

1 Introduction

Leave the Kids Alone

It is a time-honored tradition in cultural anthropology that the researcher (referred to as an *ethnographer*) begins his/her narrative with a story or anecdote. This sets the scene, as it were.

The Maniq are one of the very last nomadic hunter-gatherer societies on earth. Maniq bands travel through and reside in the forests in the Khao Bantat mountain range of southern Thailand. They live in camps where each family builds a temporary hut from bamboo, banana leaves, and similar materials. Men hunt birds and mammals with poisoned darts propelled from a blow gun and also used spears in the past. They occasionally practice trapping and fishing and men climb trees to gather honey and fruit. Women and girls gather forest fruits, starches like taro and cassava, and tubers dug out of the ground with digging sticks. Maniq communities are small, tight-knit, and committed to an egalitarian and peaceful existence. Gathered foods and game acquired by hunters are widely shared—not just with immediate kin but with the entire band. Hunting weapons are never used for violence, public displays of anger are rare, and children are affectionately indulged by the entire community. This ethos is absorbed by children whose games have no winners or losers and play groups encompass virtually all the children in the community, regardless of age. Their make-believe play closely mimics the activities, particularly food gathering and preparation, of adults. They are welcome to participate in adult activity, including hunting and gathering, and they clearly learn from these experiences. While there is no coercion (the Maniq believe that trying to shape the child's behavior will make him/her ill) and no “curriculum,” children effectively manage their own “education.” Indeed, there are no words in their language for *teaching* or *learning*. Children become fully competent in the adult repertoire of skills



Figure 1.1. Maniq girl with knife

by fourteen, including the ability to independently navigate and exploit the forest's resources.

The Maniq move on when game in the area is thinned out. They travel lightly with very few “modern” materials. They have, however, acquired steel knives and machetes which get heavy use. The indulgence of children extends to permitting them, even crawling infants, to handle these sharp tools. A colleague of mine, Khaled Hakami, has carried out a long-term study of the Maniq and shared with me several of his on-site photos of children with knives. One photo shows a baby crawling along holding a fifteen-centimeter-long knife while her father looks on approvingly. A second photo (Figure 1.1) shows a girl of four wielding (e.g. cutting some vegetable material) a machete and a third shows a boy of, perhaps, six carefully using a fifteen-centimeter knife to prepare a rat he's caught for the stewpot. Hakami wrote in reply to my query, “They play and run with knives all the time. But I never saw a child get hurt when using a knife. On the contrary, at the age of four all children can easily skin and gut small animals.” The Maniq are by no means unique in their *laissez-faire* attitude toward their children. Many, if not most, tribal societies expect children to take whatever risks are necessary to learn their culture, especially how to use tools and do useful things with them.

As remote—in every sense—as the Maniq seem to the audience for this book, I propose to draw at least two universal lessons about raising children from this example. First, all children seem to learn best when they can be “hands-on.” Second, children who are not wrapped in cotton wool (e.g. overprotected) may develop several intangible virtues like resourcefulness, creativity, resiliency, and determination or “grit.” I will expand on these two lessons in Chapter 5, but there are many other lessons we can learn by studying child-rearing practices in other cultures and in the past, a field of study to which I have devoted my career.

The immediate impetus for this book was a flattering article by Michael Erard in the *New York Times* about my recently published scholarly tome *The Anthropology of Childhood: Cherubs, Chattel, Changelings*. Titled “The Only Baby Book You’ll Ever Need,” the article had a salutary effect on sales and my editor at Cambridge University Press asked me if I’d consider writing a “baby” version of the book for a wider audience. And here it is! But before going further, I must provide a disclaimer. Contrary to the title of the *New York Times* article, neither the scholarly original nor this compact version of my work can in any way be construed as a substitute for Dr. Spock et al. It is a book *about* parents and children, not a *prescription* for how to do a better job of raising children. After all, I am, to the core, an academic—the leopard can’t change its spots. With that warning, I’ll allow that there is a very practical, down-to-earth message throughout this book: There’s no such thing as a perfect child, and parents should absolve themselves of any sense of failure if their children don’t quite reach perfection. Michael Erard clearly saw this as *the* main takeaway message from my book: “Children are raised in all sorts of ways, and they all turn out just fine.”

Another reason this is not a childcare manual is that, as interesting and suggestive as traditional childcare notions are, the circumstances under which Western parents are raising their children are just too different from the cultural and historic examples I cite. Consider, for example, the notion that “it takes a village.” This is a bedrock principle in the vast majority of the

world's societies, both in the distant and the more recent past. It means that children are cared for by individuals, often several, in addition to the mother. Typically these include a grandmother and siblings. Their care permits the mother some respite; it permits her to do her "job," including taking care of a household, gathering, gardening, weaving, etc. It also permits her to recover her vitality and contemplate another baby. Having twins, or a toddler and an infant simultaneously, can be overwhelming, but much less so if one can expect "helpers at the nest." But we don't have a ready supply of helpers anymore. The precipitous decline in the birthrate that occurred during the last century has reduced the number of older siblings available as helpers. And grandmothers, in our highly mobile society, are likely to live hundreds of miles from their grandchildren.

Sometimes those stark cultural differences can be informative, however. For instance, take the issue of privacy—especially for children. It is now considered the norm in well-off, postindustrial nations for children to have their own room. Often this room assignment occurs before birth in the creation of "the nursery." We can afford to allocate separate living areas to children, and with smaller families, children no longer need to share space with siblings. Comparatively speaking, the average American enjoys seventy-seven square meters of living space, residents of the UK thirty-three square meters and in Hong Kong fifteen square meters. But these are fully modern, wealthy societies. One can expect that in rural villages in the undeveloped world, there would be considerably less space per person. In Poomkara, a village in Southern India,

Children could be everywhere in the house but could claim none of the spaces as theirs . . . Schoolbooks were often simply stuck under the palm roof and children's clothes hung on a rope. Children did their homework sitting on the same mat on which they slept at night. Even this mat was often shared with others.

This situation is absolutely commonplace. In fact, infants and young children are widely expected to sleep with their parents

or other family members. A child that seeks privacy, or who prefers solitary to group play, will be considered abnormal—a cause for concern.

So, while we might feel that allocating personal space to children is a necessity—an entitlement—this is an extremely recent phenomenon and there's no evidence that children require private space. The children of Poomkara have none, expect none, and are not harmed when they get none. This contrast can be extended almost indefinitely. Village children eat what everyone else eats. There are no special children's foods (except for pablum and the like for toothless babies). Clothing is shared with others, as are playthings.

I think a discussion of contemporary norms regarding the granting of privacy to children can contribute much to a lessening of household conflict. Consider the long-term prognosis for the seemingly benign practice of “furnishing” the young child with not-to-be-shared resources. The child's room eventually becomes its kingdom, barred to anyone the child refuses to admit. That the room may be a filthy, untidy mess should be (from the child's perspective) no one else's business. Consider the distancing that can occur between children and their families once they acquire a smartphone. From age sixteen, the fortress-building fostered by the child's private bedroom expands with the adolescent acquiring his/her own vehicle. And so it goes, with frustrated parents referring to their pre-pubescent and adolescent offspring as “strangers” living under the same roof.

Space ownership is only one example from many we might discuss, but let's zoom out to the bigger picture. In my earliest attempt to review and synthesize the study of childhood by anthropologists, I constructed a simple model that helped me make sense of the most important “finding.” I named this model “neontocracy” (us) versus “gerontocracy” (them).

This simple model crystalizes the contrast between “new” Western ideas about childhood and the ideas that have characterized humanity for millennia. Even prehistorical funerary remains bear out this juxtaposition of highly valued elderly and lowly children. That is, we can tell the relative worth of the deceased from the

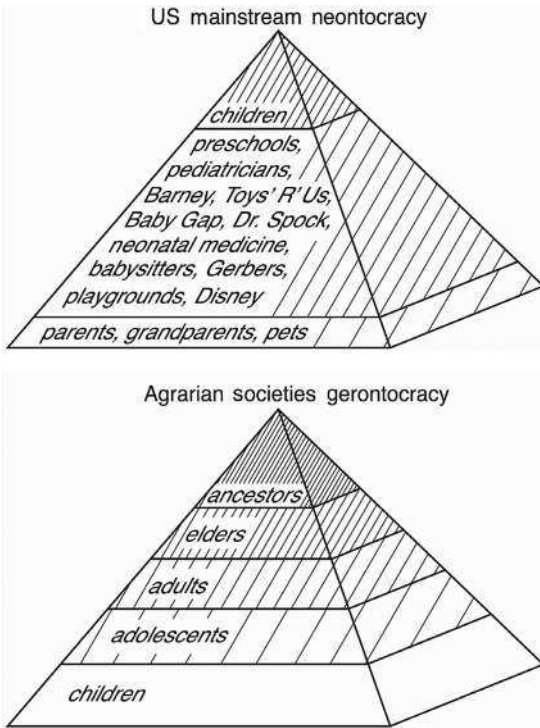


Figure 1.2. Neontocracy versus gerontocracy

location and richness of the interment, and these match the model. More recently, Joe Henrich and colleagues have developed a similar model based on a thorough analysis of the culture-bound nature of the discipline of psychology. They argue that research and theorizing about humans is based almost entirely on studies with samples from WEIRD (Western, educated, industrialized, rich, democratic) societies. They note that, where comparative data are available, people in WEIRD societies consistently look like outliers. Therefore, they argue, WEIRD subjects represent one of the worst subpopulations one could study for generalizing about *Homo sapiens*. Undoubtedly, granting a child a great deal of personal space is a practice found primarily in WEIRD society and reflects the values of a neontocracy.

As I have indicated, when I look at contemporary views on raising children from the perspective of many other societies, I see excessive concern for perfection. Perfect kids are raised by perfect parents, who draw their inspiration from best-selling child-rearing gurus who have all the answers. It wasn't always like this.

Historically and cross-culturally, child-rearing patterns were “customary,” part of the suite of behaviors which every community member had ample opportunity to observe and emulate. Prospective mothers did not receive much in the way of “instruction.” They were expected to have learned whatever was required from years of observation of mothering and from apprenticing as a caretaker of younger siblings. Further, the burden of child rearing and care was usually spread over a cadre of alloparents including grandmothers, aunts, and older siblings. This pattern is, inevitably, conservative. Significant innovation will be rare. Indeed, NGO and government interventions in rural, tribal communities to educate mothers in proper pediatric hygiene and medical treatment took many years before effecting change.

In the West, the transition from learning how to mother through observation and practice, to learning from doctors and their advice pamphlets, dates only from the 1830s. At that time, medical science began to have an impact on infant survival—primarily through the promotion of improved hygiene. Throughout the latter half of the nineteenth century, there was a growing gap between the survival and overall health of children whose mothers followed “tradition” and those who accepted the guidance of the medical profession. That this transition took so long was, in part, due to the fact that much of the medical advice was actually harmful. An example would be the advice to lance a baby's gums when teething begins.

Along with changes in child-rearing practice driven by the increasing authority of experts, there was the growing possibility of “failed” motherhood. That is, if experts took on the task of “scientifically validating” the advice contained in their manuals, it follows that mothers were liable to be blamed for the illness, death, or social and economic failure of their children. Society

no longer looked to the child itself, the social and economic milieu it was raised in, or “God’s will” as primary culprits in accounting for unfortunate outcomes. Failure had to be a lapse on the mother’s part in faithfully enacting the programs designed by experts.

Current parental angst has its roots in this transition to using “expert” advice versus watching others and learning from their example. The reliance on “authorities,” self-proclaimed or otherwise, has undermined any inherent confidence a prospective parent might feel about the task they’re facing. Parental “instincts” are seen as untrustworthy. Contemporary parental advice rhetoric is loaded with terms like “natural,” “normal,” and “essential.” These can be paired with “unnatural,” “abnormal,” and “neglectful.” It is nearly impossible to objectively evaluate these admonitions and warnings, so one’s selection from the menu of offerings depends mostly on how persuasive the expert is, and/or how similar the advice giver is to the advice seeker. Child-rearing practices are also inordinately shaped by movements (all organic, all the time), fashions (strollers for jogging), and panics (e.g. child abductions, vaccinations cause autism).

The archives of anthropology (reporting varied childcare strategies across cultures) and history (ditto across time) can provide us with a “crap detector” (with thanks to Hemingway). That is, we can compare what are currently considered “good” strategies for raising children with the patterns of the past. The goal is not to pit these ideas against each other to see who wins, but to tease out dramatic points of contrast, and to ask of the past, how were children raised? What views or ideas guided these practices and what were the outcomes? How does contemporary practice differ from more “traditional” (as recently as fifty years ago for readers who can recall) patterns? Can this backward or cross-cultural look shed light on contemporary issues? Read on; you’ll be able to judge for yourself.

2 Culture and Infancy

Just over a decade ago, I began to work on a “Herculean task”—no one else had ever attempted to do it—the review, analysis, and synthesis of the literature in anthropology (later, history was added) on childhood. The lifespan covered ranged from the idea of having a child (who makes the decision, how is it made, what marriage has to do with it) to the adolescent’s transition to adulthood. As a measure of the scope of this task, the reference list from the most recent edition of the book that ensued from this work, *The Anthropology of Childhood*, runs to over a hundred pages with nearly 2,000 distinct sources. The synthesis yielded one overarching conclusion: babies, or the children they might become, are thought of in entirely different ways across this wide sample of societies.

The subtitle of the book, “Cherubs, Chattel, Changelings,” expresses my view that this variability can be captured in three prototypes. “Changelings” is a convenient label for the babies that are unwanted, unwelcome, or given only a conditional place in society. On Chuuk Island in Micronesia, for example, abortion “may be practiced if divination indicates that the child is a *soope* (ghost or spirit). If a child is born malformed . . . it is sometimes killed for similar superstitious reasons.” The survival or longevity of a changeling is in doubt.

“Chattel” describes the model where children are very welcome and the society embraces high fertility as an ideal. Women with many live children are valorized. But the babe’s welcome is largely in anticipation of the work the child will—from a strikingly early age—contribute to the household. The Greeks used the same word, *pais*, to designate both child and slave. This anticipation is usually extended to the period when the parents are no longer self-sufficient. Ideally, many morally obligated children can be

expected to provide social security for elderly or disabled kin. Korowai “adults express an expectation of pleurably consuming the bounty of a grown child’s work.” Viewing children as chattel is particularly true for agrarian peoples, farmers and herders.

“Cherubs” names a prototype where babies are welcomed for their own sake. As anthropologist Marjorie Shostak noted for the Kalahari Desert hunter-gatherers referred to as the !Kung, “children are valued . . . for their ability to make life more enjoyable.” Before the postindustrial period, cherubs were few because the foraging way of life had become quite rare. Interestingly, as the !Kung inevitably adapted to a sedentary, subsistence-farming economy, their children transitioned from cherubs to chattel.

It follows that each of these archetypes engenders a different pattern of care. Changelings may be subject to neglect, compared to “normal” babies in the same society. Extreme neglect shading into infanticide is, or was, surprisingly common. The label and folk theory of “the changeling” may be used to justify the ill treatment.

Babies destined to be treated as chattel or cherubs can expect great attention and care to counteract the various threats to their viability. Strategies include: secluding the mother and infant for their health and safety; round-the-clock, on-demand nursing; long-term nursing to increase the intervals between births; the use of the services of a shaman and herbal medicines when the infant is ill; and swaddling them. Cherubs, but not chattel, are cuddled, kissed, sung to, spoken to, and played with; their genitals are stimulated, and they are never punished or scolded.

Of course, these distinctions may, at times, be blurry. Ache foragers in Eastern Paraguay almost never separate infants from their mothers, and babies may suckle whenever they choose; “they are never set down on the ground or left alone for more than a few seconds.” However, anthropologists also report the case of an infant who was buried alive. They were told, “It is defective, it has no hair, besides, its father was killed by a jaguar.” The Ache live on the thin edge of survival and children are readily sacrificed in response to such crises.