



IN FOCUS

## CONFRONTING CHALLENGES IN RESEARCH WITH CHILDREN

What traditions and innovations can be found in contemporary anthropological research on childhood and children? Here, contributors comment on the methodological challenges of anthropological work with and of children, and the opportunities and creative, productive approaches such challenges enable, focusing on both practical and ethical dilemmas.

# Children, Climate Change and Disasters

## Challenges and Opportunities for Disaster Anthropology

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The literature on children's experiences in disaster situations has increased considerably in recent years. Many of these studies, especially those from mental health or psychological perspectives, have focused primarily on "victims" who have been negatively affected and have displayed problematic reactions to a disaster. Notions of "trauma" and "vulnerability" dominate these assessments, and have tended to inform the interventions offered in response. Popular ideas about children in disasters have also been reinforced by the images employed by humanitarian agencies, many of which have sought to gain support by playing upon stereotypes of children's neediness and dependency in the face of catastrophe.

Ethnographic evidence, however, indicates that many youngsters appear to cope well with stress, displaying remarkable adaptability in their responses to disaster-induced changes. Children's capacities, and their knowledge of environmental issues and indigenous coping mechanisms, have also been shown to be essential assets for families in the aftermath of disasters. Examining the experiences of these children thus allows for a better understanding of the factors that foster adaptive functioning and resilience, facilitating the design of more effective disaster management programs. While efforts to examine children's lives from their own perspectives are likely to lead to richer and more detailed data than conventional adult-centered approaches, research with and on children in adverse circumstances does require additional attention to methodological and ethical concerns.

### Emergence of Disaster Anthropology

Accelerating climate change is provoking more severe floods,

droughts and other environmental extremes, with the total number of disasters having quadrupled in the last two decades. Moreover, the number of people being affected by them is also increasing because of population growth, poverty, marginalization, conflict and the movement of displaced populations to marginal areas. Environmental issues have consequently been considered integral to broader issues of human security since the end of the Cold War.

There has been a parallel surge in interest in children since the early 1990s, fueled in part by the nearly universal ratification of the 1989 UN Convention of the Rights of the Child (see Rosen, this issue). The 2002 UN International Children's Conference on the Environment further emphasized the link between children and the future of the planet, and promoted the notion that children should be recognized as active participants in environmental programs.

Responding to these developments, two dominant trends among scholars of children and disasters have emerged. One is represented by psychologists and public/mental health specialists using structured research methods purporting to generate "scientific" and "expert-led" assessments. While this approach may produce quantifiable and potentially statistically significant information, it also reinforces adult power and preconceptions, often failing to take children's own concerns and aspirations into account.

A second trend has been spearheaded by anthropologists, sociologists, human geographers and others using children-centered approaches and participatory methods. They are often motivated by human (including children) rights concerns, and guided by a view of children as agents with the capacity to shape their own environment and that of

their families and communities. Arguing for a view of children as potentially resourceful, however, is not to deny that some of them may indeed be rendered more vulnerable by the impact of environmental change and disaster events. Clearly, children's agency is framed by their evolving capacities, and their own individual and socially-generated vulnerabilities. Accordingly, disaster anthropologists have examined the role of age, together with gender, class, education, language, religion, cultural setting and other variables in shaping the differential position of those impacted—both adults and children—regarding the risks, and opportunities, created by disasters. While participatory approaches are increasingly seen as an essential dimension of the anthropology of disasters, children's involvement in research on disaster situations is not without challenges and potential drawbacks.

sive focus on those children who display resourcefulness and resilience in the face of disaster may lead to the further stigmatization of those who are overwhelmed by the confluence of adverse circumstances. Marginalized children tend to be more isolated than other groups, and can thus be harder to reach in practical terms. Excluding them, however, can reinforce their marginalization.

Participatory exercises, especially group-focused ones, need to be mindful of power relations among children. Older, more assertive or privileged participants—those whose families are wealthier or more powerful—may otherwise dominate the process and have their views prevail. This can lead other children to experience heightened powerlessness and alienation, factors known to increase disaster vulnerability.

An awareness of adult-child power dynamics is also important in the

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### Methodological and Ethical Considerations

A vast toolkit of creative research methods that can be used with and by children is currently available. Theater, role playing, storytelling, songs, puppets, visual PRA methods (eg, resource mapping, timeline, Venn diagram, diamond ranking) and participatory video and photography are but some of the many possible techniques. The selection of tools, however, is not in itself sufficient to transform research into a potentially empowering participatory exercise. This is particularly so in the case of studies conducted in the volatile setting of large-scale disasters where efforts to include the views of affected children may indeed present considerable challenges.

Insensitive research in itself can further marginalize those involved. For instance, an exclu-

conduct of participatory research activities. Parents may be angered or humiliated by the public airing of private matters, which may lead to the punishment of their children. Adults in the community may resist the idea of children's participation altogether, considering the focus on "children's issues" to be unreasonable and inappropriate in the face of the more pressing "adult concerns" posed by emergency situations. Clearly, taking children's participation seriously entails more than encouraging them to be involved and express their views; it also requires attention to issues of voice and representation and a thorough understanding of the power relations among children and between children and adults, both researchers and community members.

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### Future Directions

Children can provide a unique view of the impact of disasters and subsequent interventions on their families, communities and environments. Given United Nations' predictions that by 2010 as many as 50 million people will be displaced by disasters, climate change-induced events and related interventions, and the fact that children tend to constitute a large proportion of any given population, disregarding the views of children potentially ignores a large part of local capacity at a time of crisis when it is most needed.

Anthropologists' contributions to the study and management of disasters and climate change can be enhanced by the adoption of more child-inclusive participatory approaches that examine children's resilience, not just their vulnerability. Participatory approaches are also more likely to effectively fulfill the needs and protect the rights of the disadvantaged and disempowered. Conducting participatory research with children in disaster-affected communities, on the other hand, can place considerable demands on those involved. It necessitates serious attention to methodological and ethical issues, and requires sensitivity, and a strong sense of responsibility on the part of researchers and practitioners. Methodologically sound and ethically responsible participatory research in disaster situations should provide children, as well as adults, with safe, age-appropriate opportunities to express their views freely, ensuring that they are not subjected to any pressure or manipulated in any way.

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# "I'm an Anthropologist"

## Adolescents Studying Children and Each Other

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What do children in the US's poorest cities do when they get hurt or don't feel well? What happens before they present at a healthcare facility? In August 2007, Robert Atkins, a nurse and health scientist in the school of nursing, and I, an anthropologist, embarked on a pilot study of health-seeking behaviors of children (ages 8–12) growing up in Camden, NJ. Jonathan Kozol refers to Camden, the fifth poorest city in the US, as "the city of children." As part of the study, we decided to involve adolescents from the community in data collection and analysis.

A number of reasons have been advanced for bringing children into the research enterprise. I do not believe, however, that it is necessary for epistemological reasons to include children as researchers in order to do research about children. In my first studies of terminally ill children, although children did not act as researchers a key principle was

22[1]). Also having child collaborators can help mitigate differences between researchers and children in regard to power, authority, age and education. Moreover, it addresses several ethical considerations raised by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. These benefits are realized in the project Robert Atkins and I undertook in 2007.

### Community Adolescent Research Collaborators

We employed eight adolescents (ages 16–17), calling them Community Adolescent Research Collaborators (CARCs), a term which they now use to refer to themselves. We started our collaboration with a week-long orientation to anthropological research methods. We met as a group three hours a day for five days at Rutgers University, near the participants' homes. We now meet once a week for two hours over dinner. All sessions are audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. For each meeting, either Robert or I act as scribe, writing on a large, easel-mounted tablet. The pages are

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that children are social actors just as adults are and they exercise the same social agency in interacting both among themselves and with adults (*The Private World of Dying Children*, 1978). It was essential in that research to apply the same methods and concepts to both children and adults to solve the problems at hand. This was also the case in my later studies of the parents and siblings of children with life-limiting illnesses (*In the Shadow of Illness*, 1996) and my recent work on the roles of ill children in decision making about their care and treatment ("Involving Children with Life Shortening Illnesses in Decisions about Participation in Clinical Research" in *Kodish's Ethics and Research With Children*, 2005; Bluebond-Langner, Belasco, Goldman and Belasco in *Journal of Clinical Oncology* 25[17]).

However, there can be benefits to involving children in the conduct of research. Their involvement can facilitate access to children's perspectives and voices (see Coad and Evans in *Children and Society*

hung on the wall, providing ready access for attribution, recall and discussion of everyone's remarks. CARCs receive \$20 per session.

Before our first meeting, I set a place for each CARC at the conference table. Each setting contained a syllabus for the week, a blank field notebook, a pen and parental consent and participant assent documents. I put tape recorders at each end of the table and refreshments in the center. Robert, who recruited the adolescents through a community youth program he and a colleague organized ten years ago, told the adolescents to bring "something you value to talk to the group about."

The first meeting began with each of us talking about the objects we brought, answering questions about their characteristics and our choice. This introduced the CARCs to each other and to what would become our primary research activity: the elicitation, presentation and analysis of "narrative accounts." In a lecture-discussion format, we introduced ethnography generally and, more specifically, participant-observer

research, interviewing, photo elicitation and the quantitative instruments and measures we would use in the study. CARCs watched the prescribed IRB video and were certified per university regulations.

Our training began by developing with the CARCs an open-ended, semi-structured interview guide that would be used by the CARCs with children, ages 8–12, to elicit their accounts of instances when they did not feel well or got hurt. As a group, we discussed what we thought needed to be covered in the children's accounts starting with eliciting very basic information and moving toward thicker descriptions.

We continued our exploration of narrative accounts by asking the CARCs to describe a time when they had been sick or injured. The CARCs reviewed their interview guides and jotted down thoughts in their field notebooks before delivering narratives orally to the group. The CARCs' comments and questions to the presenting CARC provided an opportunity for presenters to expand their narratives and for the group to become more familiar with what was necessary for a narrative account.

Feeding off the group synergy and recognizing the importance of their role as researchers, the CARCs questioned one another seriously, probing for additional detail. They tolerated from each other a peppering of questions that might have been met with shrugs and responses like "I don't know" had the questions come from adults. Paying attention to the flip sheets that papered the walls of the room, CARCs kept track of what kinds of information were needed in each of the accounts and identified and discussed patterns or themes they saw emerging (eg, "We all went to the dentist alone," "Most of us didn't tell our parents when we got sick" and "We make our own appointments").

Robert and I sometimes framed their statements in more analytical terms (eg, "These behaviors fit a category we could call 'self-parenting'"), or compared what the CARCs had said to findings in the literature, and then asked them if they agreed or disagreed and why. The CARCs also asked us about our impressions of these other studies as well as what they had told us about their views and behavior.

These discussions provided extremely rich material not only about the adolescents' approaches