

"How Can They Look So Happy?" Reconstructing the Place of Children after Hurricane Katrina: Images and Reflections¹

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The media have provided detailed accounts and vivid illustrations of the damage and destruction that Hurricane Katrina left in its wake after slamming into the Gulf Coast of the U.S. on August 29, 2005. Some of this coverage focused specifically on children. The public was informed, for example, that more than 130,000 children were displaced in New Orleans alone (Kantrowitz and Breslau 2005). According to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, as of October 1, 2005, there were still 2,646 children reported as missing.² Typically, media reports about children were "human interest" stories, offering tales of tragic losses or celebrating happy reunions with re-found family members, with video clips and photos providing visual testimony.

One month after the disaster, with the stage of emergency assistance over, attention shifted to the reconstruction of the environments—including

children's places—that had been devastated by the hurricane and subsequent flooding. However important physical places are in children's daily lives and development, this brief contribution to CYE concerns itself with the place of children in a cultural and political sense. The portrayal of children in Katrina's aftermath has emphasized their vulnerability and their dependence on adults. This perspective, we suggest, reflects a wider societal paradigm that frames what is upheld as the proper place of children and youth in U.S. society. We argue that the reconstruction of children's environments on the Gulf Coast must be based on an alternative paradigm that recognizes the right and capacity of children to participate in matters affecting their lives.

Children's Places and the Place of Children

Cataclysmic events tend to bring out and accentuate the sociocultural patterns that implicitly shape our daily lives in more ordinary times. Hurricane Katrina is no exception. In many ways, aspects of its physical *destruction* are at the same time a sociocultural *construction*. Thus, race and social class are salient in discussions among politicians, academicians, and media pundits about the causes and consequences of the disaster and in the planning for reconstruction that is now underway. Similarly, it is revealing how the media and other sources have portrayed children in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Reports of their experience of place in the physical environment reflect their place in U.S. culture.

Waiting in the Memphis airport for her return flight after a week of photographing and interviewing, the first author of this essay was struck by the cover of *Newsweek*: a powerful photograph of the tear-filled eyes and sad face of Figueroa, rescued from her flooded home in the Lower Ninth Ward of New Orleans. It is a compelling image that overwhelmingly projects feelings of sorrow and suffering. Inside, *Newsweek's* special report on the "littlest victims" is headlined, "Some Are Found, All Are Lost." The report itself labels the displaced children of New Orleans, "the human detritus [of the storm] scattered across the country." This dramatic language is reinforced by such statements as: "experts say that natural disasters can be particularly tough for kids to handle," and: "therapists say that the children of Katrina could suffer for years." If there were any doubt among readers about children's vulnerability and their dependence on adults, the tenor of the report is further reinforced by a photo of a crying five year old, displaced from Slidell, Louisiana, starting kindergarten in Bossier City while being comforted by an adult with a protective hand over the child's shoulder.

The *Newsweek* report was by no means unique. On October 8, 2005, CNN broadcast a one-hour special on "The Children of the Storm" in which the narrators—their voices fraught with funereal melodrama—ask readers to contemplate whether these "innocent children...will ever feel safe again" as they present "heart-rending stories," "nightmares at best," that invoke images of "young lives upended, overwhelmed," "struggling to survive." In a similar vein, shortly after the disaster happened, the National Association of School Psychologists (2005) prepared a handout stating that "children are

particularly vulnerable." Going a step further, Christine Dobson and Bruce D. Perry (2005a) of the Child Trauma Academy asserted that "Children are the most vulnerable members of our society because *they are completely dependent on adults* [emphasis added] for their emotional and physical needs." In describing "a safe healing environment," they point to the need for information, predictability, structure, patience, compassion, and physical activity as "key elements" (Dobson and Perry 2005b). They offer broad recommendations based upon experience with children traumatized by large-scale events such as the Oklahoma City bombing (on April 19, 1995) and the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, advising educators that "these children are coming into school in a daze. For most this fog of distress will pass—in no small part to the structure, predictability, patience and compassion they will find at school. For others the trauma-related problems will persist or worsen" (Dobson and Perry 2005c).

The one-dimensional categorization of children as victims of Hurricane Katrina is not unique. For example, when a devastating earthquake hit the Pakistani-controlled Kashmir region a month later, a CNN/AP account was headlined "Grim Future for Young Quake Survivors" (Chance 2005).

Without any doubt, Hurricane Katrina inflicted pain and anguish on children, as poignantly captured by Charlie Varley in his striking photograph of Figueroa for *Newsweek*. However, the dominant representation of children is that they are simply *vulnerable, helpless victims*.

Questioning or denying individuals' abilities *a priori* establishes hierarchical relationships which de-legitimize any claims to parity by those portrayed as dependent and which relegate their voices to those of passive victims rather than of active participants. *Everything in Its Path* is a case in point, an oft-cited and award-winning classic by Erikson (1976) which offers an account of the 1972 flood of Buffalo Creek. Upon critical examination, the account is tinged with stereotypical and ill-based notions about the local Appalachian residents and the viability of their community. When surviving residents filed suit against the Pittston Coal Company—which with impunity had ignored citations for its irresponsible mine waste dumping practices in the creek—the legal proceedings reinforced these social constructions.

"How Can They Look So Happy?"

A television reporter interviewing Jennifer Kirschke about her photographs of children displaced by Hurricane Katrina noted that they were not obviously troubled by emotions of despair. Not seeing worry or anxiety in their faces, he incredulously and repeatedly asked, "*How can they look so happy?*" (see Figures 1 through 3). The question reveals a pervasive and deep-seated cultural tenet of U.S. society: because children are vulnerable, at risk, and lacking in self-defenses, experiencing adversity, let alone disaster, will inevitably make them miserable. Many of the images and responses of the children contest this belief. In the words of Jack, age 8: Hurricane Katrina "tore up a lot of people's lives, but not mine" (Figure 4).

Figure 1. Jessie, 10



Jessie, 10
Disaster Recovery Center
Baton Rouge, LA
From: New Orleans

Spent a night on the highway where there were two dead bodies. He told me sick people were dropped off there with no medical help. He and his mom are now staying in Baton Rouge with his sister and her three children.

Figure 2. Corshlyn, 4



Corshlyn, 4
Disaster Recovery Center
Baton Rouge, LA
From: New Orleans

Was with her family riding around in their car on I-10 during the hurricane as they headed towards Texas. She is now staying in Baton Rouge with relatives.

Figure 3. Hannah, 4



Hannah, 4
Temporary Relief Center
Colorado Springs, CO
From: New Orleans

Spent 2 nights on a highway and told me, "there was nowhere else to go and a plane didn't get us". Then spent four days at the Convention Center. When asked if she was having any nightmares about her experiences, Hannah replied that she wasn't but her mom was.

Figure 4. Jack, 8 and Alister, 3



Jack, 8 and Alister, 3
Blackham Coliseum Pet Shelter
Lafayette, LA
From: St. Charles Parrish, LA

When asked what the worst part of the hurricane was, Jack replied "It tore up a lot of people's lives, but not mine."

Hurricane Katrina devastated the homes and neighborhoods of many children (see Figures 5 through 8). Unquestionably, such a disaster can cause trauma in some children. We do not in anyway dispute this undeniable fact. What we do call into question, however, is the dominant paradigm that characterizes children as vulnerable, rather than resilient. We want to direct attention to an alternative paradigm that views children not as passive recipients of help, in constant and total dependence on adults, but as active participants in finding solutions to the challenges they face and helping shape their future. As pointed out by Manuel Fontaine, senior advisor on Child Protection at UNICEF (2005), "We know from experience from all regions of the world that children have an incredible capacity to recover and resilience to face these kinds of events and get better."

Figure 5. Homes all over the Gulf Coast are being gutted to prevent dangerous black mold from growing and spreading



Figure 6. Demolished home and trees in Biloxi, Mississippi



Figure 7. Debris-filled neighborhood in Biloxi, Mississippi



Figure 8. Devastated neighborhood in Biloxi, Mississippi



This capacity to “exert agency” has been well documented by work in the context of armed conflict and in other conditions of adversity (for an excellent review, see **Boyden 2003**). Evidence shows that children in these circumstances often demonstrate great resourcefulness and levels of independence that belie the prevailing portrayals of children who lived through the Katrina catastrophe. The story of Glenn in Biloxi, age 12, who came to the rescue of his grandmother, wheelchair-bound uncle and four-year old brother (see Figure 9) is entirely consistent with these observations of children’s ability to survive and cope under adversity.

Figure 9. Glenn, 12 and Efraim, 4



Glenn, 12 and Efraim, 4
Front porch of their home in Biloxi, MS

Glenn got Efraim, his grandmother and wheelchair-bound uncle onto a mattress and floated them out the window to a house with a second story when the floodwaters got too high.

A Culture of Rights

Denying or ignoring children's capacity of agency is a violation of the U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), adopted in 1989 by the U.N. General Assembly and ratified by 192 countries. Participation is one of the guiding principles of the CRC. It affirms that children are full-fledged persons who have the right to express their views in all matters affecting them and requires that those views be heard and given due weight. It recognizes the potential of children to enrich decision-making processes, to share perspectives and to participate as citizens and active agents of change.

The United States (along with Somalia) has not ratified the CRC and it does not endorse a rights-based perspective, reflecting cultural norms that predispose U.S. society towards characterizations of children as dependent "adults-to-be." However, while it may indeed be beneficial to point out to children impacted by Hurricane Katrina "what the community, government or disaster assistance teams are doing" (Clayton 2005), it would also be appropriate to support efforts by children *themselves* to actively engage the hardships that confront them. Creating opportunities for such involvement should be an integral part of rebuilding the Gulf Coast communities.

Endnotes

1. This contribution is based on fieldwork conducted by Jennifer Kirschke for the Children, Youth and Environments (CYE) Center for Research and Design at the University of Colorado at Denver and Health Sciences Center (UCDHSC). The work took place in Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana and Colorado from 09/09/2005 to 09/17/2005 and was funded by a Quick Response Grant from the Natural Hazards Center at the University of Colorado.
2. A more detailed breakdown shows (NCMEC 2005b):
 - Louisiana - 4,132 children with 1,639 of those recovered/resolved;
 - Mississippi - 316 children with 197 of those recovered/resolved;
 - Alabama - 37 children with 12 of those recovered/resolved.
 - Total missing children reported: 4,485 children with 1,848 of those recovered/resolved.

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