

# Children of Katrina

By Alice Fothergill and Lori Peek

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Reviewed by Charles Spurlock<sup>1</sup>

Fothergill and Peek examine three post-Katrina adaptive recovery trajectories adopted by children: declining, finding equilibrium, and fluctuating. The authors describe how they conducted in-depth interviews and observational field studies to identify these recovery trajectories and bring a child's perspective to the field of disaster research. Their innovative approach provides unique insights into children's ability to navigate trauma by analyzing two prevailing notions regarding children's recovery capacity. Under the "resilience myth," children possess a unique psychological ability "shrug off" any personal setbacks. In juxtaposition, "the helpless victim myth" holds that children lack any skills whatsoever to persevere in the face of calamity. Therefore, experts must program recovery in a post-disaster period to recreate normalcy for children. The authors frame their analysis of these two perspectives under the caveat that children's experiences differ from each based on their social location. Thus, the "disasters as equal opportunity event myth" fails to account for pre- and post-matrix of social, cultural, human, and financial assets and the social contexts under which children readjust to social dislocation following a disaster.

In considering children's resilience and dependence, Fothergill and Peek collected data from more than 650 children aged between 3 and 18. The authors segmented their sample by the degree of data collection. The tertiary sample included approximately 575 children who the authors observed but did not interview formally. The secondary sample comprised 60 children who the authors interviewed formally and informally and observed at one point in time. Finally, the core sample embraced 25 children who the authors interviewed and observed at multiple points over the seven-year study period. From this core group, seven children became the focal sample. The authors interviewed these children at least five times and spoke with their siblings, parents, grandparents, extended family members, and teachers. The authors also spoke with recovery professionals and other school staff members.

Collectively, the information supplied by the children and those closest to them allowed the authors to adopt Lareau's (2003) *intensive immersion* technique. Consequently, the authors are able to speak in detail about the participants' pre- and

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post-Katrina lives and circumstances and their social locations. In their observations and interviews, the authors focused on parental capacity, family structure, and extended family relations. The authors found that the schools these children attended pre- and post-Katrina were very important and identified the strengths and weaknesses of these institutions. Numerous factors (e.g., living conditions, access to reliable transportation for shopping and work, and food security) led to differentiations in the children's experiences, which were also shaped by their race, class, gender, and the resources available to their parents.

Pre- and post-Katrina, parental resource shares shaped the pathways of each of the three trajectories (i.e., declining, finding equilibrium and fluctuating). The meaning of resources is twofold. The first dimension, depth, refers to the quality and quantity of capital (e.g., as human capital) and can be measured by parental health and education. The second dimension, capital, refers to parents' capacity to mobilize resources on behalf of their children. The model adopted by this study was derived from Bourdieu's (1986) work. Specifically, multiple types of capital (i.e., social, cultural, human, institutional, and financial) were considered to gain insights into whether, when, why and how the children gained traction following their post-Katrina dislocations.

The book describes one family, the Taylors, who experienced a declining trajectory. In this single-parent family (the father of the family had passed away two years before the disaster), the head of the household had significant health and mental health issues and no stable employment or income stream. Before the disaster, the family had lived in subsidized housing that was poorly integrated into the public transportation system, a factor that added to their food insecurity issues. These conditions combined to create a *cumulative vulnerability*. On the fateful evening during which the flood waters rose, Daniel, a teenager, fashioned a harness for his mother to carry his toddler sibling before leading them both to safety. This family had limited resources and post-Katrina, has not been able to mobilize its resources to any significant degree. In part, the head-of-household's choices fail to promote better relocation and recovery adaption. Both the mother and the younger sibling continue to experience bouts of homelessness and Daniel lives at a half-way house. At Baton Rouge, Daniel experienced bullying as a New Orleans outsider. His complicated trajectory was further compounded by his failure to attend school for a significant period. The provision of support services by trained adults could have helped Daniel and many other children manage their experiences. Daniel finally graduated from high school aged 20. Daniel's family is truly disadvantaged; however, the authors note that the experiences of other families, including those with more resources and a greater capacity to mobilize, are not dissimilar.

The authors found that the experiences of the children who found equilibrium differed significantly to those who experienced a declining trajectory. The focal participants interviewed by the authors had the support of advocates and individuals

from institutions largely because their parents affected successful parenting. Like Daniel Taylor, Cierra lived in a single-parent household headed by her mother, Debra, who worked at a local hospital. Similar to the Taylors, Cierra and Debra did not evacuate New Orleans. On the evening of Katrina, Cierra's mother reported for her shift before the levees failed. Cierra had been allowed to accompany her mother (a valued employee) to work. Both remained stranded amidst the chaos that ensued. Debra and Cierra experienced deteriorating conditions, including a limited water supply and spoiled food. The conditions continued to worsen; an elderly patient suffered from heat stroke and the life-support systems began to falter due to a loss of electric power.

The authors contend that the depth and mobilization of resources explain how Cierra gained equilibrium post-disaster. The family lacked sufficient financial capital; however, education, religious, and employment institutions, housing organizations, and other programs provided resources to create sufficient conditions for recovery. These conditions required judicious human skills to produce the best possible outcomes. For example, Debra and Cierra sought refuge at the Cajundome on the outskirts of Lafayette, Louisiana, as evacuees. The staff there recognized the displaced children's needs for play, routine, and security, and created normal conditions as best they could.

When hurricane Rita threatened the Gulf States, the authorities transferred the Katrina evacuees to Shreveport where security guards held guns on these twice displaced individuals. Debra recognized immediately that the conditions are untenable and reached out to Mr. Nate, the Director of Cajundome, for his support. The staff also supported Debra by providing transportation to and from their Federal Emergency Management Agency trailer, which was located beyond adequate public transportation. The support of staff members was akin to friendship and ultimately led to the donation of a car, babysitting, and other mindful contributions that positively affected the family's well-being. Thus, Cierra found equilibrium due to effective parenting, the support of her community and the staff at the Cajundome, and because of the institutional resources provided to her from governmental and nongovernmental agencies.

A fluctuating trajectory occurs when a child's family life, housing, schooling, extracurricular activities, friendships, and their parent's employment become misaligned. Jerron's experience represents a fluctuating trajectory. Jerron lived within an extended network of loving kin. His parents were divorced, but they cooperated with each other and had created a post-modern family in which both paternal and maternal kin played a key role in Jerron's life experiences. Jerron's father paid child support, creating a stable financial situation for his son. Jerron and his father lived in different cities but remained connected through visits and telephone calls. To better understand Jerron's loss, the authors describe his relationship with his grandmother.

Upon entering school in New Orleans, Jerron went to the same elementary school at which his grandmother taught. They walked to school together, and in the evenings and weekends enjoyed extended family dinners.

Jerron's misalignment related to his being dislocated from New Orleans and being away from this loving environment. At Lafayette, Jerron began to get into fights at school when kids teased him about being displaced. Jerron's behavioral problems caused his grades to decline, but he successfully transitioned to middle school. At middle school, he began to find his stride and improved due to a social climate that Jerron described as "peaceful." This environment coupled with the superior institutions of his new school district led to a positive educational experience. However, Jerron continued to struggle due to the loss of his family and "deep compartmentalized friendship[s]" (Alder & Alder, 1998). Jerron's progress appeared to be moving towards equilibrium. However, his strong attachment to his family and childhood friends remained extremely important to him, creating some dissonance in his post-disaster recovery.

This book has multiple strengths. First, this research remains topical given that the 2017 hurricane season displaced hundreds of thousands of people from Puerto Rico when hurricane Maria hit. Climate change, coupled with social inequity and insufficient institutional support will ensure that the children of Katrina are not the only ones who suffer in the short term. Second, the intensive emersion produced rich ethnographic details. This information highlighted the problems encountered by the children and the creative solutions found by the children, parents, kin, and advocates. It is clear that caring adults and institutional support have had positive effects in the post-disaster period. For highly distressed parents and social institutions, insufficient resources and agency incapacity make childhood recovery difficult and slow. Given the high degree of social inequality in the United States, most widespread disasters will uproot the most disadvantaged, placing them in a situation after the disaster that is just as precarious as that which they were in before. Another strength of the book is that the authors draw from leading social scientists with proven records in family, youth, poverty, and social inequality research.

There are very few weaknesses in this book. However, in one instance, a claim is made regarding the educational quality of a New Orleans' university and no supporting evidence is provided. It may be that this claim merely reflects the opinion of the authors. Social capital theory, as explained by Coleman (1990), offers a slightly better fit for the research presented here. Further, the concept of *intergenerational closure* would provide a slightly better analytical framework for exploring children's post-disaster trajectories. At the request of the authors, the children drew therapeutic pictures of the trauma they had suffered at school. It would have assisted readers if this visual method, known as photo elicitation, had been labeled and its value had been explained in greater detail.

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