

# **Luttrell, W. (2020) *Children Framing Childhoods: Working-Class Kids' Visions of Care*. Policy Press.**

**Review by** Lisa M. Paolucci

Sociologist Wendy Luttrell's *Children Framing Childhoods: Working-Class Kids' Visions of Care* is a visual analysis that centers diverse working-class children's views on their own care, both at home and in school, as shared through their photographs, videos, and associated oral accounts; this work fits well within her body of research, which is largely focused on education with an emphasis in social justice. Embedded within the physical book, which contains six chapters, a prelude, and a postlude, are five links to what Luttrell titles 'Digital Interludes.' In addition, an accompanying [website](#) contains an archive of 2,036 photographs taken by the participants at ages 10, 12, 16, and 18, and 65 hours of video and audio recordings of interviews with students. Luttrell invites the public to view all of these elements in what she terms 'collaborative seeing,' with the intention that viewers notice their assumptions and biases and that these continued discoveries extend the research (p. 9). Indeed, throughout the completion of this research, the children shared their accounts along with their photographs with different types of audiences, including their own school communities and university settings, and were given opportunities to further explain or even to change their own minds as they spoke about their own photographs and recordings.

In the prelude, Luttrell places us at the entrance of Park Central School in Worcester, Massachusetts in 2003, a longtime working-class racially and ethnically diverse immigrant community where 92% of the student population is eligible for reduced or free lunch. She imbues her writing with sensory details so that we feel the heaviness of the camera against her hip, hear the buzz of the beginning of a school day, adjust our eyes to the brightly lit hallways. The plan is to provide children with disposable cameras and to ask them to take photos of anything that matters to them over four days, to start, with the intentions of aiming to understand what students see as important, and to learn from their perspectives. This project evolved into a fifteen-year long study that concluded, in part, that children are attuned to the many ways in which care is provided in their lives.

This work represents a significant contribution to working-class studies through Luttrell's assertion, in Chapter 1, that the participating working-class children ultimately argue against their own invisibility through their photographs and accounts. In the students' presentations of their families, school community, and other aspects of their lives, Luttrell finds that they continuously emphasize the care that they receive, almost as if they expect that others hold negative views of working-class culture and working-class people. Luttrell describes these care relationships as 'choreographies of care,' emphasizing the energy and design that goes into the necessity of coordinating individuals and resources in order to provide care for children (p. 22). Undergirding this analysis is a critical childhood perspective in which children are rightly regarded as possessing active roles in their own interpretations of their lives.

In Chapter 2, Luttrell illustrates the children's active roles in demonstrating that their families care for them, that their homes are places where they belong. For example, she interprets the collection of Jeffrey's images of some of his possessions, such as his black sneakers and some t-shirts and sports jerseys, as possessing a kind of tenderness toward both his mother and also his childhood as a whole. Another child hangs his father's artwork, created in prison, emphasizing for both himself and anyone to whom he describes the photo, that he still has a strong relationship with his father. Notably, when describing the many photographs of televisions and video games, Luttrell emphasizes that the children tell stories about these objects that emphasize how they are objects around which family members gather, thus highlighting the relationships of care at home and their emotions about these relationships; pointedly, the children's descriptions refute the interpretation that the children are celebrating consumerism and possession of material goods.

Luttrell's work further contributes to working-class studies in Chapters 3 and 4, which focus on mothers' and teachers' care. She points out that all mothers are judged in school settings, but that mothers with resources, including time to volunteer, are viewed more positively than mothers who have less 'money, time, energy, transportation, or flexibility in [their] job[s]'; often, mothers of color who are also characterized as 'working poor' are negatively judged as uninvolved, when the children's photographs and accounts often indicate their mothers' strong abilities to coordinate their care as they manage work and household responsibilities (p. 86). Children's photographs highlight the 'choreographies of care' in their lives, demonstrating their awareness of the ways in which multiple family members had to plan together to ensure the child's ability to travel to and from school on time, and to be fed and cared for in other ways (p. 22). When sharing photographs of their mothers, most children pointed out their mothers' intelligence and competence, their affinity for reading, and ability to care for them through a collective setup among resources and family members. The children are very intentional in conveying that no matter how busy their mothers are, they are heavily involved in their lives.

Race and ethnicity are also powerful lenses through which Luttrell analyzes the students' work. She notes that Black and Latinx children appear to appreciate their teachers' trust in their 'goodness' more than white or Asian children do (p. 137). She strongly states that the perspectives of students from diverse backgrounds on their school communities must be paid attention to, as they have different experiences inside and outside of school. Strikingly, Luttrell finds that the children seem to insist with their photographs that they deserve care, and highlighted their valuing of interdependence in school. As many photographs depicted 'kitchens and classrooms,' the children were thought to be valuing women's labor, pointing out that teachers are often disregarded in public narratives as not being worthy of higher salaries and being incompetent (p. 159). Powerfully, Luttrell argues that corporate interests are thereby served by these public narratives, and sees the children's photographs as a potentially powerful counternarrative.

Working with teenaged participants in 2011, in examining their photographs and listening to their accounts, Luttrell uses the lens of time in chapter 5 to interpret the teenagers' viewing of themselves as individuals with agency. The teenagers use VoiceThread, a software program that integrates photographs, audio, and text into digital stories, as well as camcorders, to record video. Luttrell notes how they playfully integrate content related to gender expectations, ethnic or racial stereotypes and classification, and the way they express their identities. Quite significantly, she offers the interpretation that overall, the teenagers, all working-class, appeared to inculcate

meaning in their busy lives and all of the activities therein to indicate that they were ‘proper and good people,’ rather than to use their time to generate ‘cultural and social capital,’ an interpretation that Luttrell bolsters in citing sociologist Beverly Skeggs’ work on working-class culture which emphasizes the working-class tendency to focus on just ‘being’ rather than being ‘productive’ (pp. 193-194). Notably, through specific students’ experiences, Luttrell finds that a major social inequality is some individuals’ lack of access to flexibility of time.

As she draws conclusions in Chapter 6 and in the postlude, Luttrell demands that the public attend to children’s needs for physical and emotional safety and security. Her research uniquely and strikingly indicates that children are capable of arguing for the necessity of their own collaborative care. She rightly emphasizes that the current ‘neoliberal capitalist society’ in the United States upholds a form of care that is biased in terms of gender, race, and class (p. 204).

Luttrell’s work leaves us with challenging marching orders: to seriously question how we can respond to the ‘educational opportunity debt’ that society has incurred regarding children themselves, especially children of color, as well as their caregivers, who do not have the free time to engage in their own (or their children’s) educational lives (p. 226). How, then, can the freedom promised by a democratic society actually be delivered? One answer put forth by *Children Framing Childhoods* is to intentionally and robustly invest in environments where working-class children are the recipients of care and enrichment.

### **Reviewer Bio**

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