

# Disasters and the Quality of Life

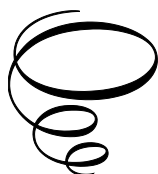


# Disasters and the Quality of Life

Edited by

Elya Tzaneva (Editor-in-Chief),  
with Mila Maeva, Yelis Erolova  
and Jiang Wei

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## FOREWORD

### DISASTERS AND THE QUALITY OF LIFE

This thematic edited volume is an initiative by Bulgarian ethnologists to develop an academic project titled “Local Disasters and the Quality of Life: Cultural Strategies in Overcoming Natural, Technological and Biological Catastrophes” of the Institute for Ethnology and Folklore Studies with Ethnographic Museum at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, funded by the National Science Fund – Ministry of Education and Science. It was coordinated by Assoc. Prof. Dr Elya Tzaneva. The implementation period was 2018–2022 under Contract DN 20/5 dated 11.12.2017–09.06.2022. This book is the main result of the project, following expanded three-year fieldwork and the presentation of the findings at an International scholarly conference in Sofia (May 2021). It is the continuation of the first steps undertaken by academic anthropologists in Bulgaria to study disasters and catastrophes from the point of view of their own scientific discipline.

But it is also something more. The creators of the volume envision it as a further expression of joint Bulgarian and Chinese efforts to study disasters, hazards, and critical situations. Therefore these first steps were combined in their early manifestation with the laying of the foundations of a new partnership in academic cooperation – between Bulgarian and Chinese scholars within the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences and the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, respectively. During the last 15 years, and as an expression of this thematic scholarly partnership, two edited volumes were issued by CSP and one by the Chinese Academic Press in Beijing: *Disasters, Culture, Politics* (2009), *Disasters and Cultural Stereotypes* (2012) and *灾害与文化定式* (2015). Among the contributors to these were respected ethnologists from the universities and academies of science in the two countries whose expertise and profound understanding of the problems arouse expectations of significant scholarly achievements. The expectation of the creators of this fourth book is towards the affirmation of

both the partnership and thematic lineage of disaster research, which seems to be extremely relevant in today's alarming time of a global pandemic.

There is no doubt in the minds of the volume's creators, and the research so far proves, that disasters are an inseparable element of human life – they have accompanied it continuously throughout its history and continue to do so. They play a determining role in the conditions of human existence, constituting a significant factor in the construction of the objective framework of life on the planet, determining its context, content, and meaning, and directing the dynamics of human life. Catastrophes, disasters, and crises play an important role in the mythologies of human groups and the worldview of individuals, but they also have a signifying function and therefore mark different important or minor events. This brings them into the discipline of anthropology – the study of cultures, groups, communities and identities, everyday life and festivities – and brings anthropology itself to the forefront of appropriate and necessary scientific and social fields with high potential and legitimacy for engagement.

Disasters wedge themselves among the people and bring chaos to organised sociality, as they challenge, disrupt and hence change the typical pattern of relations between individuals or groups and their natural and social environment. Most of them strike unexpectedly as a result of circumstances and phenomena that cannot be predicted or even assumed. Others, more and more frequently, accumulate harmful features in human activity and human errors, which accelerate the crisis potential and manifest themselves as human-made or social catastrophes in the biological, technological or socio-developmental spheres. Catastrophic events challenge society to rework a specific methodology and activate a specific resource to adapt to and cope with the crises ecologically, socially and ideologically – all three directions of disaster manifestation are in the interpretive line of anthropology. The narrower ethnological direction in this investigation stresses the role of the cultural systems (traditional beliefs and behaviour, and the institutional characteristics of a particular society or group) affected by a disaster, and focuses on how people draw upon and alter their belief systems and behaviour strategies based upon them, over longer periods, in their efforts to come to terms with catastrophic events.

As we all know, one of the sad features of today's world is that no place on earth is completely free of disaster risk. Recently the world has



become a target for calamities and disasters of different origins, scales and consequences, affecting people's lives by diverting them from their usual rhythm, changing their quality and creating situations in which adequate preparedness, prevention and response are factors of survival. Given the importance of this, the issue of disasters is increasingly entering the everyday language as well as general and specialised research, political debate and the agenda of many national, regional and global forums. Considering the relationship between civilisation and the environment, and between communities and disasters, researchers are motivated by those present and future realities in life. But they invariably depart from the causation that past cognitive and cultural standards have traced between catastrophic events and human actions.

Most of these types of disasters have appeared often in historical times and cultural memory and are long remembered by local traditions. For this reason, responses to disasters and catastrophes of diverse natures are deeply integrated into the cultures of the population. Based on the memory, the affected population creates impressions and produces models and strategies for treatment and response, which, if adequately studied and analysed, can be applied rationally to prevent and overcome the effects of disasters in the present time. Successful standards established for such an analysis can find a place in the guidelines and instructions of the official documents jointly with the local and central authorities to increase their effectiveness.

Our everyday life presents dozens of examples of how nature, technology and the social environment can cause disastrous situations. Regardless of their initial nature, these catastrophic natural events – such as earthquakes, floods, landslides, tsunamis, and fires – as well as those with technological and social backgrounds like epidemics, the consequences of wars, revolutions and migrations, oil spills, construction disasters, and explosions – always break the individual's and group's cycle of everyday culture and change its normal course. The intersection between catastrophes and people is the group and individual **quality of life** and the complex factors relevant to its disruption and recovery.

A specialised anthropological focus is necessary because disasters put human lives at risk. These are precisely the situations in which civically engaged anthropological and ethnological scholarship comes to in-

investigate, analyse and help formulate discussions. The chosen focus of this book is precisely the study of the changes that disasters of different typological and geographical natures cause to the quality of individual and group life as reflected in everyday culture.

Despite the logical link between disasters and the discourse of everyday culture, it is not a developed and frequent theme in anthropological studies, especially in the traditional streams: both in the world and particularly on a national scale, this direction began to be researched only in the last two decades when the practice highlighted the relationship between culture and the creation of niches of risk and vulnerability, as well as the presence of models and strategies for coping with disasters through culture. It fits in with the anthropology of hazards and disasters research field, which also arose and evolved recently.

Ethnologists, mainly American, have been active in this field since the mid-1980s, yet it is still considered “nascent” in scholarship. Its early period saw two basic volumes that created the leading scholars on the topic (Oliver–Smith, Hoffman 1999; Hoffman, Oliver–Smith 2002). Rapidly ascending today are the international thematic scholarly periodicals (*Disasters*, *Anthropology Today* and *Annual Review of Anthropology*) with their respective thematic issues increasingly appearing in publications on these subjects. Also progressing is the thematic research in the leading ethnology in the East focusing on the ethnic specifics of dealing with disasters, for example in Russia. The initiative and highest achievements so far are represented by the publications on ethnoecology in the Russian academy of sciences (e.g. among the first such publications see *Ethnos and its Habitat* 2009 and *Ethnic Ecology: Peoples and their Culture* 2008). Intensive research work on specific disaster situations is presented in some Chinese socio-anthropological publications (e.g. Wang, X. et al. 2000: 427–433; Tan, H. Z. et al. 2004: 126–132). Indicative of this process is the increase of the environmental sections and panels in the authoritative global and regional scientific forums (e.g. the *International Congresses of IUAES* in 2009, 2013 and 2017, and of *CAER* in 2013 and 2016 with their thematic panels; not to mention the huge amount of national and international forums lately concerning the *COVID–19 pandemic*). In recent years priority has been given to the sociocultural construction of risk, vulnerability, prevention and survival, as well as cultural models for overcoming

the disaster-turned-cultural experience at a local level. Among the international forums and special volumes issued on the relationship between culture and catastrophes in a global and regional plan, the following should be indicated: the scholarly academic conferences titled *Natural Disasters and Cultural Strategies: Responses to Catastrophe in a Global Perspective at the GHI*, February 19–22, 2004, and *Cultures and Disaster*, 2011. The former has been fully published in the thematic journals, the latter in a single acclaimed issue (Krüger et al. 2015). It is a study of the effect of disasters on the quality of life of the affected social groups and communities, conducted from the point of view and with the methodology of social anthropology.

The titles shared are evidence that the ethnologists/anthropologists slowly began to prove their importance and scientific presence in these studies, based on the methodological advantages. First of all, they are motivated by the research manner of these disciplines to view their subjects and objects holistically and comparatively, with emphasis on the broader context of human relationships in modern and historical times, exploring the inter-linkages between the cultural, social, also political and economic spheres, and the environment. In the case of disasters and catastrophes, that means: learning the ways by which the cultural-belief systems, behaviours, institutions and stereotypes characteristic of a group or society are placed in the centre of the society's susceptibility/vulnerability, preparation and mobilisation. The everyday culture contains (and the scholar respectively discovers) the cultural mechanisms (original programmes or strategies) that caused/assisted the disaster or react against it. Their research is focused on two problems: what stimulates the calamity in a cultural sense and what the collective answer is, prescribed by the cultural experience.

The interrelationship between the cultural, demographic, political, economic and environmental domains – i.e. the social context of the crisis – defines the preparedness for, mobilisation to and prevention of disasters for each discrete group of people or society. The understanding of local communities' social experience is therefore a significant part of an overall going-through, surviving and recovering strategy. The project at the base of this book was situated thematically on the border of at least three research disciplines: 1. Socio-anthropological studies of disasters and catas-

trophes; 2. Sociological studies of the category of Quality of Life; and 3. Ethnosociological investigations into the macro and micro-social local groups and communities. The combination of these research directions is offered as an original idea for this project. Accordingly, as the project's main publication, this book is designed to be a pioneering contribution to the literature on the subject.

The texts focus on the scientific content of two main categories: Catastrophe/Disaster and Quality of Life, both of which are relatively well clarified. According to the 2007 UN definition, disaster presents “a serious disruption in the functioning of a community or society at any scale due to hazardous events interacting with conditions of exposure, vulnerability and resilience that result in human, material, economic and environmental losses and impacts.” A disaster is not a simple and single event. It depends on various factors that are inherent in a given territory and population, the state of the natural environment, and climatic and social conditions (Hoffman, Oliver-Smith 2002: 3). The interrelationship between these various factors determines the level of preparedness, response capability, coping and prevention of recurrence for different groups of people and societies. The most vulnerable groups in the population are children and the elderly, those living alone, the disadvantaged, those of lower socio-economic status, ethnic minorities, and those directly affected by the disaster (Cui, Han 2019: 509–510). Exploring and understanding the experiences of the affected individuals, groups and communities is an essential part of building a coping strategy (Tzaneva 2009: 8).

The creators of this book accept that these experiences and the anthropological point of disaster intersect in their understanding of the term Quality of Life. It is envisioned as an “integral indicator of the conditions, achievements and success of the individual, his family, community and society, as well as of the activities of the different levels of government” (Tilkidjiev 2009: 116). It includes objective and subjective indicators for some “key areas” or “core dimensions”: employment, economic resources, family life, community life and social participation, health and health care, knowledge, education and training achievements. Following the *EurLIFE Database of the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions*, twelve “life domains” are of central interest for an anthropological investigation: health, education, employment, income,

social participation (social relations, communication), transport, housing, family, recreation, environment, security and life satisfaction. Some of those considered most important by the researchers are analysed in the articles included. *The World Health Organization's definition* of Quality of Life views it as “the overall wellbeing of people”. And a mechanism of investigation is respectively suggested: In understanding and studying the Quality of Life, a distinction is also made between a ‘utilitarian’ approach, based on a study of the extent to which the basic wants and needs of individuals are met, and an approach that takes into account the development of the individual, the formation of needs, virtues, qualities, values in people (‘human action/agency approach’) (WHO 1997).

Summarising the main definitions, the contributors to this thematic edited volume formulated three main dimensions of a generic concept of Quality of Life: 1. Objective living conditions; 2. Subjective needs including a cognitive component, with self-assessment of satisfaction with life in general and its main areas (health, education, employment, family and community life, leisure), and an emotional component with self-determination of the level of happiness or anxiety achieved; and 3. The quality of society (societal quality of life), taking into account the indicators of cohesion and sustainability (conceptualised by W. Zapf, H.–H. Noll, R. Veenhoven, etc.). The idea was further developed by J. Delhey for the 2003 *European Quality of Life Survey*, where living a “good, fulfilling life” implies meeting some indicators, among which are: a good job, good housing, good education, sufficient and enjoyable recreation, going out with friends and family, having at least one holiday a year, loving your partner, being on friendly terms with neighbours, having children, being useful to others, feeling appreciated by the society, and participating in the activities of associations, unions, organisations (2004: 11). These indicators are not researched and discussed in the book in their complexity, but some are combined and investigated in the fieldwork, and the findings are respectively shared.

The focus of this book is centred on two goals: first, the change of the complex quality of life of the affected population in its main guidelines, i.e. physical and psychological aspects of health and social welfare; and second, the role of culture, presented through traditional and contemporary socio-ecological knowledge and experience on factors and niches of vulnerability and risk, in progress and deployment of disaster and the reaction

of the population towards overcoming it and the normalisation of life. The study is on specific local groups according to age, sex, ethnicity, professional status, ethnocultural identity, belonging, health status, and social engagement. With these indicators, the purpose of the book is the introduction of an **empirical and analytical anthropological contribution to an adequate prevention policy response and the liquidation of consequences of disasters on the quality of life of the affected groups and communities**. It is achieved through specific research contributions to 1. Establishing a connection between the factors in the life of the affected groups that cause changes in their quality of life when disaster strikes, and the preliminary cultural predisposition of the population to suffer such an effect; 2. Better forecasting of social risks; 3. Comparing the real central and local reaction to the disaster, with the requirements/expectations of people from the local communities, and presentation of guidelines for avoiding/mitigating or minimising the tension between them.

This volume includes thirteen articles written by seventeen scholars from China and Bulgaria, mainly anthropologists who also have sociological, philosophical and economic educational backgrounds. The accepted interpretation of the main terms Disaster and Quality of Life informs a structural grouping of the materials into three main sections (called Parts). The first is a representative résumé of the project's final results: its five articles include a database of the thematic fieldwork in the studied "disaster locations" in Bulgaria, presenting four different types of disasters that happened – two natural, one technological and one biological. They are discussed regarding their effects on different social groups – children (by St. Kanev/E. Tzaneva), the elderly (by A. Kirilova), Bulgarian Roma (Pl. Stoyanova), Roma–evangelists (M. Slavkova), and also revealing the complex regional effects of an epidemic (A. Nakova/E. Tzaneva). The second part expands the geographical and thematic scope of the investigation by including also valuable research by Chinese scholars. Through detailed analysis of different case studies, the articles contribute to the definition of disasters and critical events as situations that arise from the violation of a balance in individual and collective life, as any deviation from "normality" in the particular context of each culture. This part of the book shows how the catastrophic events challenge society to rework a specific methodology (by Qi Jinyu/Geri Cuo) and activate a specific re-

source (by Fang Jingwen, Y. Erolova) to adapt to and cope with the crises from a triple perspective: ecological, social and ideological. It also presents historical insight into the problem (by Liang Jingzhi/Wu Yuzhen). Attention is also paid to the ecological and social consequences that change peoples' post-disaster lives, especially migration and mobility (M. Maeva, Qi Jinyu/Geri Cuo). Part three is intended as a bridge to the current problems of the world related to the severe pandemic picture of COVID-19. It includes three texts, the first of which is a specific exploration of the attitudes and perceptions of this surprising disaster, as well as of the reactions of a specific receiving environment – the students and the Chinese university administration (by Jiang Wei/Sun Salahan). The following texts, which are also the concluding ones of the volume, are written by the two keynote speakers at the aforementioned conference on disasters and who are two prominent scholars from the academic partnership – Prof. M. Mizov from the Bulgarian academia, and Prof. Wang Yanzhong, a director of the Institute for Ethnology and Anthropology at CASS. Prof. Mizov discusses the changes that the pandemic situation has brought to the subject and interpretive field of contemporary anthropology, along with its research mechanism and conceptual orientations. Prof. Wang presents – in the summary style of a scientist, statesman and politician – the necessary directions of human energy to prevent and overcome such disasters; the harmonised efforts of states, policies, ideologies and the joint impulses of the united world population.

The texts included give rise to several research ideas that will hopefully push forwards the study to certain analytical tracks, and will be closely approved and confirmed or rejected, supplemented or modified, according to the researchers' findings.

*Idea One* is based on the fact that disasters, along with all their uncertainties and ambiguities, mostly strike places and populations that already have a certain degree of vulnerability. The project accepts that the close study of cultural-ecological values and stereotypes allows for socio-cultural reconstruction of disasters' risks and niches of vulnerability for the respective group. The expectation is that they will manifest themselves in the behaviours of day-to-day material and spiritual culture as well as traditional ways of family establishment, communications and housing, level of hygiene and sanitary standards; ways of eating and resting, and ways of reciprocated aid and collective work or shared celebrations. Their

close study would make the disaster predictable, to a certain extent, which would allow the introduction of an adequate prevention strategy or, at a later stage, an adequate response so that people are alerted and prepared.

*Idea Two* assumes that the ecological culture – in both its ethnic integrity and regional-local manifestations – has over the centuries built up a steadily rational core of useful knowledge of responding to disasters that affects the basic human and household activities of the population. In other words, it is a system that has already previously proven its effectiveness.

*Idea Three* suggests that the estimated results of the conducted fieldwork surveys can be directed towards a comparison of a central reaction in the form of aid or official directions, and the expectations of people from the local communities, which will significantly affect the social tension between them.

*Idea Four* guesses that, based on the case studies presented in the book, the empirical material can highlight a national style of cultural characteristics (this is visible in the texts of both Chinese and Bulgarian ethnologists) in dealing with disasters, which could be brought to the attention of international expert services. The “national style of dealing with disasters” is based on the first three characteristics mentioned above. If they are well analysed and combined with the requirements of the international rules, the expectations for a proper program for combating a disaster might be legitimate, adequate and optimistic.

The creators of this edited volume, along with those of the previous ones mentioned above, believe that the materials included will reveal their civil and professional research credo. They focus on applied ethnology in terms of three social perspectives that include: protecting the ecological environment within its complexity and regional contexts and achievements; protecting the traditional cultures within their inherited traditional (and developing) norms and values, and advocating the rights and interests of the diverged groups of people, identified and organised in different ways. These main points reflect the scholarly paradigm of the volume. The authors are convinced that the anthropological and ethnological observations and discussions could add a valuable perspective to the emergence and spread of these ideas.

*Elya Tzaneva*



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**PART ONE:**

**LOCAL DISASTERS AND THEIR IMPACT ON  
THE COMMUNITIES' QUALITY OF LIFE**

# DISASTERS AND THE QUALITY OF CHILDREN'S LIVES

STAMEN KANEV, ELYA TZANEVA

INSTITUTE OF ETHNOLOGY AND FOLKLORE STUDIES WITH  
ETHNOGRAPHIC MUSEUM, BULGARIAN ACADEMY OF SCIENCES

## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

The statistics of disasters that have befallen mankind in recent years have been growing rapidly in volume and intensity. This is true for all types of disasters. Natural disasters are no exception and, due to climate change, intense urbanisation and an ever-increasing urban population, they are becoming more frequent. They also cause considerable material damage. According to a study by the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction, natural disasters of various types have struck the world twice as often in the last twenty years compared to the previous century<sup>2</sup>. With such a trend, it is natural to deepen scientific perspectives on them, focusing in increasing detail on the impacts and effects of different types of crises, disasters and catastrophes on diverse communities of people.

It has long been clear that the effect of disasters on individuals and communities is not solely explained by the level of political-economic status, the wisdom of governance, or geographical location in some safer,

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<sup>1</sup> The data used in the article was collected and implemented within the project “Local Disasters and the Quality of Life: Cultural Strategies in Overcoming Natural, Technological and Biological Catastrophes”; Leading organisation: Institute for Ethnology and Folklore Studies – Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, funded by the National Science Fund – Ministry of Education and Science; Coordinator: Assoc. Prof. Dr Elya Tzaneva; Implementation period: 2018–2022; Contract DN 20/5 dated 11.12.2017–09.06.2022.

<sup>2</sup> Statistics from the quoted study show that between 2000 and 2019, at least 7,348 disasters were reported, killing 1.23 million people, and affecting 4.2 billion people in varying degrees, some of whom were victims of more than one disaster. As a result, the world economy has incurred damages of 2.97 trillion dollars (Human Costs 2020: 6).

more stable parts of the world. Analyses claim that over 90% of disaster victims are in developing countries, and nearly 60% of economic damage is in richer countries. Moreover, while in the 1970s this damage was estimated to be \$175 million a year on average, in the first decade of this century it increased to \$1.38 billion worldwide. These data show that a higher degree of disaster vulnerability is present in more developed economies and infrastructures (for material damage measured in absolute terms) as well as in less developed ones (for human casualties). However, it is undeniable that the impact factors are combined, so their accumulation, analysis and generalisation involve most sciences of the social and humanitarian spectrum – anthropology, sociology, psychology, geography, political science, demography, social policy, health organisation, etc. They are complementary and intertwined in both the field research and the analytical part, and from this combination, adequate answers are expected to mitigate, overcome and restore the quality of human life (Lindell, Prater 2003: 176–185).

The view that disasters' impact must be considered in terms of the communities and collectives in which the affected people are grouped according to particular social indicators – and they always include those coming from governmental, historical and economic factors – is also clear in the developing literature on the issues. The complex study of the disaster–child narrative has in recent years received detailed elaboration, and substantiation and has been scientifically traced in comprehensive lines called “waves of research” (Peek et al. 2018: 243–262). As a result, the main thematic fields of disaster studies were formed with their effects on the poor and the rich, the fed and the hungry, the wealthy and the destitute without water and shelter, and the working and the unemployed outside of social security systems, and finally the elderly and the youth, the adolescents and the students, the children and the young. As a social category, they relate to such groups as women, racial and ethnic minorities, people with disabilities, people with medical dependencies, or – in the migration strand – the category of people with a limited linguistic capacity in the official language, without qualifications, persecuted by the regime of the country.

Addressing the children's community within the more general perspective accepted in the project “Local Disasters and the Quality of Life”,

is a result of the dearth of data specifically drawn from disasters that have occurred in Bulgaria and the lessons learned from them to better prepare children for such events. The specialised anthropological focus in Bulgarian ethnology, as in global science, has only recently turned to children and families subjected to disasters, and it aims to make them – along with their wider circles of socialisation – more resilient and less vulnerable in disaster situations of various types.

### **Terminological Clarifications**

In 1989, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which states in Article 1 that the category of a child “... means every human being below the age of 18 years unless under the law applicable to the child, a majority is attained earlier.” (Convention on the Rights 1989). But the path to this important civilisational choice is not an easy one. It is at its heart research on childhood and its particularities as a life stage. Some scholars argue that the totality of research and different approaches place the socio-cultural dimensions of childhood in the context of different historical eras and latitudes (Bankova 2020: 7). This focus not only allows for the projection of processes across time and space but, in the case of children's response to a disaster, allows for the tracking of the persistent and changing characteristics of children's behaviour in an emergency.

With a focus on the resulting underlying concepts in the text, we turn first to the concept of childhood, an established category in colloquial speech and a term in scholarship for which there is no uncontested definition. Like many other concepts, its meaning changes according to the social context in which it is created and applied. The idea of childhood as a specific phase in an individual's life cycle emerged as early as the fifteenth century but has undergone repeated changes over time (Bankova 2011: 121–150). In the eighteenth century, a modern attitude towards childhood emerged in Europe and changed the society itself, turning it into a community centred around children, the so-called “child-centred society.” Parallel to the decline in the economic importance of children as the family workforce, their emotional value grew. In the nineteenth century, children were increasingly romanticised, becoming a symbol of innocence.

Knowledge of child development, upbringing, health, psychology and childcare in general deepened and developed (Danova 2017). Perspectives on them are also increasing, and the aspect of child welfare research is emerging.

Child wellbeing which is the content of the other main term – Quality of Life, includes the basic needs of the child for adequate and healthy nutrition, clothing, toys, quality housing providing conditions for sleep and play, a suitable social environment outdoors, etc. The societal capacity to provide for the child and ensure child's wellbeing is a key indicator of the state of society. It is the community, as well as the family, that has a shared responsibility in ensuring the wellbeing of children. Of course, responsible parenthood is the most important prerequisite of this guarantee, but, according to the current understanding of European social policy, the fulfilment of this responsibility must be encouraged and supported by the state. Society is the last line of defence before death, disease, abandonment, malnutrition, poverty and lack of care and education (Peneva, Zahariev, Yadvkova, Yordanov 2010: 7–8). Another definition of children's quality of life states that it is “the totality of a child's and adolescent's social, physical and emotional functioning, taking into account their family. The measurement of quality of life should be from the perspective of the child, the adolescent, and the family, and should be adaptive to the changes that occur during growing up” (Eiser, Morse 2001: 248–256).

Regarding the leading category of Disaster, for the purposes of the text, the authors dissociate themselves from its often-stated meaning in the sense of being reserved “only for natural disasters, excluding biological and technological ones,” and do not go into the semantic differences between disaster, hazard, catastrophe and crisis, but use them in their interconnectedness and interdependence (Human Costs 2020: 2–5). In this text, all the crises studied in the project are presented as disasters: two natural (earthquake and flood with landslide), one technological (gas explosion) and one biological (domestic animal infestation).

## Methodological Framework

Difficulties towards the unfolding of the disaster–children's themes usually precede specific expositions and correctly indicate the complexity of the problem (Bankova 2020: 243–253). The advantages of a field-based ethnological approach to uncovering this subject are also well expressed – it is explicitly necessary to link with at least the methods of sociological and psychological survey, reference, literature and media analysis. Bulgarian ethnology also tries to fit into this research line by enriching the disciplinary field with innovative topics, but most of all with socially and humanly useful subjects that work towards improving the lives of particular groups after a disaster (Kanev 2021: 508–523; Nakova, Tzaneva 2021: 490–507). In this respect, one of the lines of interest for the above research project was on children who have experienced a disaster and the consequences for them in the short and long term. As such studies do not exist in a vacuum in world scholarship, their views can be considered valid and useful for the presentation of Bulgarian material as well. In specific studies of children's quality of life conducted in the USA in the 1990s, the relationship between health and various factors with an impact on quality of life was revealed (Jenny, Campbell 1997: 348). Dependencies that are valid and broadly representative in such research are accordingly indicative of the present studies.

This article is not based on comprehensive data collected with deliberately formulated questions on the subject, which means that no children were surveyed about their experiences and reactions to the different disasters. But it is based on information gathered through the methods of ethnology and cultural anthropology some years after the disasters when the children belonged to the category of adults. This information search was carried out in the period 2018–2021. Over three years, a team of researchers visited different localities several times and conducted interviews with residents affected to varying degrees by disaster situations. These were the town of Pernik near Sofia, which in 2012 was struck by an earthquake with a magnitude of 6 on the modified Mercalli scale (as originally announced); the village of Hitrino, Shumen region, wherein 2016 a freight train carrying propylene and propane-butane exploded and caught fire while entering the station, causing destruction and death; Asparuhovo,



a district of the city of Varna<sup>3</sup>, wherein 2014 a devastating tidal wave swept through the hills above it, along with a landslide triggered by heavy and prolonged rain; the Strandzha area in southeastern Bulgaria, wherein 2011 large herds of cloven-hoofed animals were slaughtered under the EU regulations due to the spreading of the Foot and Mouth epidemic (FMD), and subsequently other epidemic animal diseases.

While children did not take a direct stage in our research, they inevitably found their way into interviews and conversations when we went into the field. In each of the affected settlements, some children experienced disaster to one degree or another. Accordingly, its impact on their lives and quality of life showed itself multidimensionality. The accounts published here examine several cases that highlight the impact on children after experiencing a disaster. The data collected documents and outlines one possible anthropological interpretation of what effect disasters of different types have on children's lives.

There are different approaches in science to studying changes in the quality of life of children after a disaster. Some examine their health status, considering indicators such as activity, living environment, level of satisfaction, success, and sustainability. Others, based on a parent questionnaire form, examine children's social role in different situations, their emotional and physical behaviour, their mental health, their self-esteem, the parent's emotional impact on them and time spent with the family. Others take an observational approach, taking into account physical activity, vigour, mood changes, appearance, relationships with family and peers and experiencing distress (Jenny, Campbell 1997: 348). It is these very guidelines that should necessarily underpin comprehensive questionnaires that are specifically targeted at exploring the topic in the future.

In this publication, the authors limit themselves to a review of the social status and psychological and physical health of children from the four studied locations. The main aim is to form a general and preliminary picture of the change in the quality of life of children after a disaster. The hope is to present an innovative thematic and methodological lineage in ethnology that, through familiar qualitative approaches, forms a framework for the study of childhood, quality of life and possible coping strate-

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<sup>3</sup> Later in this volume, the terms related to the subject of "Asparuhovo" are clarified: see further the article by M. Slavkova.

gies for crises and drastic changes in the familiar habitable post-disaster environment within the anthropological focus.

### **Specific Characteristics of Children Concerning Anthropological Disaster Research**

According to international statistics, at the end of the 1990s, the number of children affected by disasters was 66.5 million per year. In the period from 2010 to 2020, the number of affected children reached 175 million per year. This was mainly due to recurring local natural disasters and significant climate change (Seballos, Tanner, Tarazona, Gallegos 2011: 12). According to Jury Bronfenbrenner's theory, which refers to childhood and the impact of its framing ecological systems, everything in a children's environment influences their development. He identifies four different levels of the environment that impact the child – microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem and macrosystem. The latter represents the largest circle of people and places surrounding the children that have a serious influence on them. These include cultural values, the economy, wars, etc. (quoted from Bankova 2011: 131–132). The authors of this paper assume that, in such a context, children's quality of life should be understood as a combination of various material: physical factors – cognitive, psychological and emotional – as well as social factors; the natural environment is an integral part of the existence of every individual and community, and it inevitably has its exclusive place among these factors. For this paper, they are structured according to the following elements of the category Quality of life: 1. Material environment and physical damage; 2. Psychological health; 3. Social characteristics – including the educational process. We find that for the children's community they frame the concept of socio-cultural and natural-ecological environmental context relatively well (Anderson 2005: 159–175). Texts on children and disasters often emphasise the distinctions between children's responses and those of adults and the resulting consequences (Caring for Children 2020). Within this structure, the particular characteristics of the children's community in the aforementioned contexts should also be considered, which is the subject of the following lines.

Children are the undisputed and supreme value, as well as the most important object of concern and care in any natural and human-made dis-

aster situation. All over the disaster terrain, we have recorded variants of the following phrase heard in the village of Yardzhilovtsi (Pernik), “*We were very careful with the children – and it was not only with your own, everyone looked first to calm the child*” (AIEFSEM–BAS 1056–III, 24). For children to be effectively cared for by adults at this time, research needs to know the characteristic vulnerabilities of their community: the children’s target group (under 18, as defined by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 1989<sup>4</sup>) is unique first and foremost in its *non-independence* – children are involved in multiple social–organisational formats of care (that is, protection, support, behavioural indoctrination, etc.), from which resources, programmes, activities and goals flow to them continuously (Fothergill, Peek 2015). They are developed responsibly and with the involvement of highly skilled and educated staff, and these qualities – despite efforts – often gradually diminish as they go to executive structures and those close to children. Secondly, children are *incapable/partially capable* of self-protection, so their survival and invulnerability are the results of the actions of bystanders. Thirdly, children’s physical, mental and social resilience are incomparably *more limited and unstable* than those of adults, hence their response has a different success rate from that of adults. For this reason, no one element of quality of life can be relied upon to activate and compensatorily “embrace” the others – the approach to restoring normality in children must be comprehensive and holistic across all aspects of their lives: “The ultimate goal ... is to bring together the efforts of multiple actors to reduce the risks children face while preparing them to live in a rapidly changing and increasingly turbulent social, economic and natural–ecological world” (Hayward 2012). Finally, in a crisis, children *show mixed rational and irrational reactions*, which makes them not always predictable, as often the emotional effect dominates their overall behaviour and they turn to behaviours aside from what is projected and suggested as correct by the responsible authorities. As the literature indicates, disasters can also affect children indirectly, and this impact can often be long-lasting; the impressions of the sensitive child’s psyche on the effects of the disaster depend on parents, the family and neighbourhood circle, and teachers and educa-

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<sup>4</sup> A specific categorisation defines children as “at risk,” “with special needs,” or “vulnerable populations” (Thomas, Phillips, Lovekamp, Fothergill 2013).

tors.

In the project's four destinations, the team of ethnologists saw some of these features reflected in the post-disaster picture<sup>5</sup>: the 2012 Pernik earthquake found children mostly asleep, relaxed and close to what they loved and relied on – parents, domestic animals, and familiar material surroundings. All these elements were suddenly disrupted, destroyed or shaken. An abnormality is wedged into the calm of their sleep, the people caring for them are confused and frightened, and for the older ones, the consequences affect their social progress in school and its imminent events. The flooding in Asparuhovo in 2014 must have been terrifying for the adolescents – the commotion of relatives, the chaos of homes being destroyed, the cars, rubbish, belongings and people dragged away by the storm and the later announcement of casualties. The picture is shocking for the children. It was also like this in the village of Hitrino in 2016, where children's vivid imaginations saw cosmic destruction in the flames of the gas explosion. In Strandzha 2012 there was no apocalyptic destruction of the surroundings. But the idea of a beloved village home of the grandparents associated for the children with new-born animals and sweet creatures was quickly, fearfully and – according to most adults – hastily destroyed<sup>6</sup>. These are all pictures of an *impaired life balance* for children. All cases were made more difficult by the tension of worsening conditions in the days to come.

The English-language literature on children and disasters is reviewed in the second edition of the *Handbook of Disasters* (2018), where

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<sup>5</sup> All of the quoted data from the fieldwork was collected by interviewing adults; the children's voices are heard here indirectly. Children were not explicitly asked because of the administratively complicated admission to them in situations of emergency. A type of direct information is collected from "grown-up" children, who seven to eight years ago during the disasters were students or adolescents, and at the time of the fieldwork gathering, were adults and self-responsible young people.

<sup>6</sup> According to the legislation adopted in the Republic of Bulgaria and the norms and practices in the European Union, treatment for FMD is prohibited. The legislation states that, under extremely strict security measures, all susceptible animals in the area of the outbreak shall be destroyed and buried. In the European Union, vaccination against FMD is prohibited. Vaccines are not produced or commercially available in Bulgaria. Infected animals and their contacts, direct and indirect, are subject to unconditional and rapid destruction.

the main and still-valid characteristics of this array are outlined: 1. The data was accumulated in the post-disaster phase and during the disaster-recovery period; 2. Which of the three baselines of the quality of life category is most strongly manifested depends on the type of disaster, but in all cases, there are disturbances in both the physical health and the mental and social wellbeing of the children who experienced it. The requirements of this new sub-field of disaster research are well-grounded theoretically – accordingly, the co-authors of this text fully accept the formulations in the methodology section of that publication with direct relevance to the present text (Donner, Diaz 2018: 289–311). The final point is that children are particularly vulnerable to disasters because of their fragile stage of physiological (both physical and psychological) growth, along with their limited social experience and development.

### **A Picture of the Post-Disaster Quality of Children’s Lives**

All recorded observations and stories from the four research destinations show that children are not prepared for disasters. Even more, the rational knowledge of children and adolescents is judged to be extremely scarce. For example, when questioned about the Pernik earthquake, Tzv. Manova registered in her personal archive [used here with her permission], the answers of two girls aged 12 and 13: *“Earthquakes happened in Pernik because it is located between three mountains”*. The same researcher surveyed children and when she asked “What is a disaster?” to a group of 6 year olds, two boys had no answer and the others replied, *“It is something very bad; it is a disaster to have some terrible trouble happen to you; it is a disaster to be very poor [a Roma child]”*. The 12-year-old children characterised disaster as *“a bad accident”*; *“being struck by something bad”*; *“a personal misfortune”*; *“a bad incident that affects many people at the same time”*. And for the 15 year olds, the answers were even more specific: *“A disaster is when there are fires, beatings”*; *“a disaster is anything that directly affects you and your family”*. After specifying the question “What is an earthquake?”, the answer was *“An earthquake is when things in a house move, sway and everything shifts”*; *“In an earthquake the ground cracks”*; *“Slabs hit and something breaks to pieces”*; *“Houses collapse”*; *“Everything shakes and breaks”*; *“Two walls hit and*

*houses fall down. Everything shakes*" (Manova 2020).

*Physical health.* The spaces where children live, go to school, play and grow can expose them to increased risk of negative change before, during and after a disaster. The most obvious syndrome is homelessness. In the cases examined, children's eyes often see its literal collapse – this happened in Asparuhovo, Pernik and Hitrino, where the natural environment of children's lives was destroyed before their eyes. The cases studied present the following concrete picture concerning one of the most cherished concepts for children – *the home*, which they witness first-hand and keep in their memories for a long time.

The heavy torrential rain and intensified landslides in Varna's Asparuhovo neighbourhood left 163 of the neighbourhood's residents, or 52 families, homeless, with some going to live with relatives and others provided with municipal housing or accommodated in Civil Protection vans. Hundreds more were evacuated because of the risk of their homes being destroyed. The damage to the homes of the local population was also serious, even when they were not destroyed.

According to the local press, six days after the natural disaster, orders were issued for 68 houses to be emptied and 11 were set for direct demolition. In fact, by July 8<sup>th</sup> 2014, 70 houses had been demolished and 30 other structures were deemed unsafe. The number of houses emptied due to evacuation was 120. The first reaction, inevitably causing stress, especially for children, was the relocation resulting from the above: a total of 250 people had to be accommodated by the municipality in its facilities, in dormitories of the University of Economics, Varna and vans. There was resistance among the people to leave the designated unsafe buildings for fear that the surviving properties may be looted (Narodno delo 2014, 133, 134, 137, 142). This group of directly affected families included many children.