

Promoting an Anthropology of Infants: Some Personal Reflections

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Résumé :

Comme pour la majorité des anthropologues culturels, devenir mère a changé ma vie – pas seulement ma vie de famille (bien sûr) –, mais aussi ma carrière. Etre enceinte, donner la vie et se lancer dans le projet fou d'élever un enfant a fait surgir en moi d'innombrables questions – d'ordre pratique et émotionnel bien sûr, mais également d'ordre intellectuel. Le cadeau que représente un enfant s'est accompagné d'un autre, celui de devenir une anthropologue de la maternité – et, plus globalement, de la parentalité, de la prise en charge, et de l'objet de toute cette affection et ce travail, les enfants eux-mêmes. Dans cet article, je me penche sur ce que la parentalité a changé dans ma perspective de recherche sur la vie sociale et dans ma carrière d'enseignante à l'Université en tant que mentor/maître de stage et professeur. Je conclus avec quelques réflexions sur les plaisirs et les défis que représente la construction d'une étude anthropologique des êtres les plus petits et sociologiquement presque invisibles, les enfants.

Mots-clés : Anthropologie de la petite enfance, carrières biographiques, maternité, théorie féministe

Abstract :

As is the case with the vast majority of cultural anthropologists, I began my field research working with adults. Becoming a mother changed my life - not just my family life (of course), but also my career. Being pregnant, undergoing childbirth, and embarking on the awesome project of raising a child also raised for me countless questions - practical and emotional to be sure, but also intellectual. Along with the gift of a child came a second gift, the gift of becoming an anthropologist of motherhood - and, more generally, of parenthood, of caretaking, and of the object of all that affection and work, children themselves. In this essay, I look back on the difference that parenthood made in reshaping my scholarly perspective on social life, and in reshaping my teaching career in the academy as a mentor and a professor. I conclude by reflecting on the pleasures and challenges of forging an anthropological study of that tiniest and most sociologically invisible of human groups, infants.

Keywords : Anthropology of infancy, career biographies, motherhood, feminist theory

Introduction

As is the case with the vast majority of cultural anthropologists, my previous field research among the Beng (conducted in 1979-80 and 1985) concerned overwhelmingly the lives of adults (e.g. Gottlieb 1996b, Gottlieb & Graham 1994).

In some ways, I suppose I should trace my anthropological work on childhood to 1991, when I wrote my first grant proposal to study babies from an anthropological perspective. The grant was successful and provided me with a year released from teaching during 1992-93; that year, I read everything I could find that had ever been written by anthropologists about babies. When I soon exhausted the all-too-short bibliography I'd compiled - well before the end of the fall semester - I turned to psychology and found a treasure trove of work that kept me quite busy for the rest of the fall and through the spring. By May, I felt ready to return to Côte d'Ivoire and conduct a field study of Beng infants, and after conducting that fieldwork, I embarked on writing two books that would occupy me for the next decade (DeLoache & Gottlieb 2000, Gottlieb 2004).

But this story is a partial one. In truth, my anthropological study of babies started four years before I submitted my grant application to the National Endowment for the Humanities. In fact, I would say it began the moment I discovered I was pregnant with my first child.

Across my career, I've tried consciously to integrate my personal and professional life, growing out of the feminist conviction that the personal is political, and vice versa (Hanisch (2006)). I first learned this feminist life lesson while an undergraduate student at Sarah Lawrence College, an extraordinarily nurturing college for young women, where I was exposed to feminist theory from my first year when I worked as a research assistant to a historian, Gerda Lerner, who was then creating one of the first two women's studies courses in the U.S. Learning those "personal is political" lessons from an early age when they didn't have much meaning, I just tucked them away until, many years later, I realized they would become a *modus vivendi* for me as a working mother.

Once I was pregnant, mothering became an intrinsic part of me as a person - and, as such, an intrinsic part of me as an anthropologist. This is hardly surprising. We have long acknowledged in anthropology that who we are shapes the fieldworker we become - so why not include a discussion of the point in our work? If I make all my professional decisions concerning fieldwork while keeping mothering in mind, it would be disingenuous, even misleading, not to account for these decisions. And so I offer no apology for discussing the personal side to my anthropological approach to childhood.

Indeed, in recent years, we have seen an epistemologically complex turn toward exploring various intersections between the spaces we (perhaps somewhat arbitrarily) classify as "personal" and "professional." Beginning with a growing corpus of memoirs of the field experience, of which my two coauthored volumes are joined by many others (Gottlieb & Graham 1994, 2012), this trend now permits us to recognize, and try to account for, the inextricable ways in which our so-called private lives conspire to shape our scholarly decisions and agendas - including the topics we choose to pursue, the field sites in which we come to feel at home, even the theoretical orientations we embrace¹. In keeping with this scholarly move toward disclosure rather than concealment of how the work and non-work aspects of our lives are mutually implicated, I chronicle in this piece how I came to study Beng babies through my own. Given the theoretical rationale for identifying such

connections, coupled with the fact that so few anthropologists choose to focus their intellectual energies on infants, I hope it will prove productive to situate my study of Beng babies in an ongoing life and career.

The Mother as Anthropologist

Being an anthropologist teaches us to reflect not just on the lives of others, but also on our own experiences. Learning I was pregnant meant learning how to be pregnant - that is, how to respond to the discourses surrounding pregnancy that my society pronounced all around me. Those discourses had particular cultural values laced through and through, and deciding which practices to follow and which to ignore meant, first, reflecting on the values behind them.

My first choice was when to announce my pregnancy. The word on the mothers' street was: Don't tell anyone you're pregnant until the first trimester is over. Up until then, there is a higher risk of a miscarriage, and... well, the unspoken rest of the sentence, I suppose, was: If you lose the baby, everyone might blame you for having killed your child, whether by drinking too much coffee or alcohol, or smoking, or exercising, or being stressed out, or doing something bad to harm the fetus. Whatever bad things happen to children, "blame the mother" was an old story². Alternatively, if I miscarried, people who knew I'd been pregnant would be too embarrassed to say anything at all - since Americans don't deal very well with actual deaths (the simulated deaths on our TV and movie screens notwithstanding) - and as a woman, I should be sensitive to others' feelings and try my best not to embarrass anyone who might be put into the awkward position of having to offer me condolences on the death of my-child-that-was-not-yet-a-child. Either way, it would be better to wait to announce the pregnancy until the fetus had a statistically good chance of surviving. These cultural discourses taught me much, early on, about the dominant views of women as mothers.

I delayed informing my colleagues of my pregnancy for a different reason. "Working mothers" are a problematic category in mainstream America - unlike "working fathers," who do not even exist as a cultural category, much less one that requires interrogation. We never read interviews with "working fathers," about how they manage to "juggle work and fatherhood," whereas I was constantly stumbling upon the ubiquitous articles interviewing women about how - or if - they manage to "juggle work and motherhood," and those articles had already trained me to anticipate that my journey into "working motherhood" was destined to be bumpy.

Deciding where, and how, to give birth to our child set me down many more paths of cultural discovery. The hegemonic American birth narrative grounded in impressive statistics - 99% of American mothers give birth in hospitals, 92% of first-time mothers have pain medication administered epidurally, 86% of first-time mothers have episiotomies, and so on - turned out to be only quasi-hegemonic. Did I want to go with these national trends or resist them? If I resisted them, I'd have more work to do: alternative models existed, but I would have to research them. The scholar in me took on the challenge, and I picked and chose from the options. Hospital birth with a midwife present, very long and painful labor sans drugs and episiotomy, all overseen by a doctor with a low C-section rate - these turned out to be my compromise strategy. For choosing immediate pain over drugs, surgery, and delayed pain, my narrative put me in the discursive category of either "brave woman" or "self-sacrificing, stupid woman," depending on who asked me my birth story. The cultural discourses surrounding motherhood had already begun.

And so, it must be said, I came to the subject of studying Beng babies through having my own. Later,

when it came to conducting researching West Africa, my approach to fieldwork with Beng infants was intentionally an intellectual and methodological grab-bag. But as my narrative suggests, the choices I made concerning how to pull together my particular grab-bag began far earlier than the field experience itself.

The Anthropologist as Mother

Embarking on the awesome project of raising a child raised for me countless questions - practical and emotional to be sure, but also intellectual. Entering this new stage of my own life cycle bestowed on me a double gift. Most importantly, of course, was the gift of a child. But along with that came a second gift, the gift of becoming an anthropologist of motherhood - and, more generally, of parenthood, of caretaking, and of the object of all that affection and work, children themselves.

After the birth, I craved company. Some of my friends called and said they would visit the next day, or once we left the hospital, or once we had "settled in." Depressed by these delayed offers, I thought back to my Beng friend Amenan, and the birth I'd seen her go through. Only minutes after her tiny daughter had emerged into the world, Amenan had been greeted by a line of dozens of villagers coming to congratulate her, give her small change as thanks for putting another child in the world.

By contrast, on the assumption that fatal germs might threaten a new baby's life, my hospital displayed a sign that read No Visitors while Baby in the Room. We had to make a choice: either we banish our child to the nursery, or we quarantine ourselves from our close friends. After living among the Beng, this choice was unacceptable. I had seen too many newborns, only minutes old, being passed from person to person, to believe that healthy babies being held by healthy adults are endangered. We subverted the rule, finding hours when the nurses were too busy to notice our friends sneaking past the desk and creeping down the hall to our room.

Those who were already parents, I bombarded with questions. In some, I sensed impatience: surely my "mother's intuition" should tell me what to do when my new baby cried. But I had lived in Africa long enough to be convinced that even this sort of "common sense" is culturally constructed (Geertz 1983). The hundreds of parenting books lining bookstore shelves all seemed to dispense advice that was shaped by a cultural, not natural script³. No, I did not put much stock by intuition when it came to raising our new child. Culture seemed to get in the way too much.

Our new son Nathaniel cried a lot. None of the advice offered by well-meaning nurses, doctors, friends or neighbors helped. Struggling to manage the seemingly endless cascade of Nathaniel's tears, Philip and I cast about in our memories of Beng villages, crowded as they are with infants and young children. We wondered: Did Beng infants cry so much, and if so, what would a Beng mother do? Thinking back to the village life I knew, I imagined that a Beng mother of a crying baby might pack the infant onto her back to be carried around all day, tucked safely into a pagne cloth wrapped around her middle. Perhaps that was what Nathaniel wanted, too. Philip and I decided to try it: we gathered tiny Nathaniel into a front pack and held him close to our chests. Immediately, he stopped bawling. As long as he stayed in there, he was content. And so it was in his snuggly that our new son virtually lived for the next three months. Beng mothers - at least those I was imagining from my removed position - had offered me good advice. As research by psychologists now confirms, most babies tend to be more content, and to cry less, the more they are carried⁴.

I suspected I had much more to learn from my old Beng neighbors and friends. At the same time, my initiation into motherhood opened up for me the universe of children's culture in my own society. Both observing and participating in this world taught me many important lessons about my own community, while at the same time it suggested a vast new repertoire of issues to ponder concerning the world of Beng children. And so I began to imagine returning to Côte d'Ivoire to inaugurate a full-blown inquiry into Beng babies.

I combed my field notes to see what I had previously recorded about Beng childhood. Disappointed, I realized that what scanty notes there were mostly catalogued rules, expectations, and beliefs, and only rarely how actual people did or didn't fulfill these. I began to fill dozens of index cards with questions that, during my previous two trips, I had never thought to ask. What is it like to be a Beng baby, painted twice a day with spectacular herbal paints and loaded down with beaded necklaces and waistbands to ward off diseases? How do infants develop their language - do older people consciously try to teach them to speak, or do they just pick up the skills through listening to others talk? What do the games that adults and older siblings play with babies teach them about the world? Do Beng babies experience the sort of "stranger anxiety" that so many middle-class, Euro-American babies exhibit toward the end of their first year? Do they develop the intense attachment to a single caretaker, usually a mother, that middle-class Euro-American babies so often have? Does the Beng notion of reincarnation influence the way babies are treated? Do motor skills develop on the same schedule that they normatively do with middle-class, Euro-American infants? With these and dozens of other questions that occurred to me daily as Philip and I changed Nathaniel's diapers (conjecturing how Beng mothers manage without them), tried to tempt a finicky Nathaniel to enjoy solid foods (wondering if Beng mothers had discovered tastier concoctions), endeavored to train Nathaniel to fall asleep alone in his crib rather than attached to me or Philip in the front pack (speculating about whether Beng mothers ever bothered to teach their babies to achieve such independence), I formulated my next research project.

The Fieldworker as Mother

Meanwhile, our baby grew out of his colicky babyhood and into a delightful young child. Soon after Nathaniel's sixth birthday, Philip and I decided that our son was ready to be introduced to our African home.

Once in the village a scant week, Nathaniel plunged fearlessly into life in rural West Africa, finding social riches that he clearly thought more than made up for the technological lacks. In so doing, he also taught me much about Beng society that had previously been invisible to me. In his own charming, child-like way, Nathaniel became my assistant⁵.

From my earlier fieldwork, I had constructed an image of Beng society as thoroughly gerontocratic. Dan Sperber has wisely noted (1975) that in observing foreign cultures, anthropologists tend unconsciously to be drawn to that which is different from their own society's practices and to gloss over, even to be unaware of, that which is similar. In Beng villages, I had doubtless paid attention to gerontocracy precisely because the principle is so distinct from the way North American society is largely arranged, with old people frequently cast aside like so much garbage, as a Taiwanese graduate student had once put it after doing a depressing round of fieldwork in a nursing home in Champaign-Urbana (Hwei-Syin Lu, personal communication). Concomitantly, during my previous field trips to Bengland, I had ignored the existence of friendships across generations, as well as

the respect that old people often pay children. Thanks to Nathaniel, I now began noticing regularly these patterns in Beng society that had previously been invisible to me.

It started when we remarked on all the attention showered on Nathaniel by the adults in our compound—and the naming ritual at which he received the name of a revered clan ancestor, of whose identity he was said to be a reincarnation (for a description, see Gottlieb and Graham 2012). Initially, I wrote all this ritual attention off to our son's status as the child of privileged parents. But soon I began noticing that many adults treated their own as well as others' children of all ages with a level of respect that I had not previously observed, quietly asking their opinions while seemingly issuing them orders. A single case of child abuse that I witnessed that summer was the subject of much continuing criticism by virtually all in the perpetrator's family.

Moreover, although Beng children, for their part, display marked respect for their elders as long as they are near those elders, that summer I realized that I had not previously paid enough attention to how independent children are a good deal of the time. When they aren't required to work for their relatives - and this obligation varies quite a bit by season and labor schedule - they play in groups - sometimes small, sometimes large; often changing from moment to moment; and usually of mixed ages. Even in a large village, the entire village is potentially children's play space. Indeed, during the day, Beng parents often have no idea where their children are, and - unlike their Western, urbanized counterparts - they are not overly concerned on a minute-by-minute basis for their children's safety. The village, though by no means homogeneous nor conflict-free, is nevertheless conceived as a moral community. Beng parents routinely assume that there will always be some adults, teenagers, or even other (barely) older boys and girls who can look out for their young children as they roam through the village.

After a few weeks back in Bengland, Philip and I found ourselves adopting this assumption as we would realize to our amazement that we hadn't seen our own son in an hour or two. Nathaniel himself - previously somewhat shy and clingy - quickly grew comfortable with the notion of the entire (rather large) village as his playground. Using impressive investigative skills, he devised a system to locate his parents when one or both of us had left the compound for an interview and he'd chosen to stay behind with his friends but then suddenly felt a need to see us. Like an accomplished Kung hunter, he followed our tracks through the distinctive footprints of our Eddie Bauer hiking boots on the dusty ground. Nathaniel and his friends soon turned this into a great detective game, romping through the village quite gleefully in search of those ground-level clues.

Being a good observer also helped keep Nathaniel confident that he could cope with unexpected developments. This is a skill that I saw Beng parents value in their children as well. Not only do villagers take for granted that any adult, teenager or older child will keep an eye on any young child within their sight, they also assume that children, from the age of being competent walkers - usually between 1 1/2 and 2 1/2 years old - are somewhat able to fend for themselves, and to find their way back to their own compound. For example Chantal, a feisty two-year-old in our compound, disappeared from sight many mornings, only to emerge at noon for lunch and then again around 5 p.m. for dinner preparations. Though too young to report on her day's travels, others would chronicle them for us: she regularly roved to the farthest ends of this very large village and even deep into the forest to join her older siblings and cousins working and playing in the fields. With such early independence, even toddlers are expected to be alert to dangerous wildlife such as snakes and scorpions, and they should be able to deal with them effectively - including locating and wielding a large machete. Toward the end of our stay that summer we realized how acclimated our

own son had become to local habits and dangers when we saw Nathaniel hacking away at unwanted grass in our compound with an adult's machete, almost as long as he was tall, that he had casually commandeered.

This relative independence of Beng children diverged dramatically from the subject-to-constant-parental-worry children of the Euro-American middle-class I had come to know firsthand through my own parenthood. Moreover, it echoed a pattern I was finding elaborated in my work with babies that summer: even adults conceive of infants as emotionally and intellectually formed people, with strong desire and memories. For example, what middle-class Euro-American parents might term that mysterious condition of "colic" - which, as far as I can tell, is a scientific term serving in lieu of an actual explanation for any inexplicable infant misery - is perceived by Beng parents as a sign that the infant "wants" something. All relatives and neighbors therefore pay quite a lot of attention to even the youngest of babies, asking them directly what ails them when they fuss, and in turn imputing motives and wishes that Westerners would likely think unbecoming such small people. Arriving at this understanding of the Beng model of infant volition and desire shaped my fieldwork quite directly. I came to pay special attention to this aspect of interactions between infants and adults after observing the respect that adults accord older children - something I first noticed because of Nathaniel. In this way, and apart from his own conscious efforts to help me, Nathaniel became an inadvertent field assistant simply by his presence, pointing me to subtle timbres in relationships that challenged a rather monolithic conception of generationally oriented power relations that, I realized, I had previously held of Beng society.

Even newborns are attributed a tremendous degree of both personhood and knowledge by Beng adults. At the same time, as infants mature, in some ways the knowledge with which they come to this world from their previous existence in the "other world" is gradually stripped from them, and they progressively become something approximating a tabula rasa - rather than starting out as one, as some folk Western models of childhood development and socialization might suggest. In the book I eventually wrote about Beng models of infancy, *The Afterlife Is Where We Come from*, I developed a theoretical perspective that took as its starting point the Beng perspective that infants are, first and foremost, persons.

In that book, I also detailed the methods I developed to study those infants. These ranged from constructing biographies of a select group of babies to conducting hundreds of interviews with mothers and other caretakers of infants, as well as with diviners, who claim to understand the speech and desires of babies in ways that other Beng adults, even parents, cannot. More informal "participant observation" methods included attending divination sessions for colicky babies, and a first jewelry ritual for a newborn; sitting during nursing sessions with many breastfeeding mothers; taking care of babies when mothers needed help; and conducting time-sampling methods to observe continuous portions of time to observe the duration of actual behaviors as they occurred in infants' daily experiences.

The Analyst as Mother

Observing the various activities, moods and developmental stages of infants allowed me to gain some sense of their daily lives. But was it possible to communicate meaningfully with these tiny people in any way that an anthropologist would find respectable, reportable? I had spent years studying intensively the Beng language, even producing a dictionary (Gottlieb & Murphy 1995), so as to be able to converse in the language of the group whose lives and ideas I wanted to make sense

of. Now my notion of a “conversation” clearly had to expand in order to accommodate the attempts at communication in which infants specialize. Here, I gained confidence from my own mothering experiences. The great challenge of the early days of parenting is to figure out how to communicate with a creature that seems to inhabit another mode of being. Having negotiated this awesome challenge with my own son emboldened me to imagine that I might find some success with Beng babies as well. One way in which I tried to learn directly the perspectives of the babies themselves was to study what proved to be, in effect, the dialect of Beng infants, which was conducted in a register far different from the one on which I had previously concentrated. This time, it was that of adornment. By focusing on the visual appearance of babies, I learned to read the “text” that was constituted by infants’ necklaces, bracelets and anklets, as well as their facial paint. In studying the decorations bedecking a particular baby, I could discern quickly whether that small person had been to a diviner multiple times because of frequent crying or sickness that had been attributed to a troublesome memory from a previous life; and I could estimate the extent to which the baby’s mother was dedicated and/or financially able to alleviate his or her current emotional and medical miseries. Beng babies are said by adults to lead extraordinarily complex and deep emotional lives - lives drenched in the construction and suffering caused by memory. Identifying their bodily embellishments as the visual locus of these memories made understanding the mental and affective processes attributed to them by adults surprisingly accessible.

Of course these understandings were still mediated by the perceptions of adults and did not constitute data revealing directly the perceptions of the infants themselves. Yet this gap is true of adults as well, if in subtler ways. Personhood is always a cultural construction, most cultural anthropologists are now willing to acknowledge, a multiply mediated fabrication. Identity constitutes what others attribute to us as much as what we attribute to ourselves. In this regard, perhaps infants are not nearly as different in kind from adults as we might think -though the lesson may be far more obvious in infants than in adults.

Another lesson my own early days of mothering had taught me is that babies are insistently somatic creatures. It is impossible to establish any meaningful relationship with them, any understanding of their being, without seriously taking into account their bodily orientation to the world and without engaging that bodily presence directly. Thus working ethnographically with infants means holding infants. During much of my fieldwork, while talking about babies with adults I was also balancing a small child on one thigh and my notebook on the other. Indeed, of the 700 or so hours I spent with Beng infants in the summer of 1993, a large proportion was passed holding babies - which meant being the object of assorted leaks on a somewhat continual basis. Sometimes this holding was also spent moving. I carried babies with me to or from the fields, walking on a narrow path behind a mother or babysitter, who was then freed to carry her machete and hoe, or logs that she’d just chopped down, crops that she’d just harvested, or water that she’d just pumped. I never got very good at the local style of carrying infants on my back in a *pagne* sling, but I did hold them Western style - over my shoulder, on my lap; and I had my share of getting peed on.

Offering babysitting/baby-holding/baby-carrying services was always appreciated by overworked mothers who sometimes had to look after their infants while they were cooking, washing laundry, bathing, washing dishes, farming, chopping wood, heating water, and processing crops. Again, having devoted hundreds of hours to carrying my own son gave me confidence that I could do so with other babies, even if the body posture varied.

Fieldwork is a sometimes exhilarating, often perplexing, and always peculiar combination of head

and heart. In many fieldwork projects, the “heart” component of fieldwork is evident enough to the researcher at the time of the research but becomes easily submerged in the writing that later chronicles the experience. One understandable reason for such a submersion is that the ostensible subject of the research is far enough removed from the “heart” part of the fieldwork that it seems distracting to discuss it. That is not the case for my work with Beng babies.

Children, more than adults, live a life of the heart. For many, the younger the child, the more this is the case. Of course there are constant cognitive events that even the youngest of children are constantly mastering⁶, but those events take second seat to emotions far more than occurs in adults. Naturally, we adults live emotionally rich lives as well - but most of us are better at concealing this aspect of our lives for all but those with whom we are most intimate. Scholars are especially adept at this move, being meticulously trained into the tendency during our doctoral programs. By contrast, most children tend to be far less consciously aware of the inclination by adults to conceal emotions, and children tend to express their emotions far more easily - again, the younger the child, the more this tends to be true.

The babies I worked with in Beng villages expressed their emotions readily, and my family found them irresistible. Indeed, working with infants, perhaps it is inevitable that there will be more than the usual moments of joy. It is true that among the Beng, direct compliments to a baby are considered dangerous to the infant’s well-being. Still, there are moments when parental pride overtakes cultural taboo. One day, for example, my research assistant, a young father named Dieudonné, merrily wrapped a woman’s scarf around his young daughter Hallelujah’s small head. As playful as her husband, Dieudonné’s wife immediately joined in and showed her husband how to tie the scarf in the style of an adult woman’s turban. The image of baby Hallelujah sporting a grown woman’s turban was so adorable, I immediately grabbed my camera and indulged my impulse to take a series of photos of Hallelujah and the turban. Dieudonné and his wife glowing in the delights of parental pride and I, a parent myself, experiencing vicarious pleasure. Such moments let me forget momentarily the walls that culture so insidiously erects between us, and we could savor the joys, however temporary, of *communitas*.

At the same time, during this research, I was much less hesitant than I had been during my previous stays to speak my mind, offering frank opinions about Beng life and customs. And I felt less compelled than on previous occasions to prove that I could “go native,” and must do everything possible to fit in. Partly this was because I felt quite comfortable in the Beng world on this, my third field trip, and less conscious of being conspicuous. I had a network of adoptive kin, I spoke the language with relative ease, and my presence no longer produced obvious resistance or resentment. Moreover, returning as a mother meant I was accepted as someone who had finally, if belatedly, attained full adulthood. Given this, I often felt comfortable sharing my opinions and thoughts in an honest exchange with my friends and neighbors, especially when it came to child-rearing. Tapping into my own experience of motherhood, I not only listened to fellow mothers’ stories but regularly shared with them my own, and on occasion dispensed advice to them when it seemed welcome.

For example, one day my friend Amenan and I paid a post-childbirth call on our neighbor Moya, who had delivered a baby girl two days previously. Moya’s milk had come in and her breasts were full, but during the hour I spent with her, the newborn didn’t nurse at all. “She’s just drinking water,” Moya complained, “she can’t suck yet.” Moya seemed uncomfortable with her full breasts, unable as they were to release their filling contents, and she put the baby to her breast to see if the baby would latch on. But the tiny child didn’t seem interested. “You see?” asked Moya, a bit plaintively.

Amenan spoke gently to the two-day-old: “*nyo mi*,” she urged the tiny girl - “drink the breast.” But the little mouth didn’t open with eagerness even when Amenan put Moya’s nipple next to her daughter’s face. Having had my own share of breastfeeding troubles when Nathaniel was an infant, I was sympathetic. Before I could reflect on the ethics of interference, I found myself inspired by the vision of other Beng women helping their younger compatriots with nursing troubles and offered to reposition Moya’s baby and breast so as to make a more comfortable fit. Gently, I moved Moya’s breast ever so slightly, the baby ever so slightly, until mouth and nipple were aligned. Then I pressed lightly above the nipple and lifted the breast softly from below, as I remembered doing dozens of times when my own baby son wouldn’t latch on for any number of reasons, and I had sought advice from a book. Moya was intrigued - she didn’t know this trick - and took over the positioning herself. To her frustration, her first comment to me remained accurate - the baby still hadn’t learned to suck. I was disheartened that I wasn’t able to help, but Moya seemed to appreciate my impulse. Our talk about her new motherhood continued easily, with Moya asking me as many questions about my own experiences as I asked about hers.

Some Final Thoughts

Even in the best of circumstances, raising children is a challenge that many parents the world over find alternately invigorating, delightful, frustrating, and perplexing. Beng mothers love their babies as much as I have loved my own; yet the contours of that love, its boundaries, the shapes it takes, look quite different from those mine have taken. For one thing, extreme poverty has made the challenges of rearing children one whose hardships are almost unimaginable for those who have never suffered the frustrations and humiliations of material deprivation, the resultant constant threat of sickness, the all-too-frequent sorrow of holding a baby dying in one’s arms. For another, there is the small matter of culture.

Is it possible for me, a woman of comfortable financial means, reared in a Jewish but largely secular family as an only child, and trained in a formal educational system according me access to a variety of knowledge systems, to understand the perspectives and suffering of non-literate women of a local, polytheistic tradition oriented around a model of reincarnation, living in extreme poverty, and trying to rear six or more children without access to the resources that literacy and money alike offer? Yes and no. The methods of cultural anthropology, as developed over the past century, have endeavored to provide us with both intellectual and methodological tools to bridge the formidable gaps that culture, economy and history often construct between groups of people.

For me, forging an anthropological approach to infancy has afforded me a special, dual pleasure - both intellectually, as a scholar, and emotionally - as a mother. Although my current project (working with diasporic Cape Verdeans) has me focusing my gaze on adults rather than infants (Gottlieb 2012), my twenty-five years (and counting) of bearing and raising two children continue to shape my fieldwork site choices, questions, and methods in ways that only parenting can.

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Notes

1 A partial list of recent examples, including some rather experimental pieces, would include Behar (1993), Cesara (1982), Gottlieb & Graham (1994, 2012), Stoller & Olkes (1987), Williams (1994), and M. Wolf (1992). For an engaging collection of essays chronicling relations between personal and scholarly interests in anthropologists' field research projects, see Okely and Callaway (1992). For a few rare personal accounts of female anthropologists' lives as mother-scholars both in the field and out, see Schrijvers (1993), Shostak (2000) and C. Sutton (1998). Other intriguing autobiographical chronicles of the person-behind-the-scholar include Behar (1996), Geertz (1995), Grimes (1995), Myerhoff (1980), Myerhoff & Littman (1976), and Schneider (1995). A related group of provocative writings exploring the sometimes subtle, sometimes-not-so-subtle dynamic of power relations and gender bias in ethnographic fieldwork include Abu-Lughod (1993), Bell, Caplan & Karim (1993), Callaway (1992), Caplan (1988), Golde (1986), Gregory (1984), Leap and Lewin (1996), Rosaldo (1989), Smith (1999), Warren (1988), Whitehead & Conaway (1986), D. Wolf (1996) and Yanagisako

& Collier (1987), among others.

² For some provocative scholarly reflections on this theme, see, for example, Ehrenreich & English (1979), Reagan (2003), Tsing (1990).

³ For a playful critique of this genre, see DeLoache & Gottlieb (2000).

⁴ For a key article by psychologists on this phenomenon, see Hunziker & Barr (1986).

⁵ For further discussion of Nathaniel's experiences that summer, see Gottlieb, Graham, and Gottlieb-Graham (1998), and Gottlieb and Graham (2012). For other accounts of children's effects on their ethnographer-parents in the field and vice versa, see Butler and Turner (1987), Cassell (1987), Fernandez and Sutton (1998), and Flinn, Marshall & Armstrong (1998).

⁶ For an excellent overview of recent research on infant cognition, see Gopnik, Meltzoff and Kuhl (1999).