Review Essay

Hurricane Katrina’s Families and Children: Before, during and after the Deluge

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*Left to Chance: Hurricane Katrina and the Story of Two New Orleans Neighborhoods* and *Children of Katrina* are two titles in an important University of Texas Press series called the Katrina Bookshelf. Series editor Kai Erikson is well known for his seminal book *Everything in Its Path: Destruction of Community in the Buffalo Creek Flood* (1976), about the Buffalo Creek flood disaster on 26 February 1972 in which over 132 million US gallons of black waste water broke through three dams and virtually wiped out sixteen coal towns in West Virginia, demolishing (as Erikson’s book title indicates) everything in its path. Similarly, and with the same aim as *Everything in Its Path* of combining broadly relevant findings with the particulars that inhere to every catastrophe, these books in the Katrina Bookshelf series of five (to date) focus on how families in two particular New Orleans neighborhoods (*Left to Chance*) and on how children and youth in New Orleans and across the Gulf Coast (*Children of Katrina*) navigated and negotiated their lives before and after Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans, Louisiana on 29 August 2005. Both books, then, track how people and neighborhoods were impacted during the hurricane, immediately afterward, and up to seven years after the floodwaters receded. Valuably for future policy and prevention efforts, the stance in both books is the continuous juxtaposition of individual and structural influences on disaster outcomes.

*Left to Chance* is solidly rooted in New Orleans, where the authors, professors in 2005 at the University of New Orleans, Steve Kroll-Smith, Vern Baxter, and Pam Jenkins, interviewed residents of the Hollygrove and Pontchartrain Park neighborhoods over time about their hurricane, evacuation, and rebuilding experiences. Both neighborhoods were predominantly African American, but different in social class,
or, in more usual American terminology, in income and resources. The residents’ stories are also contextualized by the authors’ use of historical and Census information about the neighborhoods, which richly illuminate how the neighborhoods came about, their boundaries, and their demography as prelude to what transpires after the hurricane. From the theoretical standpoint that personal capabilities and characteristics are embedded in social structural and institutional landscapes, *Left to Chance* provides a particularly broad and deep examination of how the well-publicized failures of local, state, and national governments actually affected the post-hurricane lives of residents of Hollygrove and Pontchartrain Park, as well as the fabric of the neighborhoods themselves.

Specifically, the authors describe the book as an oral history, a “collaborative telling,” among those who told them about disaster and the three researcher-authors who have edited and commented on their accounts (7). In effect, just as Erikson identified in *Everything in Its Path*, the goal of the *Left to Chance* authors was to “bring to public attention the disordering forces of unleashed water on the one hand and the often greater chaos created by a disaster-assistance culture favoring a privileged response model on the other” (7). In short, this book graphically and penetratingly illuminates how Pontchartrain Park residents’ depth of resource supports, higher education, and greater cultural “know-how” resulted in less stressful, safer, and more stable outcomes in and after Katrina than was the case for Hollygrove residents, who were poorer, less stable, and less well resourced.

For example, the road from evacuation to exile for Hollygrove residents, characterized as the inability to obtain government assistance sufficient to return to New Orleans, was peppered with government failures. The authors liken President George W. Bush’s challenge to civic organizations in 2005 to “find their role and do their part” (80) to his father President George H. W. Bush’s “thousand points of light” campaign in the 1980s. In both, directives about how to help and *allocation of extra funds* for help were not forthcoming. Worse, neither President accompanied the promise of help by an explicit or even implicit statement about what government’s role was or should be. As such, the Hollygrove evacuees felt they were on their own – and they were. In contrast, immediately available private homeowner insurance and well-developed personal networks of resources enabled many more Pontchartrain Park than Hollygrove residents to return and rebuild more quickly – or at all. At the same time, the authors stress that outcomes for families in both neighborhoods were strongly influenced by “chance and happenstance,” which is what makes each story simultaneously particularistic and broadly informative.

The neighborhood residents’ stories in *Left to Chance* are doubly penetrating because of the authors’ broad-brush focus on experiences of, during, and after Katrina from both individual and structural perspectives. For example, while institutional failures pertaining to Hurricane Katrina had been revealed in vivid press coverage – including the fact that three months before Katrina hit, Congress again refused to allocate money for levee strengthening that the Army Corps of Engineers determined was essential, *Left to Chance* provides a personalized, fine-grained picture of how government failures look and feel for those who experience them. Readers may never forget the agonies of seventy-year-old Pontchartrain Park resident Ronald Sandman’s toxic water-sodden, maggot-infested leg after being “wedged into a two-and-a-half-foot-high crawl space between the ceiling and roof of his carport” (23) for several days after Katrina hit, and his delirium-influenced plea for the leg to just be “taken off” (though doctors laboriously saved it). Similarly unforgettable is the

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*Review Essay*

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story about the Hollygrove man who was so exhausted from escaping the floodwaters that he sat in a pile of red ants (“a billion red ants all over him”) in the middle of a large disabled roadway and soon after died from infection in the hospital. Eighteen hundred persons died from Hurricane Katrina, and that number was disproportionately black and poor, largely because no evacuation plans were in place for residents without cars or for people who were elderly or disabled. As Census 2000 data tell us, more than three in ten Hollygrove residents (31.5 per cent) had no vehicle compared to only one in ten (9.9 per cent) residents of Pontchartrain Park.

Importantly, *Left to Chance* provides vivid examples from residents returning after evacuation that challenge the notion of disaster “recovery” as a static, reachable event. The descriptor used by one of the Pontchartrain Park residents – “The Katrina Effect” – signifies that, for many, the flood was not something they lived through, but rather something they live with, each in his or her own way (118). Even with positive experiences in rebuilding, the city’s demographic changes, increased crime, high unemployment, closed schools and hospitals – in some cases for many years after the storm – rendered the city unfamiliar to many for whom prior neighborhood familiarity had been a consistent source of social support, social capital, employment, and emotional security.

There’s a good deal of repetition in the *Left to Chance* chapters about chance, surprises, chaos, absence of adequate and accessible policy, weak to nonexistent municipal authority, and the like, which may be unnecessary for those reading the book from start to finish, but is certainly valuable for anyone reading selected chapters or sections. There may also be a little too much reliance on a few of the residents, even though each contribution is important and illuminating.

Moving beyond neighborhoods and families as a whole, the particular “Katrina Effects” on children are the topic of Alice Fothergill and Lori Peek’s *Children of Katrina*. The authors draw upon a large body of research on child development and, specifically, on children and disasters, much of which they conducted earlier in the US and globally.

Soon after the storm, Fothergill and Peek began a series of one-time interviews with a broad brush of children aged between three and eighteen in New Orleans and nearby affected areas (ultimately over 650), gathering the children’s experiences and stories about the storm itself, what happened to them during evacuation and/or displacement, who helped them, and how they helped themselves. After two years the authors winnowed down the 650 experiences and examined twenty-five in greater depth. From those twenty-five they chose seven focal children who they feel exemplify dominant themes they heard and followed them closely for another five years to learn how their lives unfolded over time. Ultimately, the authors visited these seven children at least a dozen times between 2005 and 2012. The authors also interviewed about a hundred adults, including the focal children’s families and extended families, school-teachers, daycare providers, shelter workers, religious figures, and the like. The aim of the research was twofold: one, to dispel myths about children’s resilience, vulnerability, and agency in the face of disaster (i.e. that children are blissfully unaware of a disaster and that children are helpless victims), and two, to consider the role of sociodemographic differences in disaster outcomes (versus the myth that all children are affected equally by a disaster). Each children’s story chapter graphically illuminates that children’s fates are at least as complex and varied as those of the adults encountered in both books.
Specifically, the authors identify that three dominant post-Katrina recovery trajectories for children emerged from the hundreds of single interviews and the in-depth experiences with the focal children and associated others over the seven years. First, a “declining trajectory” for children is characterized by pre-Katrina challenges for the children and their families in multiple spheres – such as housing, employment, family relations, transportation, and health – that persist during and after the hurricane and that have not abated even seven years later. Second, a “finding-equilibrium trajectory” for the children involves personal and institutional challenges pre-Katrina, as all families in the research experienced, that are counterbalanced by the presence of pre- and/or post-disaster resource depth, access to helpful and supportive advocates, and the ability to mobilize resources from strong institutions. Such counterbalances keep the children’s lives on a stable or forward trajectory, such as maintaining friends and doing well in school. Third, a “fluctuating trajectory” for the children involves the presence of less severe pre-Katrina challenges and more security and stability in at least one important sphere compared to children in the declining category. Nevertheless, children with fluctuating trajectories experience constant flux over the study period, never fully declining but never fully able to move forward.

Fothergill and Peek find variation within the trajectories as well as across them, which is particularly evident in Clinton’s pathway, which they characterize as fluctuating but I would characterize as “declining” for the following reason. Clinton, aged four when Katrina hit, had never had a consistent parent, and with only short periodic exceptions, by the age of eleven virtually every sphere of life important to Clinton’s development remains insecure. From the time of Clinton’s birth, his mother was more often than not struggling with cocaine addiction and absent for months and sometimes years at a time, leaving Clinton to be raised by his mature, but still teenage (fifteen-year-old), sister and older brother with no parental support. When the family’s landlord finally required them to pay rent, Clinton began a series of multiple moves to supportive but not permanent caretakers, known mostly through the church he and his sister attended. At the end of the study, Clinton’s brother lived in another state and his sister was trying to progress in her educational and employment life while also tending to Clinton when she could. Thus by the age of eleven, Clinton had endured over a decade of parental neglect, which threatens his future well-being, as evidenced by declining school performance and increasingly aggressive behaviors. Clinton benefited from loving siblings, to be sure, but they had also been left behind by their mother to fend for themselves for long periods – to forage for food, scramble for a little money, which perhaps constrained what they could provide Clinton in terms of adult parenting.

As penetrating as the seven children’s stories are in Children of Katrina, there may be a little too much causal linkage of children’s behaviors, such as helping younger siblings and experiencing “meaning” from participating in the research, to Katrina per se, rather than seeing these linkages as characteristic of children and youth writ large, especially among those who have experienced other life challenges, such as poverty, parental divorce, family loss, multiple moves, and the like. In another example of possible causal conflation in the otherwise remarkably descriptive Appendix B on study methodology, the authors characterize the respondents’ use of the term “staying” versus “living” somewhere as a New Orleans way of talking about their neighborhood or city. In fact, while the origins of the “staying-versus-living” descriptor may be in the South, the usage is found in other parts of the US as well and thus is not unique to New Orleans. Causality assertions notwithstanding, many stories in Children of...
Katrina provide enlightening and important guidance for disaster planning and for so-called “recovery” for children’s future lives. At the same time, since the initial aim of the book was to address how private troubles were actually public issues, more in the way of restorative policy recommendations could have been added to the program suggestions in Appendix C.

Overall, given recent increases in catastrophic floods, earthquakes, tsunamis, and other so-called “natural” disasters across the globe, as well as “unnatural” disasters such as major terrorist attacks and mass shootings, much can be learned from these two books about more effective prevention, policymaking, and policy implementation at all government levels. The Katrina Bookshelf series is to be commended for the detailed coverage of families and neighborhoods in Left to Chance and of children in Children of Katrina. Both books are exquisitely detailed in ways that multiple observations and interviews over time, together with the expert eyes of these five researchers/authors, ideally yield. Occasional maps, informative charts, and periodic photographs and/or children’s artwork facilitate even deeper understanding of the authors’ and respondents’ perspectives and commentaries in both books. As an ethnographic researcher myself, who conducted pre- and post-Katrina research in New Orleans, the neighborhood residents’ and children’s stories in both books “ring true,” which is the core “validity” criterion for the rigorous longitudinal qualitative research presented in these two fine books.