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The Anthropology of Childhood

Cherubs, Chattel, Changelings

THIRD EDITION

How are children raised in different cultures? What is the role of children in society? How are families and communities structured around them? Now in its third edition, this deeply engaging book delves into these questions by reviewing and cataloging the findings of over 100 years of anthropological scholarship dealing with childhood and adolescence. It is organized developmentally, moving from infancy through to adolescence and early adulthood, and enriched with anecdotes from ethnography and the daily media, to paint a nuanced and credible picture of childhood in different cultures, past and present. This new edition has been expanded and updated with approximately 350 new sources, and introduces a number of new topics, including how children learn from the environment, middle childhood, and how culture is "transmitted" between generations. It remains the essential book to read to understand what it means to be a child in our complex, ever-changing world.

David F. Lancy is Emeritus Professor of Anthropology at Utah State University. Recent publications include *Child Helpers* (2020) and *Raising Children* (2017).

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"This is a wonderful book spanning the full range of experiences encountered by children across cultures and through time during this most critical of all human life phases. It provides a beautifully illustrated treasure trove of examples and insights amassed over Lancy's lifetime spent studying how children have been celebrated, tended, and educated – as well as, sometimes, also exploited."

Sarah Blaffer Hrdy, author of *Mother Nature and Mothers and Others: The Evolutionary Origins of Mutual Understanding*

"*The Anthropology of Childhood* has been the pinnacle resource for students and scholars seeking to understand childhood and adolescence crossculturally since the first edition was published in 2008. Drawing from over 100 years of research in anthropology, Dr. Lancy masterfully illustrates the meaning and nuanced experiences of childhood and youth across the globe. This third edition dives even deeper into classic research and guides us through the most recent and trailblazing research available."

Dr. Hillary Fouts, Dean of Graduate Studies and Research, Western Oregon University

"A fascinating insight into the true nature of childhood – a must-read for anyone who wants to better understand children and the role culture plays in shaping us all."

Melissa Hogenboom, author of *The Motherhood Complex*

"This new edition of Lancy's landmark book is again an endless source of information and inspiration. The updated and extended collection of anthropological evidence about children, childhood, and families is definitely the must-read for students of children's socialization and learning."

Professor Emeritus Heidi Keller, Osnabrück University

"Drawing on developmental psychology, anthropology, biology, and sociology, David Lancy reveals a wholistic view of childhood, enriched with deep ethnographic insight into the diverse ways children grow up. Lancy's work elevates the study of childhood by bringing the role of children in society into meaningful light."

Karen L. Kramer, Professor of Anthropology, University of Utah

"In this deeply enriched and utterly compelling new edition, David Lancy continues to break ethnocentric and widespread assumptions about child socialization, learning, and parenting, making vital contributions to the anthropology of childhood and youth. While so recently published, this book has already become a classic in childhood studies and beyond."

Dr. Camilla Morelli, Lecturer in Social Anthropology, The University of Bristol

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Preface

Third Edition Preface

This edition is tinged with a sense of urgency. The well which I drew heavily from in the first two editions is drying up. Anthropologists who focus on children are increasingly concerned with intervention and amelioration of problems (child slavery, forced immigration, poverty, abuse) rather than descriptions of children's lives in "traditional," relatively unacculturated, communities. Ethnography is no longer the method of choice as researchers turn more and more to quantitative, reductionist methods that focus on specific behaviors, e.g., manipulating pipe cleaners as a proxy for innovation. So, while I continue to scour the literature for work related to children in culture, I have also more thoroughly reviewed the "classics" such as Jean Briggs' 1991 *Ethos* article and the monographs produced as part of the Whitings' *Six Cultures* study. Also, the decline in fieldwork by cultural anthropologists is significantly offset by a substantial increase in child-focused archaeology.

Aside from the shift in the priorities of childhood anthropologists, fieldworkers are increasingly finding children and families that are in transition to the homogeneous, Western-inspired version of childhood. Children's preferences are given greater attention now and they are expected to invest more time in schooling than in supporting the domestic economy. Their sense of their own futures is shifting rapidly, and they are abandoning the pursuit of activities that don't advance those new aspirations.

Approximately 350 sources have been added to this edition and several new topics are featured. These include paying greater attention to studies of children learning from the environment. Foraging in the adjacent forest and savannah is a particularly fruitful setting for demonstrating how much social learning occurs in such collaborative endeavors. In Chapter 5, I discuss what it means when we speak of culture being "transmitted" between generations via children. While one of the dominant themes of each edition has been children's precocious involvement as "helpers" in ongoing work activity, I pay more attention to the delicate negotiation that occurs in order to ensure that the child doesn't impede or undo the work of those more competent. Also in Chapter 7, in the section on children learning crafts, I have introduced some exciting new work on children learning to make stone tools. Middle childhood is an emerging area of inquiry that I am able to encapsulate in a new section in Chapter 8.

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Structurally, a great deal of the text has been edited and transferred to textboxes. This was done wherever the narrative contained text that was list-like in nature. There are now 58 textboxes distributed throughout the volume. My hope is that by streamlining the narrative, the text will become more coherent for the reader.

In the Preface to the first edition, I credited Katherine Tomlinson – who spent a considerable part of her first three years playing in my office – with inspiring my work. Katherine will be entering high school this Fall. Meanwhile, her successor as muse, my granddaughter Adley, will turn two in mid-May (Figure 7). Although my relationship to Adley is as an adoring grandparent, she also provokes my curiosity. As predicted, for example, she's eager to do chores and her mom Sonia, unlike most WEIRD mothers, goes to considerable trouble to encourage her nascent helper.

I'll end by expressing my gratitude to J. J. Deliskave who's done superb work on this and several other of my works over the last decade. Kay McKechnie did a marvelous job copy-editing the manuscript. Andrew Winnard, Executive Publisher of Language, Linguistics, and Anthropology at Cambridge University Press, has been great to work with over several years.

Second Edition Preface

The Anthropology of Childhood was first published in November 2008; however, I had delivered the manuscript to the publisher much earlier. At that time, I did not feel that the book was "complete." The flow of "new" sources was unabated. So, I proceeded as if the book was incomplete and continued to collect and annotate relevant work. Then too, there has been a virtual explosion in the size of our formerly rather miniscule community of anthropologists (and archaeologists!) studying childhood. This has produced a spate of journals and books. New scholarly organizations have sprung up, including the Anthropology of Children and Youth Interest Group (ACYIG, of the American Anthropological Association) and the Society for the Study of Childhood in the Past. Several institutions in North America and Europe host regular, open seminars highlighting recent research, and international conferences have been convened in the US, Canada, UK, Belgium, Greece, Norway, and India.

This edition incorporates over 750 sources that were not referenced in the first edition, which drew on roughly 1,400 sources. Certain topics have been blessed with lots of new material, in particular: infancy and "delayed personhood"; child labor; adoption and fosterage; infants and children as autonomous learners; the limited role of teaching in children's acquisition of their culture; gamesmanship; the benefits of free play; the chore curriculum; apprenticeship; the impact of economic transformation and civil conflict on childhood; children as a reserve labor force; the historical antecedents of schooling; resistance to education; the impact

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of schooling on thought; the culture of street kids; and children's *agency*. Readers familiar with the first edition will also find a great deal of new visual material to complement the text.

The second edition also afforded me an opportunity to refocus the book to make it even more useful to the intended audiences. First, I can unashamedly claim that this is a reference volume, given the comprehensive nature of my literature survey and the thoroughness with which I document each source, including specific page numbers. I couldn't have done it without Google Books and Google Scholar! Second, I know very well that readers find this work to be extremely accessible, all-encompassing, and engaging. Feedback suggests that students feel a justifiable sense of mastery of the field, once they've read it. Third, I want to provide a valuable resource to childhood scholars, whether in anthropology or elsewhere. Child psychologists, in particular, may be blinded by the dominance of Western culture in their theories, methods, and population samples. There are many ideas here that correct or even overturn conventional wisdom regarding child development and, particularly, the role of parents.

I likened the production of the original book to the careful handling of an awkward and obtrusive gorilla. For the second edition I would invoke the metaphor of a barn-raising. I have always been fascinated by the idea of a barn-raising, and one of my favorite cinematic moments is the Amish barn-raising in the 1985 film *Witness*. I have gained a wonderful community of friends and scholars in the last six years who've created forums for the discussion and promotion of the anthropology of childhood, and these discussions gave birth to many of the "big" ideas introduced in this edition. I would like to acknowledge my enormous debt to these very wonderful organizers/hosts. These include Susan Blum, James and Tanya Broesch, Alyssa Crittenden, Sandra Evers, Peggy Froerer, Rob Gordon, Peter Gray, Diane Hoffman, Marida Holos, Heidi Keller, Stephen Laurence, Alice Lesnick, Courtney Mehan, Leslie Moore, Élodie Razie and Charles-Edouarde de Suremain, Andria Sherrow, and Gerd Spittler. Funding from the Society for Psychological Anthropology allowed me (and colleagues John Bock and Suzanne Gaskins) to host a marvelous interdisciplinary seminar to thrash out the role of stage in theorizing about childhood. As I extended my reach, endeavoring to make this edition more comprehensive, I was aided by numerous patient scholars who expertly fielded my queries. A special thanks to David Bjorkland, John Bock, Barry Bogin, Adam Boyette, Suzanne Gaskins, Heather Montgomery, David Olson, Sanae Okamoto-Barth, and Alice Schlegel. Last, a shout-out to ACYIG board members Kristen Cheney, Jill Korbin, David Rosen, Susan Shepler, Aviva Sinervo, E. J. Sobo, Rachael Stryker, and Tom Weisner, who have been so critical in the process of building an organization to shelter our enterprise.

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First Edition Preface

In 2002, an article entitled "Why don't anthropologists like children?" appeared in *American Anthropologist*. The author argued that anthropologists, in their comprehensive study of every society on the planet, had ignored or mishandled childhood (Hirschfeld 2002). Since I'd devoted my career to the study of children in culture, I was personally affronted. Moreover, I had had no difficulty finding dozens of accounts of children in the ethnographic record to corroborate a thesis I advanced in a book published just a few years earlier (Lancy 1996). Consequently, I wrote a careful and thorough rebuttal and submitted it as a commentary. The journal editors rejected it as too long. I whittled and whittled but it was still over the 500-word limit. I gave up trying to shrink my rebuttal and, instead, decided to expand it. You are reading the result.

I realized that while I might be aware of a treasure trove of material in the ethnographic record, others might not. The field, in fact, seems balkanized. For example, I've noted that anthropologists who study children in schools – there are more than 700 members of the Council on Anthropology and Education – may not pay much attention to the work of ethnographers studying children learning to farm or to hunt. Anthropologists looking at language socialization; archaeologists studying mortuary practices; biobehavioral anthropologists studying fertility – these and numerous other lines of inquiry run in parallel, rarely crossing. Theoretical perspectives that are treated as antithetical when they might better be seen as complementary divide us as well.

This volume aims to include, therefore, the work of anthropologists interested in childhood who, heretofore, may have been unaware or at least unappreciative of each other's work. I achieve this synthesis partly through a comprehensive literature review but also by eschewing lengthy treatment of theoretical formulations that might act as a bar to the uninitiated. Ideally, this work should serve as a catalyst that promotes much greater interaction among those who study children.

The book quite consciously sets out to capture and offer at least a passing reference to most studies in anthropology where children are in the foreground. All of the major themes – for example, infancy, children's play, and adolescent initiation – are covered at length. Furthermore, where these themes abut the disciplines of history and primatology, I draw liberally from those bodies of scholarship to strengthen and enrich the presentation.

A seminal work that provided a model for my research was Sarah Blaffer Hrdy's *Mother Nature*. In that book, Hrdy draws on the literature on motherhood outside the dominant culture, and, in constructing a more representative portrait, she also dismantles many taken-for-granted notions about the phenomenon – the maternal "instinct," to choose just one example. It has been my intent to do for childhood what Hrdy did for motherhood. Here, too, we see that many assumptions

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that are made about what is "normal" or natural in children's development are, in fact, quite narrowly culture-bound. Indeed, throughout this work, the formula employed in child development texts will be turned on its head. In these texts, research on middle-class Euro-American children defines the standard and "anecdotes" from anthropological studies illustrate "deviation from the mean." In the pages that follow, common aspects of Western childhood are examined through the lens of anthropology. This lens reveals that what we take for granted as customary appears to be rather strange when compared with prevailing practices found elsewhere. The goal is not to offer a competing volume to standard child development texts but, rather, to offer a supplement or corrective.

The alliterative terms in my subtitle suggest three compass points in this landscape. Our own society views children as precious, innocent, and preternaturally cute *cherubs*. However, for much of human history, children have been seen as anything but cherubic. I will introduce readers to societies, indeed entire periods in history, where children are viewed as unwanted, inconvenient *changelings* or as desired but pragmatically commoditized *chattel*. These perspectives will be employed in the study of family structure and reproduction; profiles of children's caretakers – parental, sib, and community; their treatment at different ages; their play; their work; their schooling; and their transition to adulthood. Again and again, our views and treatment of our cherubs will stand in sharp contrast to views of children constructed by anthropologists and historians from their work in other societies.

Another audience I hope to reach is the legion of teachers, fieldworkers, and policymakers who are laboring to improve the lives of children not fortunate enough to have been born into a privileged society. All are aware of the importance of taking culture into account in their work, and "multiculturalism" has become an oft-heard mantra. But the concept is often used to provide some exotic spices to season the otherwise standard prescriptions for children's schooling and welfare. Throughout this work we'll probe deeply into the literature to discover the ways in which child development is truly shaped by culture. But *The Anthropology of Childhood* goes beyond this analysis in consistently building bridges between the rich cultural traditions documented by ethnographers in the past and the contemporary scenarios confronted by interventionists.

Gradually, the 500-plus-word commentary has grown into a 500-lb gorilla dominating my life and rendering me an insufferable companion. I couldn't see a play or a movie or read a novel without finding something that might fit. Joyce has not only tolerated the beast but has groomed it on regular occasions. Other family and friends fed it snacks. Thank you, Nadia, Sonia, Leslie, Bob, Judy, Quinn, Rick, and Melissa. Many others often asked after the gorilla's growth and well-being. At Utah State, these included (among many others) my colleagues Michael Chipman, Richley Crapo, Christie Fox, Kermit Hall, Norm Jones, Rick Krannich, Pat Lambert,

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Lynn Meeks, and Mike Sweeney. Colleagues elsewhere who joined the vigil included Katie Anderson-Levitt, Nigel Barber, Jay Black, Gary Chick, Gary Cross, Aaron Denham, Bob Edgerton, Heather Rae-Espinoza, Hilary Fouts, Rob Gordon, Judy Harris, Shep Krech, Jon Marks, Jim Marten, David Olson, Aaron Podolefsky, Paul Raffaele, Deborah Reed-Danahay, Jaipaul Roopnarine, Peter Smith, Brian Sutton-Smith, Glenn Weisfeld, and Becky Zarger. Thank you all for your support, guidance, and tolerance of my persistent queries.

As this project took on visible proportions, I began to bring the gorilla into my Anthropology of Childhood class. Students in the class also did much to nurture it from toddlerhood on, notably Helen Brower, JeriAnn Lukens, Amy Montuoro, Tonya Stallings, Mary Sundblom, and James Young. However, no one was more critical to this enterprise than Annette Grove, who evolved from stellar student into untiring and incredibly effective research assistant and editor. My debt to Annette is simply incalculable. Cecylia Maslowska assisted with the translation of Gerd Spittler's *Hirtenarbeit* and the late Professor Renate Posthofen with Barbara Polak's work. Professor Sarah Gordon assisted with material in French.

Many colleagues assisted in the creation of what eventually coalesced into this oversize creature, beginning before I had any idea of what was coming. Utah State's Honors Students in 1995 selected me to give the annual "Last Lecture," and I used the opportunity to develop the child-as-commodity ideas presented at the end of the book. A general outline of Chapters 6 and 7 emerged at a presentation I made at UCLA in February 1999. Hosted by Alan Fiske, the talk was followed by extremely stimulating discussions with Alan, Patricia Greenfield, Tom Weisner, Candy Goodwin, and others. In April 2004, Pierre Dasen and Jean Retschitzki invited me to a symposium in Switzerland to present early versions of Chapters 5 and 6 on learning and play. Sid Strauss had me speak in December 2004 to an incredibly diverse and stimulating group – sponsored by the McDonnell Foundation – on culture and children's social learning. Chapter 6 was drafted, initially, in response to an invitation from Gerd Spittler to give a presentation in Bayreuth in July 2005. Bryan Spykerman's inspired photographs of children added personality to the text. These gratefully acknowledged efforts to assist me in gestation are complemented by the work of many midwives who critically reviewed chapters and provided often extensive and invaluable feedback. Chief among these I would thank Rob Borofsky, John Gay, Barry Hewlett, Howard Kress, Mark Moritz, Barbara Polak, Ali Pomponio, Alice Schlegel, and, particularly, John Bock and Suzanne Gaskins. Two anonymous reviewers for Cambridge University Press provided extensive, on-target feedback.

This work is dedicated to the late Nancy Hylin. Our next-door neighbor, she became, in effect, a close older sibling. Nancy, in adulthood, met and married a Norwegian, Hans Jacob Hylin, settled in Norway and proceeded to raise four sons and assist in the rearing of nine grandchildren. She also enjoyed a distinguished career

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as a secondary school teacher. Nancy was a natural participant observer and, for nearly fifty years, she shared her observations of childhood and adolescence with me and my family through the media of long, intimate letters and photographs. So, while my research and fieldwork has been episodic, I could count on a steady stream of "field reports" emanating from Norway, year after year. In spite of her passing in 2000, Nancy served as muse throughout this project, a silent but insistent reviewer and critic. Lastly, I need to acknowledge a muse of another sort. Katherine Iris Tomlinson will turn three in a few days and, since birth, her weekly play-dates with "Uncle David" have been both therapeutic and inspirational. As you read this text, please remember that I much prefer cherubs.

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