Book Reviews

Children of Katrina

Alice Fothergill and Lori Peek (2015).
Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 321 pages.
$24.95 (paperback); ISBN: 978-1-4773-0546-1.

*Children of Katrina*, by sociologists Alice Fothergill and Lori Peek, is part of The *Katrina Bookshelf* collection available through the University of Texas Press. The series reflects a national commitment to enhance understanding about the human scope of Hurricane Katrina (the 2005 storm that struck the Gulf Coast of the United States) and the important lessons that may be learned from it. With their clear analysis of the trajectories of New Orleans-based children following the hurricane, Fothergill and Peek’s contribution to this series is nothing short of outstanding.

I can identify many strengths in *Children of Katrina*. Fothergill and Peek bring attention to children, a group relatively neglected in disaster research. The authors highlight the range of outcomes for children after the hurricane, and explore how these outcomes connect to the social locations of their research participants. The authors take a holistic approach to understanding the spheres of children’s lives, including a consideration of family, housing, school, peers, health, and extra-curricular activities. The research design reflects a commitment to gaining broad exposure to a large number of children and their experiences, while honing in on seven specific children’s stories, giving us a rich sense of actual lives. Fothergill and Peek capture the vantage points of not just children but the adults in their lives, including siblings, parents, child care workers, shelter staff, and teachers. *Children of Katrina* serves as both a model of good writing and an example of how research with a protected group can be conducted in a caring and compassionate manner.

I’d like to discuss in more detail two additional strengths I see in the book that for me, are the most notable. First, the longitudinal design of the study enabled the authors to trace the trajectories of their focal children across seven years. Longitudinal research requires a major commitment of time and resources and is often neglected in the fast-track pace of academic research and publication. Writing up longitudinal results can require a complete reorientation in how to organize the analysis and findings, as Fothergill and Peek point out in their methodology appendix. Yet when done well, as I’m convinced this was, longitudinal research can shed invaluable light upon the factors shaping change over time, factors that lead to transitions and trajectories with long-term consequences. This longitudinal analysis adds great value and enables a deeper understanding of children’s lives across time.
Second, children whose lives were the most precarious were framed using the concept of cumulative vulnerability. This concept shaped the organization of the book and the conceptualization of key trajectories in children’s lives following the disaster. Three longitudinal trajectories emerged from analysis of the lives of the seven focal children: a declining trajectory, in which children’s lives following the disaster were characterized by “serious and ongoing instability” (37), a finding-equilibrium trajectory, in which the disruption of the hurricane was followed by “a return to or a newfound type of stability” (97), and a fluctuating trajectory, in which a lack of comprehensive recovery or rapid fluctuations in well-being characterized the children’s experiences.

Fothergill and Peek draw upon the cumulative vulnerability framework to characterize the children most at risk of a downward trajectory, and draw from the literature on disasters to identify groups most likely to be vulnerable following a natural disaster—racial minorities, low-income individuals, women, and children. As the footnotes indicate, the authors have previously written extensively about social vulnerability and disasters. I am not that familiar with the literature on disasters but would like to highlight how the concept of cumulative vulnerability contributes synergistically to another interdisciplinary sub-field of social research, that of social gerontology/aging and the life course.

The life course perspective, a prominent conceptual framework in research on aging, draws attention to transitions and trajectories across the human life course. Key principles of time and place, timing, linked lives, life span development and agency are commonly used to organize life course findings (Elder, Johnson and Crosnoe 2003). Though they may not have intended it as such, Fothergill and Peek’s book contributes beautifully to this literature and provides a rare glimpse into how the dramatic event of a major disaster may play out very differently in the trajectories of children who are differently situated in the social structure. The specific event of Hurricane Katrina in 2005 and the specific location of New Orleans, Louisiana, USA, fit with the life course concepts of time and place. The differential impact of age and maturity on the children’s experiences fits with the life course emphasis on timing. For instance, we can see quite dramatically how separation from friends profoundly affected the well-being of teenagers like Mekana. This example fits with the life course concept of linked lives, too, as does the story of Jerron, who could never quite get over being separated from his father and extended family members. The evolving life span development levels of the children changed their perspectives on what they had gone through, and Fothergill and Peek used different methods to reach children of different ages. Finally, we see how the agency of the children shaped their experiences, with the authors in their conclusion chapter emphasizing the children’s capacities for helping adults, other children/youth, and themselves through pro-social choices.

It is striking to me how excellent of an example this research is of life course principles and insights. It reminds me of one of my favorite life course concepts, that of cumulative disadvantage and its flip side, cumulative advantage (O’Rand 2006). In certain spheres such as education, some of Children of Katrina’s dislocated focal children (such as Jerron) encountered increased educational
opportunities, although the emotional distress of being somewhere he did not want to be inhibited Jerron from taking advantage of a better situated, more racially integrated school. In the case of Cierra, another focal child, cumulative advantage might be worth noting; as the authors point out, Cierra’s situation improved quite a bit after the initial trauma of the hurricane had subsided. It might be worth incorporating the notion of cumulative advantage as a counterpart to cumulative vulnerability in the analysis.

Because the book *Children of Katrina* is situated within a series about Hurricane Katrina, it is likely to receive quite a bit of attention within the field of disaster research. I think the title and promotion of the book will lead to attention from scholars and teachers within the international and interdisciplinary field of childhood research as well. The book fits very well within the maturing field of childhood studies with its emphasis on the social construction of childhood, children’s agency, and the importance of hearing children’s voices (James 2004). As one who teaches about children, many ideas in the book were familiar to me, such as the idea of children being a marginalized group, and age intersecting with other important dimensions of marginalization/risk (Buhler-Niederberger 2010).

This book also adds insight to the study of families, and actually reminds me of Annette Lareau’s (2011) well-known book *Unequal Childhods*, where focal children were studied in depth within a larger community study of children, and followed over time. Like *Unequal Childhods*, *Children of Katrina* considers issues of race, class and gender as they affect the lives of the focal children. It is clear that these dimensions matter and affect the resource depth available to children following an event such as Hurricane Katrina. *Children of Katrina* and *Unequal Childhods* bring another dimension to the surface as well—the impact of advocates who can connect those in need to services that can make a lasting difference. Fothergill and Peek bring this out especially in Cierra’s story, underscoring the importance of advocates and institutions for children’s mobility.

I certainly hope that *Children of Katrina* will attract the attention of social gerontologists and others who study human aging and the life course, because it so richly illustrates the important life course principles I mentioned earlier. I imagine that *Children of Katrina* could fit with other types of book series, such as ones focused on cumulative vulnerability, life course trajectories, families situated in historical context, or children and intersectionality.

The authors consider diverse children across race, sex, age, and social class levels. A remaining question that I have concerns children from immigrant families, particularly children whose parents may be undocumented. It would have been interesting to see how a lack of legal status may have affected service distribution and resource depth for children and their families. I was a little surprised to see that this dimension of social difference was not addressed in the book. Quite possibly, children from undocumented immigrant families might experience declining trajectories reflecting cumulative vulnerability, but that of course is an empirical question.
In sum, Children of Katrina is a masterful book, contributing to knowledge about not just disasters but the literatures on children, family studies, aging and the life course, social inequality, qualitative methods and longitudinal research. The authors diligently and ethically carried out this enormous project across seven years, with potential for even longer-term follow-up. While they made it look easy, enormous human skills and social/emotional intelligence were necessary to do this kind of work. The authors listened carefully and respectfully to their participants. The fact that no focal families withdrew from the study is a strong testament that great care was taken in the process of conducting the research. Further, the voices of the children came through, as did the authors’ sensitivity to multiple forms of social difference. I was moved throughout, and cried as I read the story of Daniel on page 30.

The book made me reflect upon my own childhood trajectory and those of my siblings. The methods appendix is very useful for researchers studying children, disadvantaged populations, or change across time. The appendix on disaster preparedness offers practical suggestions for assisting children in disaster contexts, across the many spheres of their lives. I commend the authors for work well done, and look forward to talking with students about Children of Katrina in my future courses about children and families.

References


Review by Maria Schmeeckle

* Maria Schmeeckle, Ph.D., is an associate professor in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology and an affiliated faculty member with the Children’s
Studies Minor at Illinois State University. She received her doctorate from the University of Southern California in Sociology in 2001. She created and teaches a course called Children in Global Perspective, as well as courses about family relationships and research methods. Her research explores what the currently available, global data about children reveal about children’s inequality worldwide. Her publications have focused on marginalized children from a global perspective, extended families and kinship, and adult children in stepfamilies.

Youth Activism in an Era of Education Inequality

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$27.00 (paperback); ISBN: 978-1479898053.

In Ben Kirshner’s book, Youth Activism in an Era of Education Inequality, the reader is presented with theoretical scope and lived detail of youth activism. Kirshner describes social contexts in dire need of transformation and provides nuanced analysis of complicated attempts to alter these contexts. Kirshner sets out to, and largely succeeds, in providing a comprehensive examination of what it means—and what else it could mean—to consider youth activism as precisely the push for social transformation so sorely needed in this “age of impunity” (King 2015) in education.

Perhaps there is no more quintessential phrase from this book that captures its ethos and approach than Kirshner’s position that “youth should not be treated as ‘citizens of the future’; they should be treated as citizens now” (6). Readers are provided an excellent grounding in the frames of “youth” that run across much research on young people, youth engagement, and social change. Throughout, Kirshner draws on participatory approaches, analysis of distal movements, and theory on youth and social change. He weaves up-close details that address the pragmatic question of “how did they do that?” with exploration of the obstacles, tensions, and difficulties that come with doing anti-authoritative work in various settings. Throughout, Kirshner maintains a strong stance that youth activism should be provided more ground, support, and space not because youth need to be “given” voice or valued for their youth but because social change is facilitated by virtue of the societal spaces that youth choose to and are forced to occupy. Kirshner consistently spells out what possibilities are made available if adults understand themselves as intergenerational collaborators and resources, rather than guides for youth development.

For example, in chapter 5, “Schools as Sites of Struggle,” Kirshner provides description and discussion of several school-based participatory youth research projects that exposed various forms of institutionalized discriminatory practices. We read about the ways that youth and adults must tangle with the politics and constraints of advocating for change within hierarchical structures. As we should