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**THE NEW CHILDHOOD STUDIES:  
REFLECTIONS ON SOME RECENT COLLABORATIONS BETWEEN ANTHROPOLOGISTS AND  
PSYCHOLOGISTS**

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**ANTHROPOCHILDREN**

*Perspectives ethnographiques sur les enfants & l'enfance*

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## THE NEW CHILDHOOD STUDIES: REFLECTIONS ON SOME RECENT COLLABORATIONS BETWEEN ANTHROPOLOGISTS AND PSYCHOLOGISTS

Alma GOTTLIEB\*

### INTRODUCTION

ONE DAY, while living in the rain forest of Côte d'Ivoire, I was chatting with a young mother I'll call "Au". Previously, I had noticed that whenever her nine-month-old son, "Kwame," saw me, he crawled nervously to his mother, clutching her long skirt or clambering firmly into her lap. Once, I left the duo for a few minutes. When I returned, Kwame was happily exploring the external microphone of my tape recorder that I had left on the ground. Remembering lab experiments by psychologists that aim to measure "stranger anxiety" in children just this age, I seized the opportunity to assess how anxious my presence made Kwame.

Sitting down, I moved the microphone a bit nearer to me, just out of his reach – and in the opposite direction of his mother. With me back, Kwame stopped indulging his curiosity. Turning to look nervously at his mother, he dropped his interest in the microphone and retreated quickly to her lap, then her breast. Only after a long, reassuring breastfeeding session did he slowly detach from his mother. Eventually, he made his way to playing with a bowl next to her (Figure 4). The microphone that had fascinated him minutes before lay a scant 30 cm. from his reach. He glanced at it with regret – but turned back to the bowl. Those 30 cm. represented too great a distance to travel from his mother, in the presence of a stranger – myself.

The profile of such a child was hardly exotic to me. My own son had acted similarly at that age. At the time, my husband and I consulted parenting books, as well as our doctor and nurse. The texts and professionals all assured us that our son's behavior was normal. In fact, they claimed, between about nine months and two years, a child who does not exhibit some level of caution around strangers, and some "clinginess" to her mother, might have an "attachment disorder" that should be investigated and, perhaps, treated. From my own mothering experience, then, Kwame's behavior hardly shocked me.

Instead, what intrigued me was the comment made by my friend, Amenan, who claimed that, in her large village that included hundreds of children, Kwame was the only child who ever acted this way. Amenan termed this behavioral style *gbane* – a Beng term I translate into English as "clingy". Amenan explained that babies like Kwame who are *gbane* "do not go to [other] people" (*à ta sō klε*). In Beng villages,

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Amenan insisted, children rarely show such fear of strangers, or clinginess toward their mothers.

Moreover, whereas American mothers and doctors – along with developmental psychologists – would classify many “clingy” children as psychologically “normal,” Beng parents consider them all problematic: “their character is difficult” (*o sie grégré*).

Mothers of such children view themselves as unfortunate. If their babies remain excessively attached to them, how will they get their work done? Healthy Beng women typically work from about 6 am to 8 pm, 7 days a week. They do all the cooking and dishwashing, all the twice-daily bathing of babies and toddlers, all the laundry, all the hauling of water for the entire family’s use, all the chopping and hauling of trees for firewood... and, between all this domestic labor, they spend a full day working in the fields cultivating their crops.

The mother of a *gbane* child is quickly exhausted and unable to work. In the worst case, a *gbane* baby who hampers her mother’s labor may put the entire household’s food supply at risk. For these reasons, a Beng infant or toddler who exhibits even the mildest nervousness toward strangers is judged, at best, a nuisance – at worst, a disaster. Instead of being categorized as emotionally healthy by psychologists, such children are, instead, considered by Beng adults to be emotionally unhealthy, and socially problematic.

As an anthropologist, I am tempted to assert that the alleged tendency for all babies to stay close to their mothers is not universal, given the Beng case. Instead, local values determine whether, and how much, young children feel nervous around strangers.

The developmental psychologist might acknowledge that local values and practices may suppress the tendency, but might still insist that the tendency exists because of a psycho-biological foundation.

How do we hold a productive, interdisciplinary conversation about such matters beyond invoking competing models? In this article, I explore recent interdisciplinary work that has fruitfully joined anthropological and psychological perspectives to tackle issues of mutual interest by drawing on the strengths of each discipline.

#### **A CASE FOR THE MARRIAGE OF ANTHROPOLOGY AND PSYCHOLOGY**

Some might say that the disciplines of anthropology and psychology are doomed to speak at cross-purposes, given that psychology aligns itself firmly with the natural sciences, whereas anthropology straddles the boundary across the natural sciences, the social sciences, and the humanities. In fact, in the 1980s, American anthropology saw bitter debates about whether our discipline is a science or humanities field. American anthropologist Edward Bruner had been trained early on as an engineer but later became a humanistically oriented anthropologist... and the father of an

engineer son. For personal as well as professional reasons, then, he felt pained by the divisions tearing apart our discipline and wrote movingly<sup>1</sup>:

*The very terms of the controversy, science vs. humanism, sets up a false dichotomy which is not reflected in the actual practice of anthropology. All anthropologists are scientists, just as all science is interpretive. In what ways are we all scientists? We have the goal of seeking the truth although we realize that we can only achieve approximate understandings. As practitioners of anthropological science, we believe in careful scholarship, in generalizations backed by firm... data... in full consideration of the negative evidence. In the practice of anthropology, we do not follow a series of rules based on formal propositions but we use our creative imagination in the solution of anthropological problems... [S]cience doesn't have to stand in opposition to humanistic understanding... In the pursuit of elusive truth and in the imperfect practice [of] our anthropological science, those scientifically inclined and those humanistically inclined ought to practice their anthropology together, with tolerance for their differences.*

*We need each other.*

I suggest that this blunt yet eloquent statement applies equally well to the relationship between anthropology and psychology. It is true that contemporary cultural anthropologists tend to pay attention to community norms and people's reactions to them, whereas developmental psychologists either focus on claimed universal behaviors and impulses, or they invert the anthropologist's ratio and pay attention to individuals and how they cope with norms. But these are a matter of focus. The questions our two disciplines pose are closely interrelated. We all aim to understand the human condition. Given our shared preoccupation with the lives of our species, both fields stand to be enriched when we combine our strengths in deploying relevant methods and theories to further probe the lives of children and those who care for them.

If all this sounds a bit abstract, let us return to baby Kwame and his peers. The Beng case allows us to acknowledge how closely interrelated our two disciplines' questions are.

### *The Example of Kwame*

If, unlike Kwame, most young Beng children feel friendly toward strangers, rather than clinging to their mothers, how do they get that way? Does individual behavior by Beng adults (which psychologists might emphasize) combine with broader social norms and expectations (which anthropologists might probe) to produce this common behavior among most Beng infants and toddlers?

Indeed, most Beng mothers use multiple techniques to intentionally train their children into attaching minimally to them; into feeling comfortable around strangers; and into feeling well integrated into caretaking networks that are both dense and broad. These techniques begin right after childbirth.

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<sup>1</sup> Edward Bruner, "The Scientists vs. the Humanists," *Anthropology Newsletter* 31 (February), 28(1990): 28.

As soon as the placenta is expelled, a household member leaves the birthing room to announce the news around the village. At least one adult from every household soon appears at the new mother's door. In a large village, dozens of visitors may line up. One by one, the visitors bless the new mother and ask: "What have you given me?"

She replies, "A girl" or "A boy."

The visitor thanks the new mother and may then toss her some coins to congratulate her. Through this ritual practice, all adult members of a village become connected to the life of each new village member<sup>2</sup>. Later, if she encounters parenting challenges, a mother may feel comfortable drawing on the collective child-rearing wisdom of this large group of neighbors.

Equally relevant, the newborn should feel welcome in the village. This is critical, given the indigenous religion of the Beng, which includes a model of reincarnation. With this spiritual orientation, babies are reportedly tempted to return to the afterlife for many reasons. To avoid this tragedy, adults try to make the baby feel welcome by as many people as possible, and as soon as possible (Gottlieb 2004).

In short, within the first few hours of life outside the womb, a newborn learns his or her first lesson: to be human is to engage sociably with a large number of new people. The fact that these people are generally smiling and making eye contact with the newborn – and, often, physical contact, as well – may immediately begin to teach the small person that the "default setting" for strangers is friendliness.

Of course, Western-trained psychologists would point out that a newborn's brain function can not create memories of this experience. Yet, the general lesson concerning the positive value of a wide range of social contacts, including strangers, will be taught frequently after this early welcoming ritual. With further brain development, the growing child will internalize the lesson.

Meanwhile, over the first few weeks, dozens more guests daily enter the room in which mother and newborn are resting, visiting for up to an hour or two. As hostess, the new mother should immediately hand over the tiny child to any high-status guest, or anyone who travels from another village. Such a guest may decline to hold the baby, but the mother must make the offer.

During these visits, it is also preferable for the baby to be awake, so the two can be introduced. The mother (or an attending female relative) addresses the baby directly, introducing him or her to the person-who-is-at-first-a-stranger. The caretaker points to the guest, then turns to the infant and asks the child directly: "Who's that?" If the question meets with silence, the caretaker may repeat the query. If the baby is too young to respond with even a noncommittal noise, the caretaker still instructs the child gently. A baby of a few months may answer with a noise such as "Mm" or "Eh." The caretaker may interpret this as the correct answer, and may then say,

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<sup>2</sup> One is reminded of the literature by French anthropologists on the "child of the lineage" (Lallemand 2002; Rabain 1979; Razy 2007).

pleased, “Yes, that’s your cross-cousin” or “Yes, that’s your little mother,” and so on – thereby placing the guest in a meaningful social universe. Everyone the small child meets – strangers included – is introduced by such a kin term.

After this formal introduction, the visitor has a face-to-face conversation with the little one, while the child’s mother or another adult “speaks for” the baby – training him or her how to respond properly. A typical encounter involves direct eye contact between the baby and whoever is speaking for him or her. According to developmental psychologists, such eye contact is a critical feature for inclining young children to engage in friendly social encounters. These early instructions in greeting become important later in life, when complicated greetings inaugurate all social encounters.

Of course, the exchange just described is problematic if the baby happens to be asleep when a guest arrives. So, for high-status guests, or visitors from another village, the mother must offer to awaken the baby. If she does not at least offer to awaken and hand over her infant, my Beng friends speculated, she would be criticized for being “selfish”: unwilling to allow her new child to be claimed by her social network. However, such a scenario was hardly imaginable to my consultants when I raised the possibility.

Beyond guests, mothers may encourage their husbands to cultivate strong relations with their infants. Most Beng fathers have little to no involvement in the minute-by-minute routine care of their infants – bathing, feeding, carrying, cleaning (although, some especially nurturing men do some caretaking). But most wives do encourage their husbands to spend time playing with their babies. My friend Amenan pointed out that some babies prefer their fathers to their mothers, which she described by the Beng phrase, *ó sale a mà* – “s/he sticks to him”. She cited one case:

*Kouassi... was more attached to his father, Kofi, than he was to his mother... from even before [the time that] he could sit up! Kofi often took Kouassi with him to the fields, from the time that Kofi started crawling – Kofi carried Kouassi on his back while pedaling his bike! – unless he [Kofi] had too much to carry on his bike [from harvesting crops]. On those days, he left Kouassi in the village. Then, Kouassi cried and tried to follow him! When he was two years old, someone often had to go and catch him in the forest, where he’d followed his father – up to five times a day! Kofi himself wanted to bring Kouassi with him because he loves all his children very much.*

After hearing about this family, I asked Amenan if a mother might feel jealous or sad if her young child obviously preferred her husband over herself. Amused by my question, she countered: “If a child prefers the father over the mother, this is very good for the mother : she can get more work done!”

Beyond their husbands, Beng mothers typically identify one or more girls or childless young women who agree to take care of their babies much of the time after the first two months. For times when the main babysitter proves unavailable, a mother needs substitutes. To attract potential babysitters, she decorates her infant every morning and evening with jewelry and makeup. Who could resist offering to hold and take care of such a beautiful baby?



In addition to attracting babysitters, mothers share the task of breastfeeding. If a breastfeeding mother leaves her child with someone else, the moment the infant seems hungry, fusses, or cries, any nearby nursing mother offers the baby her breast. If no breastfeeder is nearby, any woman – even one who is post-menopausal – offers her empty breast to the baby. In effect, she uses her breast as a pacifier. In these ways, mothers teach babies that even the breastfeeding relationship that links them somatically is not exclusive. The body part that is the source of most of a baby's nourishment, and a key to her survival, is replaceable.

Some mothers deploy yet another striking somatic practice. I had asked my friend, Amenan, if anyone can predict which babies will become clingy. She explained: "Those who will become [like that] look [a lot] at their mother... from... one month old." She noticed this about her own children and explained that she deliberately broke their gaze:

*When [my] babies look in my eyes I blow in their face. This way, they don't become gbane... If you get used to a child, you can't work. There are times to work. You can't, if you have a child [you like too much]. You should give him to somebody else. It's not good to like the child too much.*

In this technique, we see a child-rearing agenda that intentionally aims to reduce mother-child attachments – not out of cruelty, but practicality.

From the methods enumerated, most healthy Beng babies become emotionally secure with wide social networks from an early age. Beng mothers themselves appreciate this trait. In explaining to me that none of her children had ever exhibited signs of being overly attached to her, one mother told me proudly, "they go to [other] people, they don't cling [to me]" ("ηο ta sɔŋ klɛ-ŋà gbàne").

Indeed, most Beng babies seem equally comfortable and happy with their mothers and, generally, anyone else. I watched infants passed daily from person to person--including, sometimes, to strangers. In a quantitative study I conducted observing babies during 41 two-and-a-quarter-hour sessions, the modal time that babies spent with a caretaker was five minutes. The next most common duration was ten minutes. In almost all instances, the babies I observed went willingly to their new (temporary) caretakers. Only rarely did they cry or otherwise express fear, anxiety or anger when their mothers disappeared from view. Later, when reunited with their mothers, babies might smile with mild pleasure at the sight of their mothers – especially if they were hungry and had not breastfed while under their babysitter's care. But that pleasure was fairly quiet. Rarely did I observe dramatic relief after reuniting with a mother. Separating from one's mother should be a routine event that happens without stress many times over in a typical Beng baby's day. Accordingly, in the Beng view, a mother's return should not normally cause major rejoicing for a baby.

### *The Questions Posed by Kwame*

In short a large assortment of practices discourage strong mother-child attachments, and encourage multiple attachments between a young child and many other people. These practices allow us to answer the question: Why do most children in some communities exhibit strong attachment to their mothers, while most children in other communities do NOT exhibit such an attachment? That is the sort of question that begged for an anthropological approach. But we should also acknowledge the question that psychologists might prefer: Why do some, but not all, children in a particular community exhibit what is locally considered unusual, if not condemned, behavior?

In other words, there are two dimensions to the “Why” question concerning humans’ behavior: Why, at the individual level? And, Why, at the sociological level? Psychologists are especially good at addressing such questions at the individual level; anthropologists are typically stronger at the sociological level. So, let us see what happens when we combine disciplinary forces to revisit the case of baby Kwame. The psychologist would probably ask: What are the circumstances that might produce the relatively unusual *gbane* baby who, unlike most of his or her peers, does not “go to [other] people” (as the Beng put it)?

### *Learning More from Kwame*

In fact, as the psychologist might predict, Kwame’s biography was marked by special circumstances. His mother, Au, had had a boyfriend as a teenager – but her father forced her to become the second wife of a distant cousin from another village, following local “arranged marriage” rules. Deeply unhappy, Au resisted this arranged marriage mightily for over a year. In the end, she relented. But her rebellions took a toll on her family, whose habits of disputes and alcohol consumption worsened.

Soon after she finally settled in with her arranged-marriage husband, Au gave birth, but the infant died. A second baby died, as well. A third infant survived – but, while still young, this girl was sent off to join her mother’s younger sister, who was working on a distant plantation. Kwame – the fourth child Au bore – was thus the only living child currently residing with his mother.

Under these circumstances, one might expect that Au might become more intensely attached to Kwame than most Beng mothers would. She had only one child with her, having lost two to the cruelty of death, and a third to being foster-raised; and she remained unhappily married as a second wife, living somewhat far from her natal village, and her dysfunctional family – from whom, in any case, she remained somewhat estranged. If a mother in these circumstances might be tempted to “over-invest” in her infant son – to adapt the language of Western popular psychology – one might equally expect that, in turn, the baby might, likewise, “over-invest” in his mother, becoming (in the Beng view) excessively attached to her, and cautious around strangers. In short, examining the contours of Kwame’s unusual case may help us to understand what sort of relatively unusual social universe may produce



“stranger anxiety” in a society whose members routinely – and successfully – discourage its onset in most infants.

Kwame’s case offers a good example of how perspectives and questions from anthropology and psychology can speak to each other – and how a combination of both disciplines can help illuminate data encompassing both “typical” and “atypical” individuals.

### **A CASE FOR THE MARRIAGE OF ANTHROPOLOGY AND PSYCHOLOGY**

For variable periods in different national contexts, our two disciplines have frequently pursued separate paths. Anthropologists critiqued psychologists for confining their studies to lab-based studies of middle-class, Euro-Americans, while avoiding the daily contexts of their lives. Psychologists critiqued anthropologists for largely avoiding studying children altogether, and for focusing on tiny samples of small, obscure populations. Each critique had its merits.

Given that all humans begin as children, the texture of children’s lives ought to be of central significance to all practitioners of the human sciences. Yet until recently, and with notable exceptions in particular historical eras and nations (*cf.* Bibliography below), relatively few anthropologists have considered the lives of children worthy of investigation (although the French school has a consistent and robust history of addressing children’s lives). For a long time, this failure produced a serious deficiency compromising the ability to produce a reliable and comprehensive data base documenting all human life stages.

Nowadays, children no longer constitute an invisible research subject for anthropologists, especially in the USA, where scholars have finally begun paying attention to them in significant numbers. Within the American Anthropological Association, an “Anthropology of Childhood and Youth” group now counts some 1,500 members. The group publishes a lively and informative monthly newsletter, *Neos*, and a monthly blog. Since 2010, the group has organized a more-or-less-annual conference – including, once, jointly with the Society for Psychological Anthropology.

All these activities suggest surging interest in childhood by anthropologists. Indeed, anthropologist David Lancy has recently published a second edition of *The Anthropology of Childhood* that takes stock of all this burgeoning research. The book was reviewed in the *New York Times*, as was another recent book by the eminent anthropologist-couple, Robert and Sarah LeVine. Together, these two notable reviews have brought much popular attention in the USA to the growing field of the anthropology of childhood.

Especially in the USA, much work remains to be done by anthropologists on infants and toddlers, but a great deal of work now exists exploring the lives of older children, teenagers, and young adults. Considering the broader political context, recent gun-control protests of high school students in the USA may well awaken a new generation of youth researchers among anthropologists.

If anthropologists are now paying much more attention to children, developmental psychologists, for their part, have begun acknowledging that 95% of the world's children do not look, behave, or live like middle-class, Euro-American children. At first, these early efforts by psychologists were ignored by their discipline. More recently, increasing numbers of psychologists have been making similar arguments.

With the welcome, growing attention to both our disciplines' gaps, anthropology and psychology stand to gain enormously from a sustained conversation to chart a more ethical and culturally sensitive research agenda. Thankfully, in recent years, the two disciplines have engaged in productive conversations that take the other discipline's strengths into account.

### ***The Example of A World of Babies***

I discovered how productive this conversation might be when I co-taught a course on The Anthropology and Psychology of Infants with developmental psychologist, Judy DeLoache, back in 1995. The course proved so successful that we worked with our students to expand and strengthen their course papers, which we published as a book (DeLoache & Gottlieb 2000).

Both the first and second editions of that book have become a popular text in many psychology, anthropology, and other classes at universities in the USA and Europe. The popularity of the two editions suggests that readers curious to understand young children's lives recognize that the experiences of all babies are not interchangeable, and they want to understand what might explain the differences<sup>3</sup>. Most developmental psychology textbooks focus on lab-based studies of Euro-American babies, and Western students apparently long to understand the actual lives of all kinds of babies, not just the behavior of Euro-American babies in laboratories. A combination of the questions asked by anthropologists and psychologists, and the methods used by both groups, offer a rich approach to address that curiosity.

That said, when we first began working on *A World of Babies* in the late 1990s, our interdisciplinary collaboration on childhood was unusual. In fact, Judy worried that she might become an outcaste in her discipline precisely because she had teamed up with an anthropologist and was looking at babies around the world, beyond those studied in American labs. But in the past twenty or so years, many more collaborations have produced a great deal of exciting and scientifically robust research. In the remaining pages, I offer something of a quick "cook's tour" of some of the promising work on childhood cross-culturally now being done by scholars in both fields who are aware of the other discipline. I believe that, collectively, this work merits the welcome moniker of a "new childhood studies."

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<sup>3</sup>The Facebook page for the book's new edition has attracted some 725,000 visitors since its creation in September 2016) (<https://www.facebook.com/WOBBook/>).

## ***From Cultural Psychology to The New Childhood Studies***

We could probably say that the modern, interdisciplinary field of children's studies was founded at Brooklyn College of the City University of New York in fall 1991. Two years later, a major international journal in the field, *Childhood*, debuted. It is still going strong, having recently celebrated its 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary. And since 2011, a new peer-reviewed journal has arisen, *Global Studies of Childhood*, with editors in Hong Kong and Australia.

In the USA, dozens of universities now offer childhood studies “modules,” minors, or concentrations. Quite a few masters-level graduate programs in childhood studies have sprung up across Europe and the USA. One such program at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology describes its focus this way:

*[The] MPhil in Childhood Studies aims to provide students with an understanding of the relationship between childhood and culture as well as the dynamics between economic, social and political conditions and children's livelihoods and welfare in different contexts (<https://www.ntnu.edu/studies/mpchild>).*

The first doctoral program in childhood studies was created at Rutgers University in New Jersey, in 2008, and a doctoral path in international childhood Studies is now offered at the Department of Geography, Environment and Development Studies at Birkbeck College in London, among others. The program promises<sup>4</sup>:

*(...) you will consider how global forces, including society and economy, international development and war, shape the experiences of children and young people worldwide. You will also explore other factors that shape childhood, including class, gender and ethnicity. By the end of the course, you will have an advanced understanding of how the complex interaction of the global and the local shape the experience of childhood.*

Another graduate program, at Trinity College in Ireland, is currently offering generous scholarships for graduate students to pursue doctoral research on “social inequalities, child development, and longitudinal research.” In short, the new field of childhood studies is thriving as an academic discipline in the academy.

In some ways, what I am calling the “new childhood studies” draws from the field of “cultural psychology.” First named as such by eminent psychologist Jerome Bruner, *cultural psychology* offered a fresh approach to all areas of psychology. Anthropologist Nancy Lutkehaus (2008) recently chronicled the important impact that engaging with an anthropological approach had on Bruner as he developed his cultural approach to psychology. In effect, practitioners of cultural psychology such as Richard Shweder aim to combine anthropology's expertise in local contexts around the globe with psychology's longstanding interest in universal components of human development, including childhood.

That said, “cultural psychology” does not just focus on children or parents. In that sense, what I am calling “the new childhood studies” might be seen as a branch of “cultural psychology.”

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<sup>4</sup> [http://www.bbk.ac.uk/study/2019/postgraduate/programmes/TMSCHIYD\\_C](http://www.bbk.ac.uk/study/2019/postgraduate/programmes/TMSCHIYD_C)

And, as I have suggested, the new childhood studies is encouraging exciting conversations linking anthropologists and developmental psychologists, in particular. Some especially strong writing has focused on a field of study that has gained great prominence within developmental psychology: attachment theory.

Why this topic? As some colleagues and I have recently written in a co-authored article (Rosabal-Coto *et al.* 2017):

*[A]ttachment theory has had an inordinate influence on a wide range of professions concerned with children... inside and outside the United States... attachment theory has been used as the basis for child-rearing manuals and has influenced programs and policies... to form legal decisions that affect families.*

Addressing the enormous influence that attachment theory has had globally, four recent books rethink the theory's philosophical, ethical, and empirical foundations. The first two books collect essays by scholars in anthropology and psychology critiquing attachment theory for being grounded in a seriously flawed set of assumptions (Otto & Keller 2014; Quinn & Mageo 2013).

The most obvious critique offered by the contributors to these two collections is that attachment theory claims to have universal relevance but is based overwhelmingly on research with middle-class, Euro-American babies. These babies tend to grow up in small, two-generation families, without much social support beyond the mother's intensive care. In that sense, the theory is Eurocentric insofar as it ignores the undeniable fact that child-rearing practices vary tremendously around the globe. Without paying attention to the local structure of the family, as well as local child-rearing practices and goals, applying "attachment theory" mechanically to communities beyond the urban West inappropriately harnesses research findings that are then used by the designers of intervention programs that risk doing far more harm than good.

A third recent book by historian of science, Marga Vicedo (2013), interrogates the assumptions of "attachment theory" by casting them into a historical and social era that renders the theory very much a product of its time and place – rather than a timeless theory with universal relevance.

Soon after those three books appeared, the Ernst Strüngmann Forum, a research organization in Frankfurt, sponsored a gathering of scholars from around the world, to further rethink attachment theory from multiple disciplines. An intensive week of conversations and writing among four research teams – of some ten interdisciplinary scholars each – resulted in a fourth book (Bard & Keller 2017) collecting essays that look critically at attachment issues from evolutionary, psychological, anthropological, and other perspectives.

Some years before attending that workshop, I had written a chapter for a book entitled, "Is it Time to Detach from Attachment Theory?" (Gottlieb 2014). When I conceived that title, I assumed my answer to the question I posed was – "Yes – attachment theory has outlived its usefulness." I am no longer so sure. Rather than announcing its death, the productive conversations my colleagues and I have been

conducting across disciplinary boundaries in recent years have convinced me that new ethnographic research into young children's daily lives that takes local contexts into account may actually enrich attachment theory – as long as “attachment theorists” are willing to consider these comparative contexts... and, following the scientific method, are willing to change the theory to accommodate new data.

And these interdisciplinary conversations suggest that is increasingly the case. After finishing co-authoring our chapter critiquing the theoretical foundations of “attachment theory” from an ethnographic perspective (Morelli & Chaudhary *et al.* 2017), our team realized that we needed to account for how attachment theory has been misused around the globe by well-meaning policy specialists relying on this scientific body of work. So we co-authored a second chapter devoted to this critical issue (Rosabal-Coto *et al.* 2017).

We found the process of co-authoring these two, long pieces so fruitful that we co-authored three more pieces on related topics. The first two pieces offered extended commentaries on recent articles that purported to accommodate local contexts – but that, we thought, failed to do so adequately (Morelli & Bard *et al.* 2018; Keller *et al.* 2018). The last piece we co-authored offers a new, critical reflection on the basic impulse behind “parenting interventions” across the global South (Morelli & Quinn *et al.* 2018). In critiquing “attachment theory,” it has become clear to us that the sorts of parenting interventions that large government and non-government organizations alike are propagating globally are often wildly inappropriate, given local conditions. Through these five texts, we have expanded beyond our original topic of “attachment theory” and have tackled broader issues permeating developmental psychology.

Our group has begun looking more systematically at other parenting inventions beyond those pertaining to “attachment.” Two members of our group have recently co-organized a conference panel aiming to initiate a new era of research on global interventions into parenting practices in communities beyond those of middle-class, Euro-Americans (Scheidecker, Murray & Sarcinelli 2018).

Another international group of interdisciplinary scholars that partly overlaps with the first group I have mentioned has been meeting online over the past year. Our multi-disciplinary group of some 36 scholars interested in childhood includes 17 developmental or community psychologists and 7 cultural anthropologists, as well as 11 researchers in 8 other fields (medicine-4; education-3; biological anthropology-1; medical anthropology-1; history of science-1; social policy-1; human development-1; statistics-1). And we are based in ten countries across the globe, from the US (22) and Canada (3), to Colombia (1), South Africa (4), Zambia (1), Kenya (1), Germany (1), the UK (1), Japan (1), and India (1).

With this geographical and disciplinary diversity, our online conversations have proven extraordinarily stimulating as well as mutually instructive. Whatever our specific training, we start from an insistence that cultural research, psychology, and global interventions into children's lives are all in serious need of more self-critical



and ethically attuned attention to how human development and family practices take shape across enormously varied socio-cultural settings and dynamic political challenges. Our e-conversations have proven so fruitful that, last year, developmental psychologist Frank Kessel and I coordinated an effort to plan a seminar on “Culture, ethics, and global childhood interventions: An interdisciplinary conversation.” The key questions we raised include:

- When partnering with international funding agencies, have childhood researchers effectively balanced scholarly and professional commitments with the needs and wishes of the communities in which they seek engagement?
- Have scholars of children’s lives thoughtfully responded to communities that object to being “over-researched and under-rewarded”?
- Given that we humans both create, and are created by, social norms and communities, what ethical principles should govern research and interventions with children living in diverse cultural communities and political regimes around the globe?

Our interdisciplinary group has proposed addressing such questions primarily through the lens of policy initiatives that target families and communities in diverse global settings. We think that is just the beginning.

## CONCLUSION

A recent, popular article online has proclaimed that: “knowledge about different cultures is shaking the foundations of psychology.” (Geeraert 2018) The catchy and ironic acronym, “WEIRD,” has recently been evoked to challenge claims of a universal human nature. Coined in 2010 (Henrich, Heine & Norenzayan 2010), the phrase cleverly highlights a bizarre and unethical situation: research with 5% of the world’s population – middle-class Euro-Americans – is routinely and uncritically used to make generalizations about the other 95% of the world’s population. Describing the over-researched population as WEIRD – standing for “White-Educated-Industrialized-Rich-[from]-Democratic-[countries]” – is a brilliant way to turn universalizing claims of earlier developmental psychologists on their head and indicate just how “weird,” or statistically unrepresentative, this group actually is, vis-à-vis the world’s population of 7.6 billion people. In other words, although this small group of research subjects (in which I happen to be a native) is a statistical outlier, it has stowed away on the ship of universality. The ironically memorable catch-phrase, WEIRD, may now successfully be galvanizing a generation of developmental psychologists to take seriously the enormous difference that local context makes in shaping childhood experiences and beyond.

From the online conversations that my interdisciplinary, international colleagues, and I have conducted, we expect to plan new projects to deepen and sharpen what is fast becoming an authoritative critique of research among, and interventions involving, families in dissimilar cultural contexts. We imagine a future seminar grounded in conceptual analysis of illustrative cases –“attachment theory,” linguistic



interventions into families surrounding supposed “word gaps” between wealthy and impoverished families, and other issues. We aim for publications intended for scholarly, public, and policy-oriented readerships alike. In short, our group aims to reshape the direction of multiple disciplines, policies, and practices. The long-term goal is to formulate methods that prioritize ethical principles in studying and strengthening the lives of children and their families across diverse political regimes and cultural settings.

The growth of academic disciplines has certainly had its rewards. But, given that they exclude at the same time that they include, all boundaries (whether physical or conceptual) by definition have limitations. This goes for disciplinary boundaries as much as national frontiers. Recognizing the advantages of creatively collaborating across disciplines, scholars in practical fields such as health care now insist on interdisciplinary approaches for the safety of their patients; engineers now study best practices for interdisciplinary approaches to training intellectually nimble students; and iconic business leaders such as Steve Jobs have made their mark by insisting on interdisciplinary collaboration<sup>5</sup>. Considering the wildly creative nature of children, any researcher in childhood studies stands to gain invaluable new perspectives when collaborating with colleagues trained to ask new questions, assume new realities, and deploy new methods.

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<sup>5</sup> Institute of medicine, committee on the work environment for nurses and patient safety 2004 “Interdisciplinary collaboration, team functioning, and patient safety,” Appendix B in *Keeping patients safe: Transforming the work environment of nurses*. Washington, D.C.: National Academies Press; Richter D.M. & Paretti M.C. 2009 “Identifying barriers to and outcomes of interdisciplinarity in the engineering classroom,” *European Journal of Engineering Education* 34(1): 29-45; Houser C. 2014 “Cross-pollination: The value of interdisciplinary friction,” September 24, <http://3daystartup.org/blog/2014/09/25/cross-pollination-the-value-of-interdisciplinary-friction/>

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