Children of Katrina, 2015, by Alice Fothergill and Lori Peek. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.

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The literature on children and disasters has been undergoing a significant transition for several years now, one in which scholars have shifted from viewing children as a vulnerable population, in need of complete protection, to a population capable of post-disaster innovation, adaptive capacity, and resilience. This shift in thinking has been driven, in large part, by two sociologists: Lori Peek and Alice Fothergill. Their new manuscript, Children of Katrina, significantly advances this literature by explaining how New Orleans children affected by Hurricane Katrina recovered— or didn’t— from the storm. Moreover, the book dissects the biographies of these children to help the reader understand how and why particular children thrived or struggled. If there can ever be an authoritative work on the experiences of children following a catastrophe like Katrina, this is certainly it.

Children of Katrina is organized around the experiences and lives of seven focal children, 25 core children, and more than 600 secondary or tertiary children. Using the seven focal children, in particular, Fothergill and Peek present three trajectories that children took in the aftermath of Katrina: the declining trajectory, the finding-equilibrium trajectory, and the fluctuating trajectory. For each trajectory, they use one or two of the children as case-study or ideal-type examples of that trajectory, documenting how their particular contexts predisposed them to that trajectory.

What is perhaps most refreshing about Fothergill and Peek’s book is that, when looking at children affected by a catastrophe like Katrina, they do not fall prey to the “helpless victim” myth, nor to the “resilience” myth. Instead, they imagine a spectrum between children-as-victims and children-as-resilient and provide the space for their participants to vacillate between vulnerability and resilience at various points in their recoveries. Still, as Fothergill and Peek point out “these boys and girls were active agents, not passive victims” (p. 28).

Although the book advances our understandings of why some children flourish and others flounder after a disaster, its most lasting contribution will almost surely be methodological. Children of Katrina serves as an exemplar of committed, dedicated, disaster research done out of an earnest desire to improve the lives of Katrina-affected children. In some of my previous writing with Kristen Barber, I have tried to make a case that the most empirically rich disaster research is done by local researchers who were themselves affected. That experience, we argue, generates new questions, new
ways of looking at old questions, a tireless dedication to the affected region, and an emotionality which can itself be used as data. Implicit in that argument is a critique of some “in-and-out” research done by non-local researchers. But, *Children of Katrina* provides a noteworthy exception to the critique. In their fieldwork, Fothergill and Peek exhibit an unusual dedication to the children in their study. Over the more than seven years of data collection, they return frequently to New Orleans, becoming fixtures in the lives of their participants. They take their participants out to dinner, safeguard cherished items during bouts of homelessness, help with car repairs, and send them notes and small gifts when they are away. It is clear that Peek and Fothergill, over time, were considered extended family members by many of the participants and their families. Given the demands of academic work, and the great geographic distance between themselves and the study participants, this level of involvement in the lives of their research participants is almost unimaginable. The work was clearly undertaken with love and kindness, two qualities too often absent from social science research.

The deep connection the authors formed to their participants is perhaps best explained by the participants themselves. As one participant reflected after being interviewed, “It’s like ‘Man, somebody really did are about me. People love me. They want to know where I am and how I’m doing.’ That means a lot to people.” Another man explains that “I can’t wait to see the book and everyone else’s stories… [Being interviewed] is a relief, its’ a breath of fresh air to be able to get it out, all the stuff that we went through during the time that this was goin’ on, it’s like a relief” (p. 265). Though many critics have wondered whether social science research on disaster exploits or re-traumatizes affected persons, Fothergill and Peek’s book demonstrates so very clearly how the research and data collection process, not simply the results, can improve the human condition. It will surely inspire future generations of engaged disaster scholars.

If there can be any critique of *Children of Katrina* (though one must grasp at straws to find one), their deep descriptions of the lives of their children, and their placement of these children in one of several ideal-type trajectories, at points does obscure the ability of the reader to discern the specific causal factors that propel their focal participant children onto one post-disaster trajectory or another. I now realize that the inability to isolate two or three simple causal factors points not to any theoretical or methodological shortcoming of the work but, rather, to the incredible complexity of their participants’ lives. Fothergill and Peek view recovery not as an outcome, but as a dynamic process with no fixed endpoint. As such, the factors (homelessness, etc.) affecting their educational, social, and economic outcomes are numerous and changed frequently during the seven years of the study, making it impossible to reduce childrens’ outcomes to the presence of absence of one or two variables or conditions. The authors masterfully document this complexity and it should make us all question whether it is possible to properly describe and analyze complex post-disaster outcomes within the cold confines of a regression model.

Hurricane Katrina impacted an entire generation of New Orleans children. These children, most of whom are now young adults, continue to lead lives that have been
shaped by the storm and its aftermath. Meeting the ongoing needs of this generation, as well as future children who will experience disasters, requires detailed examination of how children and youth experience disaster and its recovery, and Fothergill and Peek provide much of this needed examination. Such knowledge will help us better allocate resources to meeting children’s unmet needs. Or, as Fothergill and Peek point out “A child—regardless of individual traits—cannot recover from a disaster without the necessary resources and social structural support.” Besides its obvious value to social scientists, *Children of Katrina* should be a fixture on the bookshelves of policy-makers and those involved with non-profits and NGO’s who work to ensure that more children are able to find equilibrium after a disaster.