspector. Again, I'll give credit where credit is due, but I'm not the one that really has high regard for FEMA.

The other reaction to the question of discrimination was less direct. Although many of the participants were supportive of the statement that they felt FEMA as an organization was discriminatory, they were unsure where FEMA as an organization's discrimination started and ended in relation to the inspectors. For example, one African American woman in the northern focus group stated,

... that's the thing, the inspector goes and he observed, he assesses everything, but he has to bring that information back to FEMA, so he has a big part to do with what FEMA is going to give you. So it goes hand in hand in my eyes. If the inspector is racist then you're not gonna get anything.

One discussion between three other African American participants further highlighted the potential effect of bureaucratic discretion:

Not to cut you off, but I think that they [the inspectors] have a lot of say in what they're really reporting, because he can say, oh, this is not, they're not going to pay for this, and they're not going to cover this and they'll cover that. He is the person that's going to give FEMA all the information.

What he does is write up a report on what he sees.

I felt like – I don't think – he doesn't have to necessarily write it down at all.

Exactly! He can tell you he'll report everything he sees, and then go to the car and be like, "She won't get shit." So yeah, you get the decision from FEMA, but in reality it was the inspector that made the unofficial decision when they met you. I mean I can't prove that they were racist [the inspector], but they hold the keys to the kingdom. They tell FEMA what you should get and what you shouldn't get. FEMA just processes the information whether it's biased or not, they [FEMA the organization] doesn't care either way.

Yeah, the government does that stuff with welfare. You talk to a person who says you qualify for this or that based on what they see or what is reported to them and they make a decision based on whether they think you should personally get it. If they do it for that, why not this?

Despite the lack of consensus among focus groups in reference to notions of discrimination and fairness, there was a notable difference in the way African Americans and Whites responded to these types of questions. Because of the lack of discussion among white participants, it was unclear to what extent issues of representation within FEMA's bureaucracy may have influenced FEMA's decision on their respective assistance applications. For African American participants this was not entirely the case. Among African American responses there was an expressed concern not only with general notions of bureaucratic discretion among home inspectors, but also for the potential of individual racist sentiments held by inspectors to influence how inspectors report what they observe to FEMA. Although participants generally avoided labeling their inspectors as biased, all of the participants did acknowledge that the states from which their respective inspectors originated

may have had a significant impact on the way damages were assessed and reported to FEMA, which could have subsequently affected the success of their applications. Specifically, variation in the level of knowledge among inspectors in reference to how to assess damages and what damages they believed FEMA would cover was perceived to vary by their state of origin, which fostered perceptions of incompetence and a lack of training that was viewed to be detrimental to the success of individuals' respective success of being approved for aid.

Discussion and Conclusion

Through the analysis of focus groups and key informant interviews, the racial and gender representativeness of FEMA street-level bureaucrats, home inspectors, was explored. Based on the analyses, this research finds that there is a perception by both disaster aid applicants and individuals/organizations that work with FEMA in disaster recovery activities, that FEMA's street-level bureaucrats (home inspectors) are not diverse in reference to race nor gender. Along these lines, none of the African American focus group participants had interacted with a FEMA home inspector that was not perceived to be White, and only one participant indicated that one of their home inspectors was a woman. Moreover, it was also found through the key informant interviews that although these bureaucrats are also not linguistically diverse, FEMA has the ability to compensate for this limitation when the situation requires.

Related to the notion of representativeness of FEMA's bureaucracy is the potential influence that this representation has on the provision of services and the allocation of disaster assistance among Hurricane Sandy victims. Although the key informant interviews were not helpful in understanding this potential relationship, the focus groups were instrumental. Based on the focus group analysis, differences between how white and African American participants perceived they were treated by FEMA street-level bureaucrats were apparent. Whites perceived that they were either unsure whether they were treated fairly by home inspectors based on their own ignorance of the inspection process, or that they did not perceive to be treated unfairly by home inspectors. Although some African Americans also indicated that they were unsure whether they were treated unfairly because of their lack of knowledge about the inspection process, several indicated that their experiences with FEMA's street-level bureaucrats was unfair. Moreover, some African American participants even spoke about the potential influence that home inspectors' bureaucratic discretion could possibly play in their ability to garner disaster recovery resources from FEMA. Additionally, some African Americans even drew a distinction between FEMA's street-level bureaucrats and FEMA as a larger organization by indicating that their inspectors were not necessarily problematic, but FEMA as larger organization was bias against them in their pursuit of acquiring disaster recovery assistance.

As a result of these findings, I find some evidence to support my first hypothesis that when street-level bureaucrats are not representative of their clients that negative perceptions of the bureaucracy manifest. Moreover, although I also find some partial support for my second hypothesis that when FEMA's street-level bureaucrats are not representative of disaster assistance applicants, this will result in lower levels of benefits being bestowed to the applicant, even when assistance is granted, the data in support of this is surprising. The reason the support for this finding is surprising is because focus group participants did not necessarily attribute their varying level of aid to the racial or gender diversity of FEMA's street-level bureaucrats and the potential role that this might play in program benefits as explained by the theory of representative bureaucracy with its current mainstream focus on issues of racial and gender diversity. Instead, focus group participants attributed their varying levels of aid to the

geographic representativeness of their inspectors, which not only affected their perceptions of how inspectors interacted with them, but also the way in which an applicant's property was assessed and subsequently approved for a certain amount of assistance.

This finding appears to be consistent with other studies that find a relationship between the regions from which bureaucrats originate and how that geographic origin influences the bureaucrat's ideological orientation towards various groups, which subsequently affects the bureaucrat's personal discretion in matters of policy choice and implementation (Keiser and Soss 1998; Keiser 1999; Soss and Keiser 2006; Bradbury and Kellough 2008; Grissom et al. 2009). However, despite the fact that the influence of region has been found to be important, especially among African American bureaucrats, these studies have been confined to the legislative context, how issues of racial diversity within schools affect student achievement, and/or the administration of welfare services. Although these studies help to provide instruction on how region may affect bureaucratic discretion in public program service provision, the role this variable plays in other venues, such as disaster recovery has yet to be sufficiently explored. This is extremely problematic considering the continued public statements that occur in the aftermath of disasters throughout the United States that center around allegations of discrimination in the disaster recovery process.

However, some may argue that geographic representativeness within a bureaucracy and its influence on program service provision or the bestowment of resources is better explained by notions of the "hollow state" rather than by the theory of representative bureaucracy. For example, government outsourcing in general, but in particular emergency management, results in reductions of oversight, accountability and transparency, which is problematic when dealing with disaster-affected populations because not only is the speed and volume of service delivery important, but also the quality and cultural appropriateness (Handmer, 2000; Kirschenbaum, 2004; Roberts, 2010; Rademacher, 2011). However, Grissom et al. (2009) maintain that not only does the regional origin and context of a bureaucrat potentially influence the salience of race in decision-making, but also, in the case of home inspectors, their experience with working in different disaster contexts. Although most contemporary studies of representative bureaucracy tend to focus on race and gender, limiting analyses to these two characteristics may be providing an incomplete image of how diversity within bureaucracies and/or other policy making entities influences service provision (Kennedy, 2014). As such, future research in the realm of representative bureaucracy should not only expand the scope of what characteristics are important to having a representative bureaucracy, but also return to succinctly answering the question – How do we narrowly define representative bureaucracy? By doing this, not only will we be able to better measure representativeness because we will be able to better identify its presence or absence in governmental organizations, but we can also better evaluate the importance of representative bureaucracy in public program provision in contrast to the issues posed by the hollowing of the state.

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