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Where Do Children Come from?

The Anthropologist's Veto

Americans are the most individualistic people in the world. (Henrich *et al.* 2010: 76)

The field of developmental psychology is an ethnocentric one dominated by a Euro-American perspective. (Greenfield and Cocking 1994: ix)

The study of childhood has been dominated by the field of psychology but a robust tradition in anthropology, dating at least to Mead's (1928/1961) *Coming of Age in Samoa*, calls attention to the culture-bound flaw in psychology. Mead's work undermined the claim by psychologist G. Stanley Hall that stress was inevitably part of adolescence. Less well known was Malinowski's earlier critique of Freud's Oedipal theory based on fieldwork in the Trobriand Islands (Malinowski 1927/2012). Universal stage theories of cognitive development, such as that of Jean Piaget, met a similar fate when cross-cultural comparative studies demonstrated profound and unpredicted influences of culture and school attendance (Greenfield 1966; Lancy and Strathern 1981; Lancy 1983). Ochs and Schieffelin's (1984) analysis of adult-child language interaction also showed that ethnographic studies in non-Western societies could be used to "de-universalize" claims made in mainstream developmental psychology. Bob LeVine has taken on one of psychology's most sacred cows, mother-infant attachment (see also Scheper-Hughes 1987a). LeVine's observations of agrarian, East African Gusii parents suggest the possibility of weak attachment and consequent blighted development. He finds that, while mothers respond promptly to their infant's distress signals, they ignore other vocalizations such as babbling. They rarely look at their infants or speak to them – even while breastfeeding. Later, when they do address their children, they use commands and threats rather than praise or interrogatives (LeVine 2004: 154, 156). In spite of these obvious signs of "pathology" on the part of Gusii mothers, LeVine and his colleagues – who have been studying Gusii villagers for decades – find no evidence of widespread emotional crippling. He argues that the problem of excessive claims of universality arises from the "child development field's dual identity as an ideological advocacy movement for the humane treatment of children and a scientific research endeavor seeking knowledge and understanding" (LeVine 2004: 151).

Another sacred cow slain by anthropologists is “parenting style” theory (Baumrind 1971). Central African Bofi farmers fit the so-called “authoritarian” parenting style in valuing respect and obedience and exercising coercive control over their children. According to the theory, Bofi children should be withdrawn, non-empathetic, and aggressive, and should lack initiative. On the contrary, they display precisely the opposite set of traits, and Fouts concludes that the theory may work when applied to Americans, but “it has very little explanatory power among the Bofi” (2005: 361). Throughout this book the reader will find similar examples of anthropologists “exercis[ing] their veto” (LeVine 2007: 250).

The view that many well-established theoretical positions in psychology cannot be as widely generalized as their authors assume was given a boost by a carefully argued paper published in 2010. Joe Henrich and colleagues challenged the very foundations of the discipline in arguing that psychologists fail to account for the influence of culture on human behavior. From a large-scale survey they determined that the vast majority of research in psychology is carried out with citizens – especially college students – of Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, Democratic (WEIRD) societies. They note that, where comparative data are available, “people in [WEIRD] societies consistently occupy the extreme end of the ... distribution [making them] one of the worst subpopulations one could study for generalizing about *Homo sapiens*” (Henrich *et al.* 2010: 63, 65, 79). There have been further studies highlighting the monocultural nature of these data and their limited generalizability (Nielsen *et al.* 2017). And yet, in spite of the enormous attention these reports have generated, a decade later, the needle hasn’t moved, the vast majority of research is still conducted exclusively with WEIRD samples (Apicella *et al.* 2020).

Primatologists have taken Western psychologists – who rely on lab experiments – to task for claims re uniquely human characteristics that are belied by evidence for these characteristics among free-living, nonhuman primates. “The disdain of observational data in experimental psychology leads some to ignore the reality of animal cognitive achievements” (Boesch 2005: 692). When psychologists do include “culture” in a study, they often adopt a “reductionist understanding of culture that assumes deep psychological structures to be universal yet culturally shaped” (Demuth and Fatigante 2012: 15). Mathematical simulations are often used to capture culture “effects” but “Mathematical models ... are only as good as their assumptions” (O’Brien *et al.* 2015: 124). And when psychologists go to distant locations to obtain comparative data, it is usually ODD (observation and description-deprived). “Most psychological research consists of experiments that put people in artificial situations that elicit unnatural behavior whose ecological validity is unknown” (Rai and Fiske 2010: 106).

Some years earlier I had been struck by this same paradox – that both our popular and our scientific understanding of childhood were based on experience with

and data from a single and unique culture. In studying Kpelle children in a remote interior village in Liberia, I took note of how radically different their experience of childhood was from that depicted in the textbooks I'd studied as a psychology major. To capture this difference, I created a polemical contrast between the society from which most of the generalizations about childhood had been made with the rest of the world – best captured by the terms “neontocracy” and “gerontocracy” – as illustrated in Figure 1.

This contrast, along with continued reference to the atypicality of WEIRD society, will channel much of the discussion throughout this book. My goal is to offer a correction to the ethnocentric lens that sees children only as precious, innocent, and preternaturally cute cherubs.¹ Building on a firm foundation of research in history, anthropology, and primatology, I hope to uncover something close to the norm for children's lives and those of their caregivers. I will also make the case

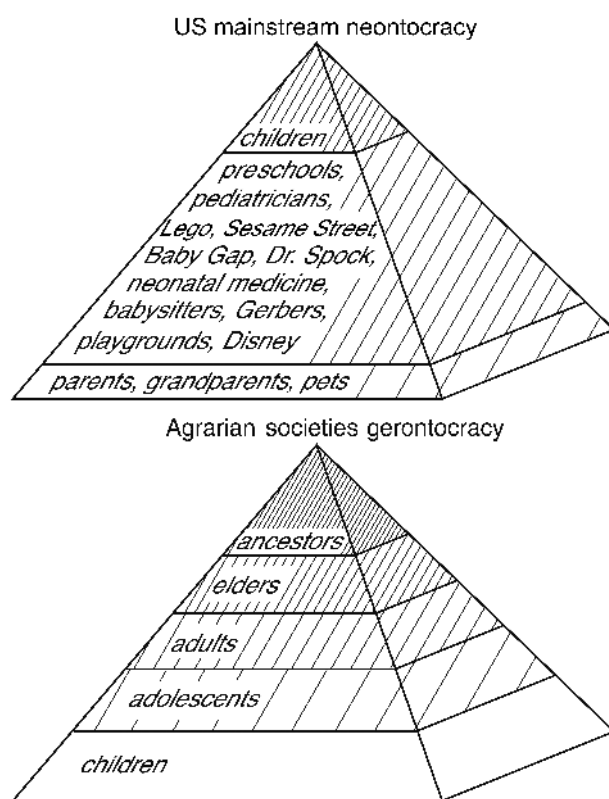


Figure 1 Neontocracy versus gerontocracy

¹ “Cherub” has a diversity of meanings, depending on the particular historical epoch or text one consults. In modern usage, a cherub is a plump, angelic, childlike creature that personifies innocence.

for alternative lenses whereby children may be viewed as unwanted, inconvenient changelings² or as desired but pragmatically commodified chattel.³

But I intend to move well beyond vetoing the theoretical assertions of non-anthropologists. I believe that the vast ethnographic archives⁴ contain an enormous vein of data that can be mined for insights into the nature of childhood – outside the neontocracy. Ethnography has some unique virtues that make ethnographic “data” particularly valuable (Maynard 2006). One such virtue is that by gathering information as a *participant observer*, the ethnographer weaves together three strands of information. First, ethnographers describe what they’re seeing – compiling an impressive observational log (complemented with photos and audio/video recordings) from which patterns can be detected. Second, by interviewing or engaging their informants in a discussion of what they’ve witnessed, they may gain an insider’s (emic) perspective, which often makes intelligible the foreign or exotic practices. These perspectives typically coalesce into what has been termed a cultural model (Quinn 2005: 479; Strauss 1992: 3) or ethnotheory (Harkness and Super 2006). These models are useful in trying to place particular childcare practices into a broader, more comprehensive cultural context. Third, ethnographers record their own (etic) perspective. As a reader of ethnography, I pay particular attention to the anthropologist’s “aha” moments when they are surprised or shocked by something that violates their own cultural model of childhood.⁵

My approach is comparative (the method is termed *ethnology*; Voget 1975) and inductive. That is, to take an example from Chapter 3, as I annotated the many

² “Changeling” is a pagan concept borrowed by medieval Christians. Like the cuckoo, trolls or elves might substitute their peculiar offspring for a human infant. The mother of the infant had recourse to a number of punitive measures designed to rid herself of the nest usurper in hopes its parent would bring back the human child and re-exchange the two.

³ “Chattel” has its origin in the Latin *capitale* or wealth, property. The closely related term “cattle” has a similar origin. A typical Roman patrician household might employ more than a 100 slaves, so their monetary value represented a significant portion of a man’s estate. Even in societies that didn’t practice slavery, children were treated as the property of the head of the household.

⁴ Prominently, but by no means exclusively, contained within the Human Relations Area Files. Available at www.yale.edu/hrf/collections.htm

⁵ It is only fair to note a major failing of most ethnographers. Because each culture is treated as unique and there is the expectation that the ethnographer be clear-eyed in collecting the data, unbiased by ethnocentrism, little attention may be paid to other ethnographic work on the topic(s) of interest. In short, the review of literature as well as analyses designed to gauge the generalizability of results may be quite cursory. Consequently, there has been little accumulation and refinement of findings from ethnography – as typically occurs in science (Tooby and Cosmides 1992: 44). Thus ethnographies rarely get connected to the web of scholarship and they are forgotten with time. Which goes some distance in explaining why there’s untapped material in the ethnographic record and why this book fills a void. This might be an appropriate time to tip my hat to the resources and staff of the Merrill-Cazier Library, without whose assistance I would not have been able to resurrect these obscure or forgotten treasures.

ethnographic accounts of the handling and treatment of newborns and infants, a pattern emerged. Although the specific details vary a great deal, a majority of the world's societies delay the conferral of personhood. This pattern, in turn, has enormous implications for the practice of infanticide, attachment theory, the diagnosis of child illness, and interment practices for the very young – among others. These patterns serve as the major organizing axes and themes of the book.

But first, a little history.

When Did Childhood Begin?

“Child” is itself not an uncomplicated term. (Boswell 1988: 26)

In the Middle Ages, children were generally ignored until they were no longer children. (Schorsch 1979: 14)

Consider the notion that childhood didn't exist at all until recently. This is the thesis of an extremely influential book by French philosopher/historian Philippe Ariès, published in 1962. In it, he argued that the concept of childhood as a distinct state is largely absent until the past few hundred years. His case is based primarily on an analysis of figurative art – e.g., in archaic and classical Greek art, “Children ... are rendered ... as small adults” (Oakley 2013: 148). And, if we limit our database to images of children, we would have to acknowledge that they are rare or don't look very childlike. The infrequency with which children are depicted in art can be taken as a measure of their insignificance (Wicks and Avril 2002: 30). And this anonymity is reflected in burial practices as well. That is, studies of infant and child burials show a characteristic pattern of informal interment in house floors, walls, and at the edge of garden plots. Special preparation, adornment, and burial goods were absent from these informal burials (Lancy 2014). What Ariès said, in effect, was that there are two early life stages: the baby-toddler stage when, lacking speech, manners, and proper locomotion, the individual isn't yet fully human; and the proto-adult stage when the individual is treated as a smaller, less competent adult. In the thirteenth century, the *infantia* stage lasted seven years or until “a child starts to lose its milk teeth” (Oosterwijk 2007: 129).

This characterization is probably not far off the mark for non-elite society throughout much of human history (Shon 2002: 141) and it may fit quite a few contemporary tribal societies. Osteological analysis, while scarce, shows skeletal evidence of adult activity (heavy, dangerous work, warfare) on juvenile remains (Thompson and Nelson 2011: 269). Around 800 BCE in Halstatt, Austria, salt-mining was a family enterprise. Excavated remains show that at least forty juvenile skeletons display signs of bone wear, trauma, and osteoarthritis, suggesting that children routinely worked in the mines (Pany-Kucera 2019).

Children were not so insignificant in elite society, however. Sommerville (1982) documents virtually continuous evidence of childhood as a distinct stage from the Egyptians onward. In fact, when Flinders Petrie excavated the Middle Kingdom (c.1900 BCE) royal site of Lahun, he found many children's toys, including balls and pull toys that wouldn't look out of place in a contemporary toy store. Barbara Hanawalt, exploring various textual sources, finds ample evidence of children in the medieval period and, in fact, is able to document consistent variation in children's lives as a function of their parents' social standing. Elite children played with toys imported from toymaking workshops in Southern Germany. "Manor children also played chess and backgammon and learned falconry and fencing" (Hanawalt 1986: 208).

To be sure, as Shahar's meticulous study shows, chronic illness, high infant mortality, and the need, when yet quite young, to prepare for one's adult role, meant that childhood with its carefree and pampered associations must have been rather short; for example, "boys and girls, designated for the monastic life, were placed in monasteries and convents at the age of five, and, in exceptional cases, even younger" (Shahar 1990: 106). "When children do become more visible, in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, it is chiefly as workers ... the emphasis is on the child at work" (Cunningham 1990: 115). Evidence of childhood in the past is irrefutable, but the length of childhood and the child's role in the family and in society were very different than in our neontocracy.

What's So Special about Human Childhood?

The majority of mammals progress from infancy to adulthood seamlessly, without any intervening stages. (Bogin 1998: 17)

For those immersed in the neontocracy, the question "What's so special about human childhood?" might never arise. But, for anthropologists impressed with unique aspects of human life history as well as the cross-cultural variability of childhood, it is one of the most vital issues in human evolution. Why does the chimpanzee, our closest relative, hover on the brink of extinction while we threaten to overpopulate the planet? Barry Bogin found an explanation for this gross disparity in positing early childhood as a "unique stage of the human life cycle, a stage not to be found in the life cycle of any other living mammal" (Bogin 1998: 17). As compared with the other apes, humans have much higher fertility, which Bogin attributes to the crèche-like character of childhood. Its purpose is to provide a kind of holding pattern in which the child can be weaned – freeing the mother to bear another child– while it is still somewhat dependent on others.

Relative to chimps, humans are weaned early, when they've reached about 2.1 times their birth weight, at twenty-four months or even earlier. Chimps wean at

five to six years and are independent and sexually mature soon after. So, while female chimps must wait at least six to seven years between births, humans can, under favorable circumstances, have another one every year. But while they may be weaned at two or earlier, human children still need adult support and provisioning. Their brains, growing rapidly and gobbling up calories, are still developing. Indeed, nutrients that fuel body growth in other species are diverted to the brain in humans (Bogin and Smith 1996: 705). Babies lack vital skills like speech. They are small, slow, and easy prey. They can't chew or digest adult foods. So, unlike most chimpanzee mothers, who are often their child's sole caregiver, human mothers rely upon childcare assistance from the child's closest kin – the father, older siblings, and grandparents. Because their genes are inherited by each of their wife/mother/daughter's children, their genetic interest is almost as great as the mother's (Hrdy 2005a).

But childhood is lengthened in the human species not only in the period from six months to four years when others can care for the child. Middle childhood is also an “extra” stage not found in the life histories of the other apes, and human adolescence is relatively longer than the comparable stage in apes. The model that best seems to explain this extended period of juvenility is referred to as “embodied capital” (Bock 2002a, 2010; Kaplan and Bock 2001). The long period of dependency on others and heightened risk of perishing before passing on one's genes is offset by a longer, healthier, and more fertile adulthood. Children, while experiencing relatively slow growth of their brains, and then their bodies, are also acquiring vital immunities or resistance to pathogens as well as developing skills and knowledge of the means their culture has accrued to ensure survival and reproduction. As they mature, youth are getting physically stronger, fatter, more competent and socially connected.⁶ Individuals who begin adulthood having accumulated a store of embodied capital are likely to live longer and produce more offspring who will be healthier and more likely to survive. This life history course should be favored by natural selection.

However, as this volume will amply demonstrate, the length of childhood overall, and the substages, vary a great deal. In Chapter 7, I discuss the possibility of childhood being curtailed so that children can “step up” and fill in for the loss of older members to the domestic labor force (e.g., death of the mother leads the eldest daughter to take over her duties). During the prolonged period of childhood, the child acquires considerable “reserve capacity” (RC) biologically and socially that they can activate under adverse circumstances (Bogin 2013: 34). For example, the loss of one or both parents may trigger the acceleration of mating and family

⁶ The early period of slow growth in childhood means the cost of provisioning the dependent child is lower (small bodies don't require as many calories) while the adolescent growth spurt signals that the child can now take care of most of his/her own needs (Gurven and Walker 2006).

formation (Belsky *et al.* 1991: 507; Draper and Harpending 1982). The child “grows up early” and shifts from the “slow” life history track to the “fast” track (Schlegel 2013: 303–304). This alternate trajectory would facilitate the replication of one’s genes in spite of a shorter, less robust adulthood (Kaplan and Bock 2001: 5566, Figure 2). There is growing evidence that middle childhood represents a decision point where a stress-filled, precarious existence⁷ will lead to earlier puberty, shortened adolescence, and opportunistic mating (del Giudice and Belsky 2011; Geronimus 1992, 1996; Low 2000: 333). Although prospects for the offspring are not very good (Bogin 1994: 32), the juvenile may already have mastered a significant fraction of his/her culture’s adaptive system and can, therefore, keep him/herself and at least some offspring alive. The life history of “street kids” (Lancy 2010, and this volume, Chapter 10) certainly fits this trajectory as well. This twin trajectory model may help us understand how the human population may have been sustained under adverse conditions.

As I have indicated, my goal has been to thoroughly search the ethnographic record,⁸ seeking emergent patterns – especially those relevant to “big” questions such as the consequences of varied periods of juvenility. Historically, human life history scholars would have employed a narrower search process. That’s because it was assumed that, to understand childhood from an evolutionary perspective, we should privilege hunting-and-gathering or foraging societies that, presumably, came closer to matching the “Environment of Evolutionary Adaptedness” (Bowlby 1980: 40). That is, if the fossil record of human evolution revealed a predominantly foraging mode of subsistence, then we should focus on contemporary societies that followed that aboriginal way of life. The ground-breaking work done on childhood among the Dobe !Kung – perhaps the most thoroughly studied foraging society in the world – set the “norm.” This view is losing its currency, however. Even though there are undoubted commonalities among contemporary foraging peoples (Konner 2016; this volume, Chapter 2), the differences are also quite evident (Hewlett 1996: 216). Then too, the !Kung are now seen as somewhat atypical in that the period when !Kung children are free from responsibility for providing food for themselves and family is quite long relative to that in other foraging groups. Many scholars now view the Late Pleistocene as the *Ursprung* of modern man, as that was the period of spectacular population growth and global dispersal of *Homo sapiens*. The modal subsistence strategy of these mobile populations

⁷ However, if the stress is largely caused by food shortage, which may be temporary in a famine, for example, the response may be only a temporary slowing of growth and maturation (Lasker 1969: 1485).

⁸ Less thoroughly, I have canvassed a considerable library of secondary sources in history. Where historians are looking at change over time and the impact of specific events or individuals, I treat historical cases as analogous to ethnographic cases. I found, for example, near perfect homology between the nature of apprenticeship in the historic and ethnographic records (Lancy 2012a).

was to travel and live near water, taking advantage of readily exploitable marine resources such as shellfish. This is a very different lifestyle than that of the !Kung, whose diet was chronically short on protein (meat), and much more like that of the Meriam (island dwellers in the Torres Straits). Unlike !Kung children, on Mer, children just older than toddlers easily obtain edible marine resources (R. B. Bird and D. W. Bird 2002: 262). There is growing evidence for evolutionary adaptation also occurring as the human population expanded rapidly during the Holocene, where we see an enormous diversification in human culture (Hawks *et al.* 2007; Volk and Atkinson 2013: 182). So, I take the position that we may learn as much about the “nature” of childhood from studying the culture of street kids as from studying African arid-land foragers.

While there is a wealth of material on childhood in anthropology, the reader should appreciate that such information may be hard won.

The Challenges of Studying Children in Culture

Adolescent [Aboriginal] girls were quite happy to spend time with me, often for hours on end, as long as I did not ask them questions and as long as they did not have to talk to me. (Young 2010: 87)

Archaeologists write of how elusive the search is for evidence of children in most habitation sites. Their primary focus is on artifacts and physical remains. It may be difficult to differentiate “toys” from utensils or votive objects (Crawford 2009; Horn and Martens 2009: 188). Archaeologists excavating an early Thule culture site determined, for example, that the smaller-sized “tools” they recovered were likely toys because they were made of wood, whereas the adult-sized versions were made of other materials (Kenyon and Arnold 1985: 352). Another clue to children’s use of an artifact as a toy is that it may be crudely made (Politis 2007: 224). A child’s involvement in ceramics manufacture may be detected by the size of fingerprints on recovered shards (Kamp 2002: 87). Earlier I noted that, since children are often not yet considered fully human, there is little perceived need to bury their remains in a formal context. So, while we can learn a great deal years and centuries later from adult burials, child burials – if located at all – will be much less well preserved (Lewis 2007: 31).

Ethnography can be equally challenging. Considering the hierarchy inherent in the gerontocracy, anthropologists interested in children are treated in a bemused fashion; after all, why bother to observe or talk to individuals who “don’t know anything” (Lancy 1996: 118; also Barley 1983/2000: 61)? Often the first challenge is to obtain basic demographic and census data. Parents rarely keep track of children’s ages (Bril *et al.* 1989: 310) and the process of recall can be laborious. Among the Kpelle, a frequent aide-memoire to calculating a child’s age was to recollect

where the garden had been – in swidden cultures the cultivated fields are moved each year to allow the land to fallow – when the child in question was born. And then the respondent painstakingly works forward, year by year, recalling details of the particular location or other noteworthy attribute such as a locust attack while the ethnographer patiently keeps a tally of the elapsing years (Lancy 1996). Estimating age on the basis of the child's size is unreliable because our notions of age-size relationships come from living in a culture where children likely consume too many calories rather than too few. I learned to gradually recalibrate my estimator. Confusion can arise from naming conventions that vary over the lifespan, and it is extremely rare for an individual to bear the same name from birth to death. A child may be called, simply, “third-born” or “born late.” Nominal terms for son, daughter, cousin, father, and so on may take on different meanings than in standard Euro-American kin terminology. This is especially true in the context of extended or polygynous (one husband, multiple wives) families. Above all, people may be reluctant to talk about children for fear of calling them to the attention of jealous neighbors or malevolent spirits. Or, contrariwise, the ethnographer may be specifically warned off from associating with particular children. One of my best child informants was cheeky, bright, very talkative, and unguarded – all attributes identifying him as a “bad child” and “un-Kpelle.”

It is extremely rare for anyone to interrogate anyone else. Considering how little privacy there might be in a small, close-knit community, it would seem unnecessary. Referencing again the gerontocracy, it is particularly inappropriate for adults to interrogate children (unless they've misbehaved) to discover their views or reasons for doing things. Children make challenging informants, as the examples in Box 1.1 illustrate.

BOX 1.1 The challenge of interviewing children and parents

“Befragte Mädchen oder Junger reagierten auf meine Frage entweder einsilbig oder reproduzierten Phrasen von Erwachsenen” (When questioned, Bamana girls and boys reacted either with mono-syllables or would parrot back something they'd heard an adult say) (Polak 2011: 112).

“The question as to the meaning of Wagenia circumcision is easier asked than answered. This is ... because the informants were of so little help on this point” (Droogers 1980: 159).

“Initiating oneself as an adult into [Asabano] children's groups can prove difficult, particularly if the researcher is ... foreign to the children. It took me more than a week before many children felt comfortable enough to talk with