

## Why *Anthropology of Childhood*? A brief history of an emerging discipline

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**Abstract:** The paper has four goals: to refute the claim that anthropologists have not studied childhood; to provide a cursory history of the field; to provide an organizational schema for reviewing the literature in the field and; to suggest a strategy for future scholarship in the anthropology of childhood.

**Keywords:** Trends, anthropology, childhood, history

**Résumé :** L'article poursuit quatre buts : le premier consiste à réfuter l'argument selon lequel les anthropologies n'auraient pas étudié l'enfance ; le second propose un rapide historique du champ ; le troisième propose un schéma organisationnel pour recenser la littérature de ce champ ; et le quatrième suggère une stratégie pour les futurs travaux en anthropologie de l'enfance.

**Mots-clés :** Courants, anthropologie, enfance, histoire

### Introduction

One of the forces that motivated me to write the first overview of the anthropology of childhood (Lancy 2008) was an article by Hirschfeld (2002) in *American Anthropologist* claiming that anthropology had ignored childhood.



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## Why Don't Anthropologists Like Children?

**ABSTRACT** Few major works in anthropology focus specifically on children, a curious state of affairs given that virtually all contemporary anthropology is based on the premise that culture is learned, not inherited. Although children have a remarkable and undisputed capacity for learning generally, and learning culture in particular, in significant measure anthropology has shown little interest in them and their lives. This article examines the reasons for this lamentable lacunae and offers theoretical and empirical reasons for re-

Figure 1. Hirshfeld Article (*American Anthropologist*)

I knew this to be far from the case but I also knew that the field was fragmented and that scholars might be aware of a few of the parts but not the sum. My 2008 volume includes nearly 1350 sources and, since publication, an additional 250 have been located and annotated. Other evidence of a viable discipline is the proliferation of new organizations,

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[www.usu.edu/anthro/davidlancypages/index.html](http://www.usu.edu/anthro/davidlancypages/index.html),

Book: [www.anthropologyofchildhood.usu.edu/](http://www.anthropologyofchildhood.usu.edu/), Blog: [www.psychologytoday.com/blog/benign-neglect](http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/benign-neglect)

conferences, academic programs and journals devoted to the subject. In this paper, I will try to briefly catalog the very rich archive of research in the field.



Figure 2. Archive (Lancy photo)

One reason for the apparent dearth of work on childhood in anthropology is the fragmented nature of the field, as shown in the following graphic. This may account for the claim that anthropologists don't study childhood.

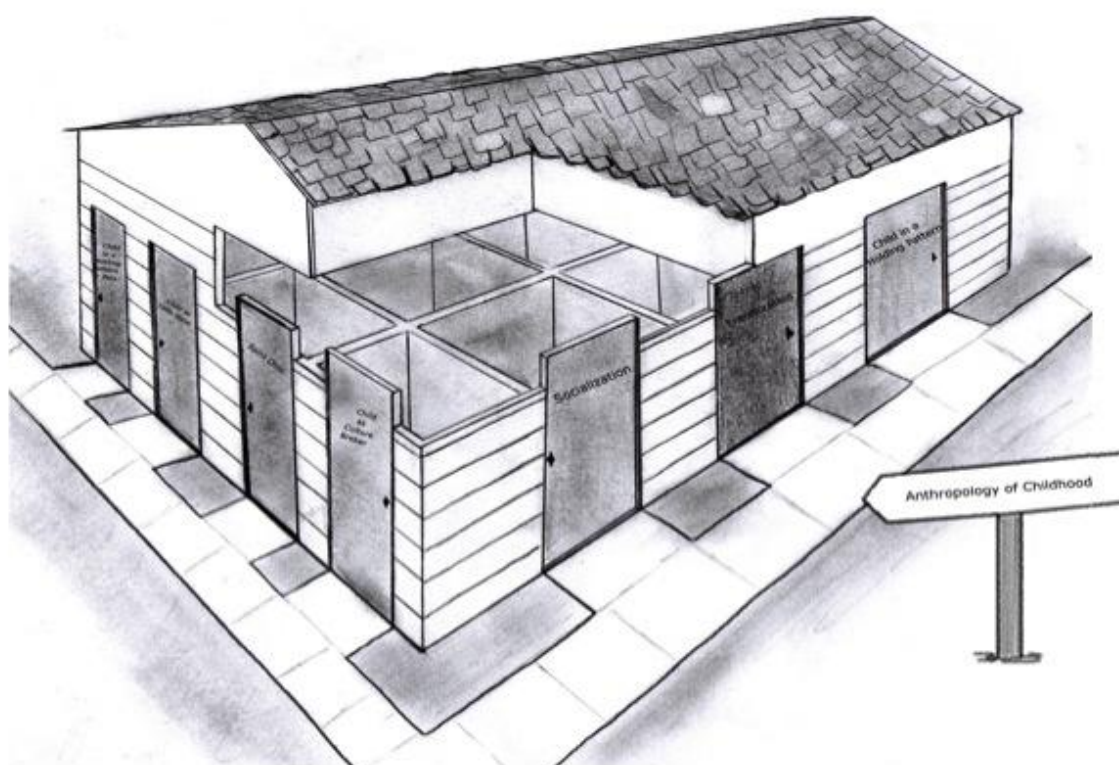


Figure 3. Fragmented Field (Joshua Clementz graphic)

The building might “house”. The Anthropology of Childhood but it is ephemeral as all one sees are the separate doors/cubicles of the more narrowly focused enterprises with no interconnections. The best evidence I can offer for this claim is the rarity of cross-citations and very brief, shallow literature reviews in much of the published work - past and present.

The second model shows the possibility of these fragmented entities participating in an intellectual “commons” labeled Anthropology of Childhood. To help us organize these fragments, we might start by asking the question, “What is the purpose of childhood?” Since childhood is a unique aspect of the species any study has the potential to contribute to our understanding of this question. Boas (1912) was the first to make this assertion 100 years ago. “Boas formulated a developmental perspective suggesting not only that human growth is influenced by environmental factors but also that, given the gradual maturation of the human nervous system, the child’s ‘mental makeup’ must also be affected by ‘the social and geographical environment’ (LeVine 2007: 249)”. Barry Bogin (1999) has been the most articulate voice in recent dialogue calling for an examination of the question. And anthropologist Mel Konner (2010) who studied !Kung infants 40 years ago, has just published his magnum opus on this precise question.



Figure 4. Integrated Field (Joshua Clementz graphic)

I have found several distinct strands of scholarship which deal with various approaches to the question “What is the purpose of childhood?”. Roughly half reflect folk, emic or insider perspectives, half etic perspectives. Each answers the question in a somewhat different way.

### **Socialization: developing the child’s character, temperament**

An early answer to the question was “socialization”. Childhood exists to afford the opportunity for the child to be shaped to fit the modal personality or social role in a particular society. The “culture and personality” school produced a great deal of research focused on the relationship between early experience in culture and later personality or character. This work was inspired by Freud’s theory even if the anthropologist didn’t always hew to the original doctrine. Mead’s (1935) *Sex and Temperament in Three Primitive Societies* represents a classic example of the genre. She discusses socialization for gender roles and, also contrasts Mundugumor and Arapesh child rearing. The former experience harsh training in childhood that prepares them to be warriors, while the Arapesh people are nurturing and indulgent - hence creating citizens for a society that is egalitarian and cooperative. Greater Freudian influence is evident in other classic works from this era including Dennis’ *The Hopi Child* (1940) and DuBois’ *People of Alor* (1944). The attempt to use anthropology to explain national character eventually undermined the culture and personality school. A famous case was Margaret Mead and Geoffrey Gorer’s argument (which Mead discussed in *American Anthropologist* in 1954) that the Russian character arose from their practice of tightly swaddling babies. In fact, they advised the US government that the Russian character, because of their swaddling practices, demanded tight control. Hence, Russians weren’t anxious to embrace democracy and throw over the Soviet system - only conquest could end the cold war.

John Whiting “rescued” the culture and personality approach. His *Becoming Kwoma* (1941) was firmly grounded in the work of his predecessors but his study is a wide-ranging and thorough ethnography of childhood. I have found it particularly helpful on the topic of children’s work. With Beatrice Whiting, John Whiting launched wave after wave of cross-cultural comparative research notably including *Children of Six Cultures* (1975).

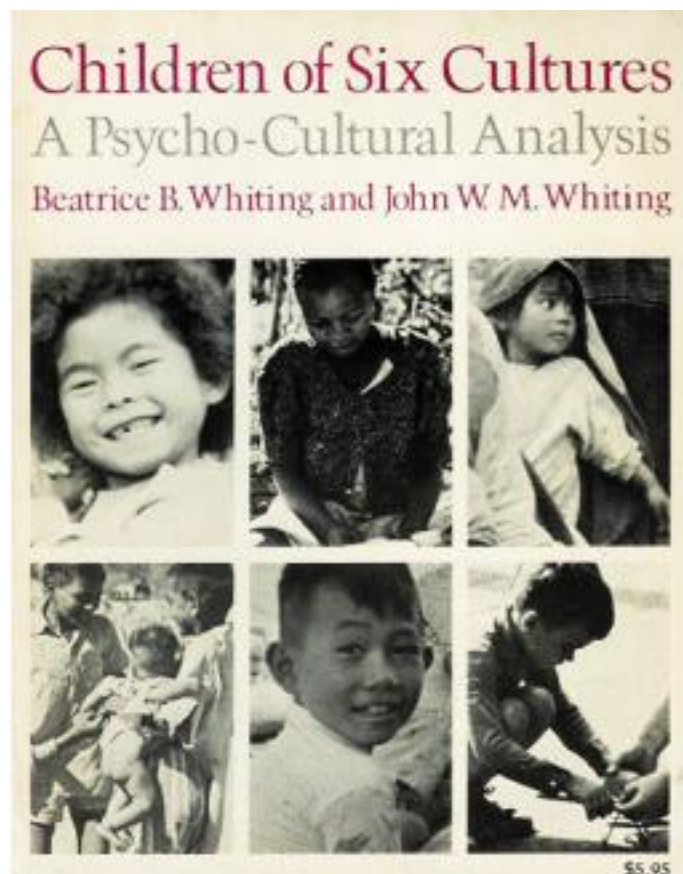


Figure 5. Children of Six Cultures (Book cover)

While continuing to focus on socialization, the research spawned by the Whitings broadened in scope to include virtually all aspects of children’s experiences not just weaning and toilet training - Freudian favorites. The focus on the shaping of character shifted to a focus on the *socialization of affect*. Methods included ethnography as well as systematic observation and comparison across a limited set of behavioral categories. The volume of research produced by this Harvard wellspring is staggering, taking into account that many of the original Whiting cohort, including, notably, Bob LeVine and Barbara Rogoff, went on to start dynasties of their own. Also noteworthy are Sara Harkness and Charlie Super who have employed systematic observation and comparison but also added the important idea of “parental ethnotheory” which transforms what had been an etic or outsider’s perspective into an emic or insider’s perspective. Their work and that of their colleagues is highlighted in *Parents Cultural Belief Systems* (1996).

Socialization continues, robustly, to serve as the home base of many anthropologists who study childhood. Bolin (2006) documented children learning expected patterns of social behavior in the High Andes; Herdt (2005) analyzed PNG initiation rites that separate boys from their mothers and turn them into misogynists; Gaskins and Paradise (2010) posit superior observation abilities in children who routinely traverse a varied landscape and;

Christina Toren (1990) studied Fijian children's growing understanding of the social hierarchy and their place in it.

### **Socialization: experiences shaping the child's cognitive and linguistic tools**

Harvard has long been a center for the study of cultural influences on childhood. Several of Jerome Bruner's students - notably Patricia Greenfield and Jackie Goodnow - carried out early field research that focused on the socialization of cognitive skills. This research was rooted in the nature vs. nurture debate. Piaget and Bruner had both theorized regarding the processes whereby children acquire adult cognitive or information processing abilities but neither made much allowance for the influence of culture. In the late 60's and through the 70s two long-term studies of children's cognitive development were undertaken in Liberia and Papua New Guinea (PNG). Both used the methods employed by Piaget and Bruner as well as other cognitivists along with parallel but culturally adapted techniques and participant observation. From the Liberian studies (Cole et al. 1975) two important findings emerged. First, cognitive "development," as envisioned by Piaget and others, was not universal.

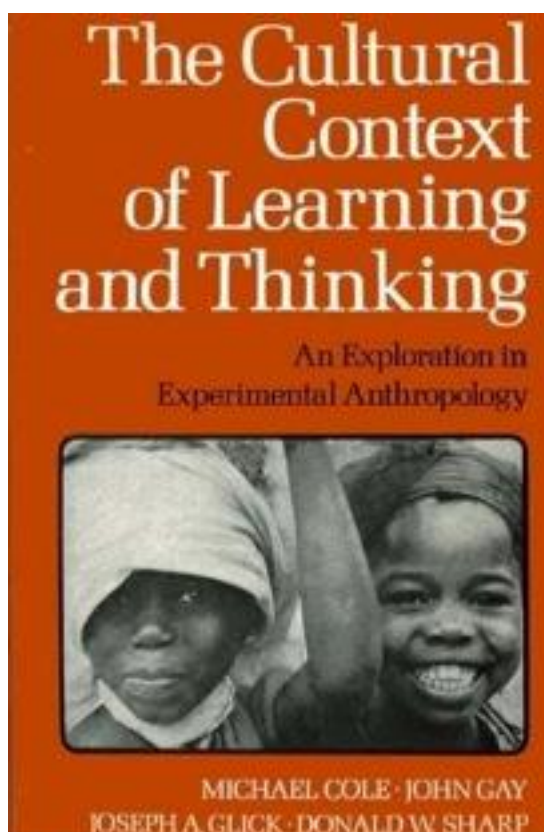


Figure 6. The Cultural Context of Learning and Thinking (Book cover)

In particular, both the Liberian and PNG studies found no evidence of Piaget's concrete and formal operations, except among students with at least 4-6 years of schooling. It seemed that much of the cognitive transformations posited by Piaget and others were due to the information processing requirements of modern education and were not hard-wired. Second, the PNG studies (Lancy 1983) also revealed clear ties between aspects of the information processing load in the society and children's information processing skills. And, lastly, emic or folk theories regarding the nature of "intelligent" and efficient handling of information were uncovered (Lancy & Strathern 1980). This line of research gave rise to alternative

formulations of cognition that took into account the kinds of intellectual problems faced in different cultures moving away from a “one size fits all” understanding of children’s thought. Debate regarding the relationship between culture and cognition was not only driven by data from the field but also through scholarly encounters between Levi-Strauss, Piaget and an army of philosophers. Two landmark volumes are Levi-Strauss’ *The Savage Mind* (Le Pensee Sauvage) (1968) and Gardiner’s *The Quest for Mind* (1973).

Research on cognitive socialization was paralleled by important work on language socialization. Anthropological linguists carry out meticulous recordings of discourse directed towards and in the presence of children. Ochs’ (1988) work in Samoa and Schieffelin’s (1990) in PNG are cornerstones in this field. As with the cognitive studies, scholars found that many assumptions about universals of language acquisition were suspect, such as motherese or baby talk and “teaching” children the native tongue. All were assumed to be universal and essential for children’s acquisition of language until shown not to be in numerous specific cases (Schieffelin & Ochs 1987).

### **Enculturation: learning to make a living**

“Enculturation” is juxtaposed with socialization. Where the latter is about children becoming competent social beings or members of their society, the former seeks to discover how the child learns to make a living. Meyer Fortes’ (1938) *Social and Psychological Aspects of Education in Taleland* was a landmark volume that inspired many others. He used the term “education” in lieu of enculturation and, following publication of his work, an “Education” chapter appeared in many subsequent ethnographies - such as Edel’s *The Chiga of Uganda* (1957). Others working in this tradition whose focus was primarily on childhood include: Otto Raum (1940) in Tanzania; Audrey Richards, studying Bemba girls’ enculturation, published in *Chisungu* in 1956; my study of Kpelle children learning to work through play (Lancy 1996) and; Greenfield’s (2005) long-term study of Mayan girls learning weaving.

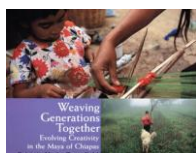


Figure 7. Weaving Generations Together (Book Cover)

In more recent years, the study of enculturation has been enriched by the contributions of archaeologists. This includes, as two examples from many, Patty Crown’s (2002) study of Puebloan girls’ becoming potters - from a study of ceramic remains - and Ferguson’s (2003) analysis of the acquisition of flint-knapping.

These studies of enculturation all operate from the view that the function of childhood is to provide a long, relatively stress-free period during which children very gradually learn the local repertoire of skills and knowledge typically mastered by all adults. However, systematic study in recent years shows that children are usually “precocious”. They pick up survival skills easily and early (Lancy, in press; Marlowe 2010). Hence, the most popular answer to the “What is the Purpose of Childhood?” question is now suspect. However, you will still see this asserted in 99% of child development textbooks that claim the elongated period of juvenility evolved so children could learn their culture. Also, recent research shows that adults rarely play a prominent role in children’s skill acquisition, other more likely candidates include observation, imitation, make-believe, emulating older siblings and the chore curriculum (Lancy 2010). The following examples support the generalizations just made.

- “Among Kewa horticulturalists, children are competent gardeners by 9 (Lancy 1983: 121-2)”.
- “Mer Island children are “fairly proficient” reef foragers by 6 (Bird & Bird 2002: 262)”.
- “In Tibet, mixed herds tended by 6-7 year-olds (Gielen 1993: 426)”.
- “10 year old Aka pygmies have mastered some 50 foraging skills (Hewlett & Cavalli-Sforza 1986: 930)”.
- “[Zapotec-Mexico-children's excellent command of ethnobotany is described as] everyday knowledge acquired without apparent effort at an early age by virtually everyone in town (Hunn 2002: 610)”.
- “[Inuit ] children produce a large percentage of their own food supply by gathering shellfish (Zeller 1987: 545)”.
- “Hadza children not only start foraging at 4, they quickly develop competence in fruit and tuber acquisition and processing (Blurton-Jones & Marlowe 2002)”.

When we turn to the enculturation of more complex skill sets such as pottery, weaving and blacksmithing, a more formal process, such as apprenticeship, may be evident (Lancy 2011). Among the critical works that document the acquisition of complex skill sets I'd include *East is a Big Bird* (Gladwin, 1970) on learning to build canoes and to navigate on Puluwat; Köhler's (2008) monograph on girls learning pottery-making in Côte d'Ivoire and; Marchand's (2001) ethnography of the minaret construction apprenticeship in Yemen. These long-term, in-depth studies of enculturation processes provide a window on rare examples of “formal” education in traditional societies. The formal aspects include the identification of a distinct “master,” distinct “novice” and a body of knowledge and skill that can't be easily learned without some form of instruction.

### **Child in a holding pattern: maturation**

One of the most widely held *emic* views on the purpose of childhood is that it functions as an external womb or incubator, growing the child until it becomes fully human. I refer to this as the “Holding Pattern” perspective and, from my survey of the ethnographic record, I would assert that this view is held in the majority of societies (the Beng a notable exception - Gottlieb 2004). The perspective is revealed through the treatment of the child in life and in death. Examples of the holding pattern view can be found from around the world, from every type of subsistence system, from various periods in history and as applied from birth to middle childhood (Lancy & Grove 2011).

- “[Among Wari] babies of both sexes are called *arawet*, which translates as ‘still being made’ (Conklin and Morgan 1996: 672)”.
- “[Kpelle] mothers carry their babies on their backs and nurse them frequently but do so without really paying much direct attention to them; they continue working or...socializing (Erchak 1992: 50)”.
- “Lepcha childhood is...a time of obscurity, of being unimportant; children are not taken much notice of and their tastes are little consulted [Gorer 1967: 314]”.
- “[Kerkenneh] babies are not thought to be perceptive or cognizant during this early period (Platt 1988: 274)”.
- “[Asabano] infants are...seen as non-sentient beings... [it was] explained to me that [babies, like] dogs, pigs, chickens, and so forth, ‘do not have thoughts’ (Little 2008: 55)”.
- “[Among the Punan Bah] a child is like an unripe fruit, it must ripen, only then will you know the taste of it (Nicolaise, 1988: 202)”.
- “In the Middle Ages, children were generally ignored until they were no longer children (Crawford 1999: 168)”.



- “[Among the Bakkarwal,] an unsteady toddler who stumbles is not picked up when it cries: ‘it must learn on its own,’ is the argument (Rao 1998: 100)”.

### Child in a holding pattern: internment practices

Complementary to the views expressed re living children, the treatment of stillborn and deceased infants and children also suggests that they are not yet fully human. Mortuary practices among the Tonga show the child only gradually becoming a person.

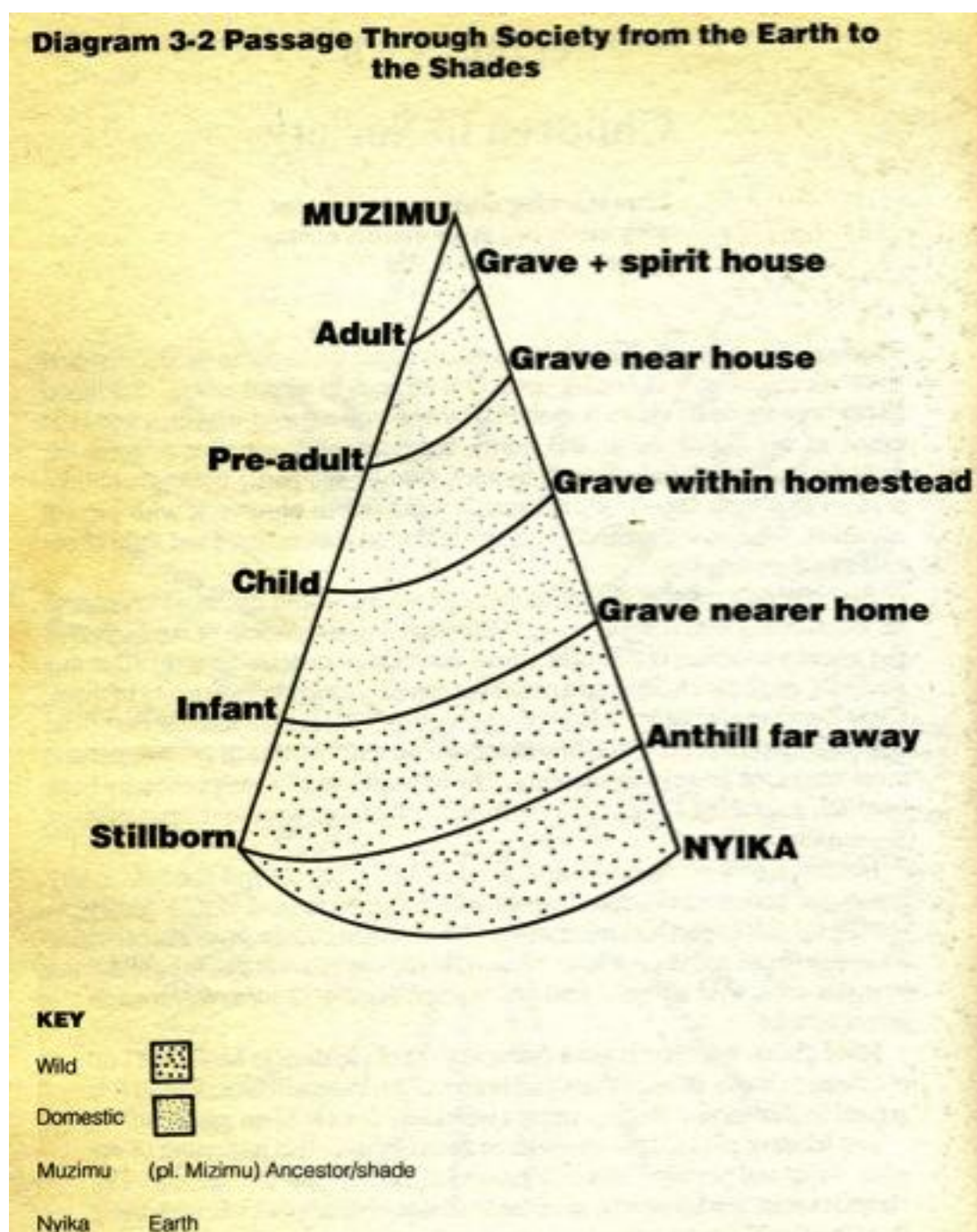


Figure 8. Tonga Lifecycle (Reynolds 1991)

“In the first stage when a [Tonga] child is born dead he/she is returned straight to the earth... sometimes placed in a pot made of earth... and then buried in an anthill far from the homestead... If the infant lives for a week or two before dying, he or she is buried closer to the homestead in a grave, but no formal ritual is observed and only women attend the burial... The death of a child who has cut his teeth is marked by ritual procedure that takes half as long as that followed on the death of an adult, but it is otherwise the same (Reynolds 1991: 98)”.

Folk or emic theories about the nature of childhood are also revealed by internment practices as analyzed by archaeologists and bioarchaeologists (Cohen & Rutter 2008; Lewis 2009). As archaeologists have turned their attention to children, the consistent finding has been that the still-born, infants, and children, up to the age of ten in some cases, are not afforded a full-scale burial with ritual. They may be placed in the camp midden, buried in a shallow grave under the floor or near the house. They are rarely buried with mementos. This suggests that the child is in a holding pattern, not fully human. The study of child remains by archaeologists has proliferated in the last decade but, as yet, no one has ventured to construct a broad survey that would aggregate across the many studies.

### **Child in a holding pattern: play**

Some of the earliest documentation of children in varied cultural contexts comes from descriptions of play. Much of this work implicitly or explicitly sees childhood as a time for purposeless activity, the child passing time in play until it can begin to learn important things or be useful (Schwartzman 1978). In a broad overview of the literature on childhood in anthropology, play and games constitute a significant portion. The Association for the Study of Play began life as The Association for the *Anthropological* Study of Play in 1974. In the organization’s thirty-seven year history it has published an annual volume of studies (e.g. volume 1: Lancy & Tindall 1976) along with Newsletters and Journals. I find it interesting that, by comparison, children at work - an activity that is just as central to childhood as play in most societies - has received far less attention.

Nevertheless, the holding pattern=play perspective is not just held by ethnocentric outsiders but is central to many, if not most, parental ethnotheories of childhood. For example, “With the arrival of the next sibling, *dénanola* (infancy) is over. Now, play begins...and membership in a social group of peers is taken to be critical to *nyinandirangho*, the forgetting of the breast to which the toddler has had free access for nearly two years or more. As one [Mandinka] mother put it, ‘Now she must turn to play’ (Whittemore 1989: 92)”.

### **Child in a holding pattern: growth**

Another common view of childhood and its purpose focuses on the child’s health, growth and physical maturation. Wiley (2004) focuses on the strategies employed, in a difficult environment, to enhance the child’s survival. Élodie Razy (2007) examines the same general issues with, perhaps, a greater attention to culture. Charnov (2001) has constructed one of the best known theoretical arguments. In this theory, based on evolutionary considerations of human life history and reproductive success, the purpose of childhood is to grow into a robust, healthy adolescent capable of a long, successful period of high fertility. John Bock (2001) has fruitfully combined the growth and enculturation models of childhood.

### **Child as a “Little Slave”**

Aside from childhood as a holding pattern, this is the most common “emic” answer to the

question: What is the purpose of childhood? That is when anthropologists observe and query adults and children about the nature of childhood, doing chores or being helpful comes to the fore. For example, Gottlieb represents the typical Beng attitude: “Remember that in our language, one word for ‘child’ really means ‘little slave.’ As soon as the little one can walk confidently, don’t hesitate to send your child on errands in your village or neighborhood (2000: 87)”. From the more traditional ethnographic descriptions of children working, the field has moved to systematic, multi-method analyses that reveal more precisely the contributions of children to farming (Kramer 2005) and foraging (Marlowe 2010) economies. The general conclusion is that children often are expected to make a significant contribution, even as they are learning the requisite skills and growing into the stature and strength to do more adult tasks. And in very recent work on children affected by the processes of globalization, we learn that children may, in fact, be the primary breadwinners in societies where males fulfill only the procreative function of fatherhood and females are busy bearing and nursing more children (Kenney 2007).

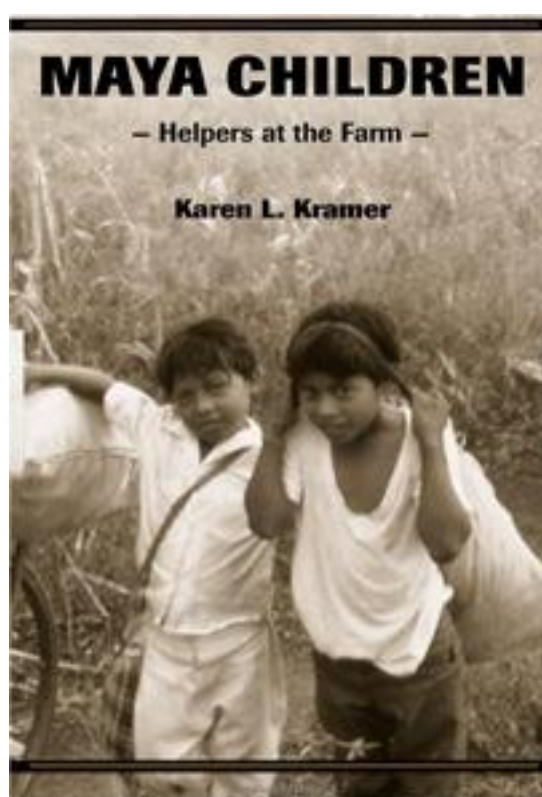


Figure 9. Mayan Children at Work (Book Cover)

### **Child as intermediary: Spirit Child**

One reason for children qua children is widely noted in the literature. Infants are usually seen as being in a liminal state, not fully human, as noted earlier. In numerous cases this liminal state corresponds roughly to the idea of “spirit-child”.

- “Every [Yakutat] baby born is the reincarnation of some maternal relative who has died”. (De Laguna 1965: 5)”.

- “The perceived relationship of [Mende] infants with the world of spirits, generates loyalties in conflict with the world of the living....infants are presumed to develop unusual powers of vision and the powers to move across different sensory domains (Fermé 2001: 198)”.

As such, spirit children can be sent as a messenger to the gods, to the spirit world, to the home of the ancestors, and so on, carrying messages from the living.

- “A [Balinese] child...is like a little god, newly come from...heaven...perhaps an ancestor returned to earth. At three months it is taken for the first time to the temple to make its obeisance at the shrine...the child has a status of maximum innocence and purity (Belo 1949: 15)”.

- “In the Tibetan tradition, it is believed that babies may have special attributes or abilities that adults no longer possess, or that infants may have relations with supernatural elements (Maiden 1997: 127)”.

Not only is this phenomenon found often in the ethnographic record but it is a prominent aspect of many funerary practices in which children are implicated. Frequently finds of child sacrifiants are associated with the construction of sacred buildings where their remains form a critical part of the “foundation deposit”. In Mesoamerican cosmology, the tears of to-be-sacrificed children attract the favorable attention of Tlaloc, god of rain.

- “Children to be sacrificed [at Tenochtitlan] were richly dressed and taken to the hills where a vigil was kept; if the children cried this was considered a good sign since the tears augured rain (Berrelleza & Balderas 2006: 238-9)”.

### **The Child as Culture Broker**

Viewing the child as a culture broker encompasses one major and several minor research traditions. The major tradition is the anthropological study of education. Launched by George Spindler and his students at Stanford, among others, ethnographers quickly discovered that schooling was viewed by both children and adults as an opportunity to channel new resources, especially remittances from successful graduates, into the village. George and Louise Spindler launched the Case Studies in Education and Culture series of small monographs in the late 1960s. One of Spindlers’ students (who was later my mentor) was John Singleton and he was instrumental in launching the Council on Anthropology and Education in the late 1960s. Two well-known examples from the Spindlers’ series are Bruce Grindal’s (1972) *Growing up in Two Worlds: Education and Transition Among the Sisala of Northern Ghana* and Harry Wolcott’s (1967) landmark *Kwakiutl Village and School*. Eventually, 16 were published and I have found valuable material in every single volume.

The child as culture broker is, if anything, a more commonly adopted perspective today, arising from the dramatic culture change encountered by traditional villagers whether as migrants or remaining in place. Amy Stambach (2000) studied educated, young Chaga women and their success in the face of dramatic culture change; Greta Gibson (1988) describes Sikh high school students in California who’re expected to lead their migrant families into the middle class; Orellana (2009) documents Hispanic immigrant children helping non-English speaking family members to cope with life in Los Angeles; Leinaweaver (2009) shows children on the leading edge of change in Peru and; Bourdillion (2000) documents Zimbabwean children earning money to add to the family budget.

### **Conclusion: childhood as a “cultural constraint”**

In the last decade, more and more published work on children in the social sciences, including anthropology, archaeology and history begins with an affirmation of the child’s “agency”. Hirschfeld’s article (2002), mentioned at the outset is one example, another occurs in Trawick’s (2007) *Enemy Lines: Warfare, Childhood, and Play in Batticaloa*, She asserts: “I had no special theory in mind, except that children exercise agency - they knowingly act on

their worlds to change those worlds (5)”. There is a growing cadre who would dump the study of childhood altogether as an unwarranted imposition on what should be children’s unfettered choice in constructing their own character, life-style and life-course. And yet, I find the child agency literature almost useless in terms of advancing understanding and, ultimately, improving the lives of children. I shall expand on these ideas in a subsequent issue of the journal in an article called: “Unmasking Children’s Agency”.

Coming back to the initial issue, why should we bother with constructing an Anthropology of Childhood as opposed to all of these more narrowly focused lines of inquiry? One reason, among many, is Bob LeVine’s notion of the veto. So often, western psychologists and others concerned with children use biased samples and a biased, ethnocentric lens to advance propositions about the nature and purpose of childhood. And, along comes anthropology to set the record straight. Mead may have been the first in debunking widely held certainties about the nature of adolescence (Mead 1928). In two recent publications, I drew on the anthropology of childhood to debunk the myth that mother-child play is universal and essential (Lancy 2007) and, likewise, that young children learn primarily by being *taught* by their parents (Lancy 2010). But, the field is wide open, so to speak, as recent critiques of western social science suggest (Henrich et al. 2010). There are still many misconceptions of childhood that anthropologists should “veto!”.

Childhood is not static - patiently waiting for us to improve our methods and theories. We cannot turn back the clock and study aboriginal childhood. To build a comprehensive anthropology of childhood, we must use whatever windows on children in culture are available, even if the windows are old, cracked and dirty. It is only by incorporating all relevant past research into our present scholarship that we can hope to advance the field and be taken seriously by those who study childhood from other disciplinary perspectives and by those who make policies affecting children.

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