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Childhood: Anthropological Aspects

The anthropological study of childhood first documents and accounts for the variety of childhoods found around the world; second, uses the comparative ethnographic record to test hypotheses about human development; and, third, studies the mechanisms in child, family, and community life for the acquisition, internal transformations, sharing, and intergenerational transmission of culture.

A thought experiment will illustrate the anthropological point of view about childhood. Imagine a newborn, healthy infant. What is the most important thing that you could do to influence the life of that infant? Most respond by mentioning dyadic interaction with the baby: hold and touch the infant a lot; provide good nutrition and health care; provide stimulation to achieve school success; love the baby; give it wealth and social capital, and so forth. Anthropologists believe that the most important influence in human development is the *cultural setting within which the infant will grow up*. It is how, why, and by whom children are held, loved, fed, stimulated, punished, provided resources, and so forth, and how that varies so widely across human communities, that is the focus of inquiry. Shaping a whole person engaged in family and cultural community life is the 'purpose' of childhood development from an anthropological perspective. Childhood is a cultural project with goals, meanings, constant adaptation, and struggle, and anthropology provides the evidence for the startling and remarkable varieties of childhoods lived around the world. Biological, psychological, and cultural anthropologists collaborate in the study of childhood, since biology, mind, and culture are all required to understand childhood.

The study of childhood and the process of children acquiring culture 'was almost entirely neglected by anthropologists until after 1925' (Whiting 1968). Although much progress has been made, anthropology does not yet provide a single unified theory of why and how childhoods vary around the world, or of childhood acquisition of culture. Rather the field offers rich, multivariate hypotheses and data on childhood (Super and Harkness 1997).

1. The Stages of Childhood

Five stages of human growth and development are common to *Homo sapiens*: infancy, childhood, juvenility, adolescence, and adulthood (Bogin 1999). Margaret Mead described lap children (infants, aged 0-1), knee children (toddlers, 2-3), yard children (preschool, 4-5), and community children (juveniles in middle childhood, 6-12). Anthropologists analyze the cultural meaning of the very idea of 'stages,' since stages are used to account for children's behavior ('he's crying but it is OK, because he's still a toddler'), as well as to assure and define normal and appropriate development ('she is eight, and so old enough to start helping run our household'). Human cultures weave wonderful variations, meanings, and stories around pan-human maturational stages of childhood. The Beng of Ivory Coast for example, believe that young children are still partly in yet another 'stage,' a cultural world called *wrugbe*, where ancestors share life with prebirth children who are ambivalent about leaving that world. This helps explain for Beng why infants cry or are sickly: they want to return to *wrugbe*.

2. Conceptions of Childhood in Anthropology

There are a variety of perspectives on childhood in anthropology. In one view, children are socialized into a set of norms and customs that they learn and then perpetuate. In this view, children are small adults in the making, ready receptors of traditions, shaped by parents and community adults to insure continuity in cultural and moral education, competence for survival in the ecology of the community, respect for tradition, appropriate behavior and respect for elders in demeanor and gender roles.

Second, children's personalities and minds are understood as reflections of the cultural themes as well as the anxieties children grow up with (such as in the work in Bali of Bateson and Mead 1942). The focus is on the semiotics and communication of cultural meanings to children, on how these cultural patterns are absorbed and internalized, in turn reproducing the meanings as well as neurotic obsessions of their parents' cultures.

Third, the psychocultural, or personality integration model (Whiting and Whiting 1975), begins with the climate, history, and ecology of a community, which shapes child-care practices, which in turn produce psychological effects on children, effects produced by direct social learning as well as by psychodynamic processes shaping personality and defenses in children. These children become adults who then project into myths, rituals, art, and other forms (including in turn their own practices as parents) the learned patterns as well as intrapsychic conflicts produced in childhood and shared by others in their community. Children and adults alike have universal needs of the self—

hunger for recognition, reward, and material and bodily satisfaction—to which cultures respond through the cultural careers made available to children in a community (Goldschmidt 1990). Culture inevitably thwarts these hungers, leading to intrapsychic and cultural conflicts. Melford Spiro used psychodynamic and sociocultural approaches to understand the ideological, political, and ecological reasons for and consequences of the care of children by designated community caretakers, or *metapelets*, in socialist-inspired agricultural collective groups in Israel (Spiro 1975).

Fourth, anthropologists study the 'developmental niche' of childhood: everyday physical/social settings, cultural customs of care, and the psychology of the caretakers as shaped by their cultural models of parenthood that direct behavior (the goals, meanings, and rationales for parenting and being a child) (Harkness and Super 1996). Parenting of children also is shaped by the organic hardware given by our common mammalian heritage, and by socioeconomic conditions in the community. Children experience culture as it is practiced within their family's daily routine of cultural life. Cultural routines consist of activities children engage in (mealtimes, bedtimes, family visits, chores, going to church, school, play, etc.) Activities are the primary mechanisms bringing culture to and into the mind of the child. Activities consist of goals and values; tasks of an activity; the scripts for how to engage in that activity; the people present and participating in the activity; and the motives and feelings of those involved (Weisner 1996).

Finally, some anthropologists view childhood itself as a cultural construction shaped by forces within as well as outside a single cultural community. The very idea of what a child or parent is, in this view, is more the outcome of processes of power in an increasingly global political economy, in which children as well as parents, are 'constructed' or 'positioned' by these agents of power (Stephens 1995).

3. Some Cultural Influences on Children's Development

3.1 Cultural Scale and Complexity

Children in more complex societies (with occupational specialization, an extensive market economy, a nucleated settlement pattern, centralized and hierarchical political and legal system, and a centralized religious priesthood) are more likely to seek help and assistance from others, to try and dominate or control others, and to be more egoistic. Children in less complex societies are more likely to show nurturance toward other children (to offer assistance and respond to their requests), be more responsible, make more responsible suggestions to others, and do more tasks

required for family and community survival. Mothers who have heavy subsistence workloads are more likely to expect responsible work from children and use stricter discipline. Children living in extended, joint, or expanded households and family systems are more often involved in directive, aggressive interactions, while children living in smaller nuclear families are more often engaged in sociable and intimate interactions with parents and others, and fathers are more involved with children. Of course children and adults everywhere are nurturant, seek help, or are aggressive. These patterns only reflect the modal tendencies of communities, not a rigid uniformity within them (Whiting and Edwards 1988).

3.2 Gender Differences

Gender differences in children's development are recognized and shaped by all cultures (Ember 1981). Of five kinds of interpersonal behavior in children aged from three to 11—nurturance, dependency, prosocial dominance, egoistic dominance, and sociability—girls on average were more likely than boys to be nurturing toward others, while boys were more likely to be egoistically dominant and aggressive than girls. Play styles and types vary by gender (girls are more likely to do work-play and to do so nearer their homes, for instance). Women and girls do most 'mothering' of children well into the juvenile period in most cultures, so girls experience care by their own sex, while boys do not, leading to differences in early gender identification, and psychosocial and self-development. Peer groups have a tendency to segregate by gender, and children prefer same-sex children to interact with. Cultures with more mixed-age and mixed-gender groups around children are likely to have less sex-segregated roles for children. Individual differences among boys and girls, even within communities where there are strong overall gender differences, are usually substantial.

Father roles are recognized in all societies. Fathers seldom are involved in direct care of infants and young children but fathers do have complementary nurturing and affiliative roles, and are more involved in economic, protective, and didactic child training. In a study of 80 preindustrial societies, fathers were more proximate and involved with young children in monogamous, nuclear-family, and nonpatrilocal situations, and wherever mothers make relatively large contributions to family subsistence. Father involvement is related to sociocultural evolution: foraging societies report more father participation in childcare, while horticultural, agrarian/peasant, and pastoral tend to have less. There is an upswing in contemporary societies in encouraging paternal care. The cultural beliefs about gender (how women's as well as men's roles are defined by parenting), as well as the ability of fathers to provide consistently for their children,

influence father involvements. Poverty and uncertain economic life, or migration and dislocation, can drastically change father as well as mother involvement in patterns of childcare.

3.3 Emotional Development

Emotional development in childhood is influenced by cultural expectations at each developmental stage about the kinds of demeanor expected. A child should show that he/she is a certain kind of cultural person with an appropriate self and identity. Cultural management of emotion relies on what Robert Levy (1973) called 'redundant cultural control.' Tahitians (Levy 1973), for example, as well as many Pacific Island, Asian and other cultures, expect children to be calm, gentle, and quiet in demeanor (except for an extended period of adolescence and youth called *taure'are'a* in Tahiti, in which adventures, autonomy, rebellion, and aggressiveness are culturally expected and common). Redundant community management of 'gentleness' includes many beliefs and practices: children are somewhat distanced from their mothers and fathers after infancy and live with peers; socialization networks are diffuse, meaning that affect towards others is diffused; severe anger is 'strongly discouraged' while mild transient episodes are tolerated; threats are common while actual aggression towards children is not; accidents are reinterpreted as punishment by spirits for aggression and this is widely believed to be true; there can be magical retaliation for serious anger; and it is generally shameful to show lack of control. A *culture complex* of many interrelated beliefs and practices of this kind is a strong sign that some emotional pattern or competence in children is of adaptive and moral importance to a society.

3.4 Basic Trust and Attachment

Basic trust and attachment are fundamental in childhood in all cultures. Anthropological studies show that a wide range of family and parenting practices can produce close affiliation and trusting attachments in children. Successful attachment does not depend on only one kind of maternal care in nuclear families, nor a specific kind of infant and toddler behavioral style. Although the individual child is named and recognized everywhere, individualism and egoistic autonomy as goals are not at all universal; rather, sociocentric and interdependent self-development are common ideals (Shweder and Bourne 1991). Chisholm (1999) proposes an evolutionary developmental hypothesis regarding trust and attachment. Environments varied during the long course of evolution. Less threatening, more favorable material and social conditions led to greater investment in fewer children, and so encouraged closer attachments to one or a few caregivers. Unfavorable conditions encouraged what are called 'insecure' or avoidant/ambivalent infant and child

attachments, since in threatening, insecure conditions that was the more adaptive, successful parental and child response likely to increase the chances of children reaching reproductive age. Most cultures provide multiple caretakers to children, not a single person, and care is 'socially distributed.' Indeed, living an entire childhood exclusively in one's natal home may well be the exception around the world. Older siblings and cousins are widely used as caretakers. Extended families in village and agrarian-based societies have high levels of multiple care of children. In India and elsewhere in Southeast Asia, for instance, there is an intense, 'relational,' childhood experience with several 'maternal' figures, a pattern found widely across cultures (Weisner and Gallimore 1977).

3.5 Developmental Goals

Anthropology does not assume that competencies valued in Western communities (verbal skills, cognitive abilities, or signs of egocentric autonomy of the self, for instance), are necessarily meaningful child developmental outcomes elsewhere, although all cultures are concerned over some version of good communication, mental ability, and self- and personhood. LeVine et al. (1994) contrast pedagogical goals (cognitive and social stimulation to prepare children for literacy and schools, as well as for an individualistic and autonomous self- and personhood away from their natal home) and pediatric goals (concern for survival, health, and physical growth of infants, and subsequent responsible engagement in family subsistence and continuity), comparing families in Boston, USA and the Gusii of western Kenya. Many parents and cultures have mixed goals, and are ambivalent about the constantly changing requirements for childhood. Anthropology has a unique point of view regarding the goals for a good childhood: the production of cultural well-being in children. Well-being is more than physical health or the attainment of skills and competence, or of successful subsequent reproduction, important as these are. Well-being is the ability of a child to engage and participate in the activities deemed desirable by a cultural community, and the psychological experiences that go along with that participation.

4. The Acquisition of Culture

The roles and settings in which children acquire culture matter for when and how children learn. Children are apprentices to more experienced community members in doing important tasks, and this apprenticeship situation is a powerful learning experience for children. Play and work blend in childhood learning. Imaginative, fantasy, toy, physical, and motoric play (including organized sports with rules) varies according to whether adults encourage it, whether it is

considered 'beneficial' for children by adults because it enhances desired competencies or societies' developmental goals (such as cognitive and school-like activities in many contemporary cultures), and whether children's sheer inventiveness, creativity, and exuberance take over. The Kpelle of Liberia have children playing on 'the mother-ground,' or open public spaces where children can observe, lurk nearby, and imitate adults going about their activities in an agrarian village community. Formal schooling and the 'outside' world of employment and the nation-state contrast sharply with this mother-ground of childhood. Anthropological studies of schooling find striking differences in the culture of classrooms around the world, including different teaching practices and student expectations. Cultures vary in the 'moral and cultural curriculum' accompanying literacy and other training, classroom and peer norms, gender, and class circumstances mirrored in school practices, and daily routines of school (Tobin et al. 1989). Participation in ceremonies and rituals at times of baptism, birthdays, naming ceremonies, puberty, and marriage also are powerful influences on children's acquisition of cultural knowledge. Such ceremonies crystallize cultural beliefs and practices; they intensify emotionally, politically, and socially salient key concerns that parents and communities have about childhood, and elevate the goals the community shares for children and parents (Turner, 1967).

Multiple cultural and mental processes are involved in culture acquisition. However, the relative importance of different mental and cultural mechanisms for emotional, social, or cognitive learning is currently not well understood in anthropology. Evolved tendencies of the mind prepare children to understand the world in certain ways. For example, children in widely disparate cultural communities seem to share understandings about what living things are like and how they behave and think (Hirschfeld and Gelman 1994). Psychodynamic processes transform emotionally salient cultural information. Stories and narratives embed cultural knowledge, shape recall, and organize cultural knowledge into sequences with shared local meaning. Sociolinguistic studies of child language acquisition show wide variations in how and when parents talk to their children, and view language learning as embedded in interactional routines shaped by cultural practices, with children as active learners (Schieffelin and Ochs 1986). Cultural knowledge is available to and used by children in the form of cultural models and schemas for how to comprehend and act in the world. Neither children nor parents generally 'know that they know' most cultural knowledge, and it is not usually in conscious awareness, even as they act in accord with their culture's beliefs. Cultural beliefs and practices have powerful 'directive force' in guiding child behavior and child socialization in part because of this shared, implicit, everyday understanding put into action (D'Andrade 1995).

5. *Anthropological Methods and the Study of Children*

Anthropological methods for the study of children include ethnography and participant observation (Weisner 1996). These methods fit with the anthropological concept of childhoods lived in cultural pathways in naturalistic settings. Systematic observational procedures, field guides for comparative studies, and special procedures for sampling children's activities and time use enhance ethnography (Munroe and Munroe 1994). Anthropologists also use assessments standard in child development for comparing physical growth, and the cognitive and socioemotional life of children, often revising these to insure that culturally appropriate procedures and meaningful outcomes are being measured. Film and video records of childhood are invaluable for comparative studies of cultural activities, emotional expression, holding patterns, or gaze and attention.

6. *Anthropology and the Study of Childhood in the Twenty-first Century*

Anthropology has always been concerned with the experience and the cultural worlds of minorities, the poor and non-literate, and of those, including children, who are so often unable to give voice to and represent their own world. Life histories and autobiographical accounts have provided rich data, as in the classic *Nisa: The Life and Words of a !Kung Woman* (Shostak 1981). Scheper-Hughes (1992) describes infants and young children in deeply impoverished political-economic circumstances in urban northeastern Brazil, circumstances leading to high infant and child mortality, and anger and despair among parents (and anthropologists). Anthropological studies of African-American families and economically downwardly mobile families in the USA demonstrate how some (but not all) can rely on extended kin in their struggles with poverty. Anthropological studies of childhood disability and deviance find greater acceptance and social integration of children with physical and cognitive disabilities in many communities, as long as children are able to live as sufficiently cultural persons in their communities and are not violent or dangerous to others (Ingstad and Whyte 1995). Anthropologists are concerned with children at risk around the globe, including, for example, children under stress from academic examinations in Japan and Korea, immigrant children in Europe and elsewhere, street children, or children facing change in East Africa. Child sexual and physical abuse around the world is now a recognized concern for anthropologists. Cultural beliefs and practices regarding appropriate discipline and treatment of children clearly do vary widely, and Western notions of abuse are not universal. However,

repeated and unchecked physical aggression, or intrafamilial sexual relations between close kin and children are nowhere defined as normative and acceptable (Korbin 1981). Anthropologists are concerned with children's rights, recognizing their vulnerable status and the lack of provision of basic protections for children (*Cultural Survival Quarterly*). World youth cultures are growing in importance due to the influence of the Internet and mass communications around the world. These are all topics for the anthropology of childhood in the twenty-first century. However, the comparative study of powerful local and regional cultural differences in parenting, childhood, and family life across populations around the world will continue to provide enduring scientific questions for anthropology.

See also: Adolescent Development, Theories of; Childhood Health; Children and the Law; Gender-related Development; Infancy and Childhood: Emotional Development; Life Course in History; Life Course: Sociological Aspects; Trust, Sociology of; Youth Culture, Anthropology of; Youth Culture, Sociology of

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T. S. Weisner

Childhood Cancer: Psychological Aspects

Substantial progress in medical anticancer treatment (chemotherapy, radiotherapy, surgery, bone-marrow transplantation) has improved dramatically the long-term survival rates of children and adolescents with the diagnosis of cancer (malignant tumors, lymphomas, and leukemias). Some decades ago, the essential threat for the family was to face the death and loss of

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