FOREWORD

When the late psychologist Norman Garmezy, a pioneer of the field of resilience, first began studying positive adaptation in children in the early 1970s, he sought out stories of children who had thrived despite being exposed to highly stressful environments, particularly those associated with poverty. “Who will fall to the ravaging effects of mental disorder,” he declared to his colleagues at a 1970 conference, “or who will, despite stress and adversity, remain inviolate to psychopathology remains a problem of mystery and challenge.”¹ Garmezy had already spent two decades studying war veterans, schizophrenics, and the children of schizophrenics. In each, he sought to illuminate the predictive path, those factors in people’s lives that foreshadowed either positive or negative outcomes, that divided the successful from the unsuccessful, and the adaptive from the psychopathological.

At the start of his two-decades-long children’s study, Garmezy visited public schools throughout Minnesota, asking the same question of the school principals, nurses, and social workers with whom he met: were there any children in the school whose background worried them when they first learned of them, but who now elicited pride when they walked the school halls because they had succeeded despite steep odds? Illustrations of resilience were often distilled in snapshots of a child’s life. He learned of one nine-year-old boy who was being raised by a single mother, herself an alcoholic. The two of them often had little food in the house. Each day the boy would bring to school a “bread sandwich,” two pieces of bread with nothing in between, in order to blend in with the other children bringing their lunches from home. He didn’t want the other children to pity him, Garmezy learned, nor to know of his mother’s failings. As Garmezy and his colleagues evolved their theories of resilience and adaptation they accumulated many such stories. Some were drawn from children who experienced cataclysmic events in their lives, others from children who lived the quieter lives of grinding desperation and poverty. “I have to think of a single great stressor and its consequences,” Garmezy said, in recounting his life’s work in 2002, “and I also think of the accumulation of stressors in which the environment, the family, and the background all add up to generate negative events and circumstances that ordinarily would bring a child down, but in many instances do not.”²

In *Children of Katrina*, Alice Fothergill and Lori Peek use the backdrop of the catastrophic 2005 hurricane to advance our understanding of re-

silience and recovery even further. They have built on both the inductive power of that story-telling tradition, and upon several decades of psychological and sociological literatures of adaptation, resilience, and vulnerability. The stories they tell in this volume, drawn from the generation of children who experienced Hurricane Katrina along the U.S. Gulf Coast, bridge the acute traumatic stressors of the storm and displacement, and those that are more personal stressors common to those who live chaotic lives of broken homes, homelessness, and poverty. From among the 650 children they encountered in their research, Peek and Fothergill selected seven stories in particular with which to illuminate the pathways to recovery. They were careful to vary their selected children by age and gender, race, and social class. Much as Garmezzy exhorted his colleagues to do, they have methodically explored the social, cultural, and economic forces in the lives of these seven children. From the data they collected over the span of seven years of observing and interviewing the children, their families, and their social networks, Fothergill and Peek have painted a picture of three recovery trajectories: one in which the child finds equilibrium, one in which the child fluctuates between positive and negative states, and one in which the child and the family are in decline. The individual stories are often heart-wrenching. The implications are enormous.

Katrina was momentous in its destruction and disruption. As many as 1.2 million residents of Louisiana and Mississippi evacuated their homes, approximately 500,000 people were displaced for at least four months, and of the 160,000 children who were displaced, only 60 percent had returned to their home communities two years later.³ The images of Katrina splashed across the media reflected a city under water, a critical infrastructure devastated, and a vulnerability revealed. This was particularly damning coming only four short years after the terror attacks of 9/11, and the revelation that U.S. systems of response and recovery were so ill-prepared. A bipartisan congressional report labeled the response to Katrina a “failure of initiative.”⁴

In many ways, though, the drama of the initial storm and response pales in comparison to the enormity of the recovery. Even today, nearly a decade after the hurricane, many Gulf Coast residents are still dealing with the economic and emotional legacy of Katrina. By documenting these recovery trajectories among the children and households they profile, Fothergill and Peek have underscored some of the key individual, familial, social, and structural characteristics that distinguish each of the recovery trajectories.

The world of disaster research is small, and that of those of us focused on disaster recovery is even more intimate, so our paths and academic interests have certainly crossed with those of Fothergill and Peek (and in the

interest of full disclosure, have led to significant and ongoing collaborations with the latter). Our own quantitative work revealed that five years after the hurricane, children exposed to the storm were five times as likely as comparable “non-exposed” children to be suffering from Serious Emotional Disturbance. But this finding masked the nuances of the story. Not every child was suffering; after all, two-thirds were not. Why did some children fare well and others less so? What pieces of “ordinary magic,” as Ann Masten has referred to the normative characteristics of resilience common to many children, were essential for those children who were able to experience better outcomes?⁵

In chapter 6, Fothergill and Peek offer the story of Cierra, 11 years old at the time of the hurricane, to illustrate a child who was able to regain and maintain her equilibrium. As the hurricane approached, Cierra and her mother, Debra, sheltered at the New Orleans hospital where Debra worked. When the levees broke the floodwaters rose quickly, and in short order the hospital was besieged by evacuees arriving at its doors by boat, the electricity failed, and patients decompensated and died around them. After days in the failing hospital, Cierra and Debra were shuttled to the Superdome and then to Lafayette, Louisiana. Their home was destroyed, and all their possessions gone. They started life anew first in a shelter and then in a FEMA trailer in Lafayette, where they lived for three years. Initially, when Fothergill and Peek interviewed Cierra, she was bereft at the loss of all that was familiar to her: “I was missing all my family and my friends and the people that were really close to me that loved me the most.” But over time, Cierra flourished in her new surroundings. She developed a diverse and caring network of friends and adult supporters and she succeeded in school; she was even awarded a prestigious fellowship to travel to Washington, DC, as a student leader. Through the detailed and evocative story they tell of Cierra and Debra, Fothergill and Peek identify the many factors contributing to her finding equilibrium, most notably “the support and assistance of advocates and institutions, with her mother as the primary conduit to these resources.” This led them to formulate a critical recovery model for the resource-poor, one which includes supportive advocates; strong social and civic institutions, such as schools, relief programs, and faith-based organizations; a competent and resourceful parent or guardian; and a child willing to be an active participant in his or her own recovery. “Without all of these factors simultaneously in play,” they note, “Cierra may have not found equilibrium following Katrina.”

Garnezy and his protégé Ann Masten and other resilience theorists developed a “short list” of psychological attributes that promoted positive

adaptation among children. The list included intelligence, self-efficacy, executive control, and a good sense of humor, among others. In looking back over 30 years of resilience scholarship, Masten and her colleagues referred to this as the “first wave” of resilience research, in which they identified individual resilience factors. The second wave explored resilience processes within individuals and across social systems, the third wave examined interventions that might enhance or facilitate resilience, and the still-emerging fourth wave has focused upon a consideration of multiple system effects, encompassing biological and social systems.⁶ Fothergill and Peek bring the sociological perspective to the space straddling the third and fourth waves. Their stories and insights articulate many of the psychological and social forces at play in children’s lives, and their recovery models align with evolving policy prescriptions for child-serving institutions and more generally for systems of response and recovery. In the decade since Hurricane Katrina, this country has experienced a series of domestic disasters that have focused the research community on the impact of disasters on children—the Joplin, Missouri, and Moore, Oklahoma, tornadoes, the Deepwater Horizon oil spill, and the Sandy Hook Elementary School shootings in Connecticut, among others. In the tornadoes, the children lost peers and their schools; in the oil spill the children lost access to a recreational environment and to some extent to a way of life; and in the school shooting the children lost a sense of safety and security. Fothergill and Peek’s model of finding equilibrium, with its emphasis on effective and compassionate advocates and institutions and on the way that social structures and conventions manifest themselves in children’s lives, can offer some guideposts for policy-makers intent on helping children resist or recover from such disasters. It goes without saying, of course, that such disasters should be prevented in the first place.

Fundamentally, though, what Alice Fothergill and Lori Peek offer in this volume is an exceptionally well crafted and meticulously researched work that advances the *voice* and *agency* of children. Perhaps it was preordained. In the weeks before Katrina struck the two sociologists had been inspired by the words of Bill Anderson, a widely known disaster scholar and legendary former National Science Foundation program officer, who had challenged the field to consider the impact of disasters on children. Anderson posed three questions to frame the research: What do disasters do to children? What is done on behalf of children? And what can children do for themselves and others?⁷ Fothergill and Peek discussed the ways that they, as two young sociology professors, could respond to that call. When Katrina hit, their answer was readily at hand and they moved quickly into

the field, within weeks. They were intent on interviewing the children directly as a means of expressing the *voice* of children so often absent in research studies. And they were equally committed to understanding the role of children's participation in their own recovery, their *agency*.

What Fothergill and Peek have done in *Children of Katrina* is to expertly weave three approaches in responding to Anderson's three questions: the careful ethnographic methodology of Elliot Liebow's *Tally's Corner* and Kai Erikson's *Everything in Its Path*, the methodical long-form journalism exemplified by Jason DeParle's *American Dream*, and the clear and utter compassion for their subjects that is uniquely their own. Readers of this book should take note, in appendix B in particular, of how carefully and compassionately they navigated the relationships they fostered in conducting the research for this book. They empathized with their research participants, recognized the differences, and bridged them as they could. That appendix is, in itself, a master class on qualitative techniques, as well as a thoughtful discourse on some of the thorny ethical dilemmas confronted by social science researchers.

Lastly, the three trajectories—declining, finding equilibrium, and fluctuating—that Fothergill and Peek have advanced in this book are important to the field, as is their particular emphasis on social structure and youth engagement. Hurricane Katrina was a devastating event for the country, but it will not be the last; this volume speaks for the children of Katrina, and for the children of disasters yet to come. It is critical to those of us in the fields of disaster research, policy, and practice that we not only hear the voices of these children, but also attend to them, identifying and facilitating the resources for recovery they need within themselves, their families, and their communities.

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