



TRANSFORMING THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF CHILDHOOD

How are contemporary anthropologists—as researchers, educators and practitioners—revealing and transforming the ways we think about childhood and the roles and experiences of children within larger social contexts? In what ways can we ask new questions about children and childhood that move beyond the traditional limits of our discipline, or between subdisciplines?

A Four-Field Anthropology of Childhood

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The anthropological study of childhood both benefits from the four-field approach and provides a means of integrating knowledge across the subfields. Anthropology's growing interest in childhood has resulted in the development of a dynamic, synergistic and holistic body of work that will provide us with a more complete picture of childhood. There is exciting research on childhood in every subfield and each body of literature offers complementary insights. By

The Temporal Dimension

The temporal dimension differentiates much of the paradigmatic and methodological variation across the subfields. Time scales range from the geologic time of evolution to the more recent prehistoric to the present day. It is not uncommon to view evolution merely as a process that occurred in the past. Yet, adaptations to features of past environments can have major effects in the present. Similarly, findings by archaeologists may illuminate otherwise anomalous contemporary situations, such as child soldiering. Connections also radiate from the present to the past. The knowledge gained from descriptions of enormously varied present-day childhoods can be used as a guide to the study of childhood in the past. By

gating through social, cultural and ecological settings. At the same time, we must not throw the baby out with the bathwater. Biological maturation and adult oversight remain important factors in children's lives. Evolutionary anthropologists are interested in formal models that quantify these trade-offs in terms of energy and other currencies. Through independent means, different research traditions are converging on a more sophisticated view of childhood.

Social and Ecological Competency

The development and application of social and ecological competency by children can be modeled as a process that integrates different scales and perspectives. Childhood has been shaped by the processes of evolution in ways that differentiate us from our primate relatives in terms of growth, development and maturation. This is seen in the patterning by which children acquire language and begin to achieve social and ecological competency. Yet this basic pattern is highly variable in different social, cultural and ecological contexts. Using data from cultures in the past and the present, we can begin to understand how this variation is manifested in the roles of children, the activities in which they engage, the skills they acquire, children's roles in family dynamics, language socialization, the development of gender and influences on growth and development.

There is much current debate concerning the emergence of juvenility and how this is related to brain growth and the process of learning and acquiring skills. Theoreticians pay attention to ethnographic work that focuses on how children acquire knowledge of their environment. These studies of development in specific contexts can be aggregated for more general insights about developmental processes and learning. Much the same thing is true of

local research on language acquisition and language socialization. Data from specific cases informs our theoretical models of language development, even as this more robust theory more precisely guides our work in the field. If these exercises in integration can be brought to fruition, the payoff will be in far greater comprehension of how the "stock" pattern of development varies across individuals in response to the environment in which they grow.

Disruptive Experiences

In an era when children are negatively affected by social and ecological disruption on an immense scale, examining the issue from multiple subfield perspectives offers an expanded view. Evidence from bioarchaeological studies, for example, reveals that children, in the past, often suffered because of inequity based on gender, class and ethnicity. There are striking parallels in the effect of adverse conditions on contemporary children and their early counterparts. We see consistent areas of vulnerability such as the mother's health, weaning, attachment, child nutrition and the deleterious effects of chronic, poverty-related disease. Intervention programs with youth, carried out by those informed by applied anthropology in particular (see Vargas-Barón, this issue), may benefit from a more thorough understanding of similar conditions that affected children in the past. By the same token, while archaeology cannot reveal emotional states, it is not unreasonable to extrapolate to the past from present analyses of the mental health of street children, child soldiers and others in disrupted conditions. Children today face stress and inequity in their household living conditions that translate into differentials in health and patterns of growth and development. Contemporary data can help shed light on these effects in past times and places.

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fostering awareness and communication between anthropologists across the subfields, and by encouraging students to be ecumenical in their work, we can promote a truly comprehensive and theoretically sophisticated approach to the anthropology of childhood.

Scholars in the field can initiate the process of integration by surveying and synthesizing *all* the pertinent literature on their topic. In this article we explore the benefits of employing the different subfield lenses to examine temporal scale, cross-cultural and cross-ecological variation, and the dynamics of childhood as both a state of being and a transition to adulthood. Without a doubt there are many other areas of scholarly inquiry into childhood that will profit from increased emphasis on transcending subdisciplinary boundaries. In the sense that anthropology is an experiment in testing the compatibility of paradigm and perspective, having vigorous and independent subfields is the source of alternatives that produce a strong and integrated whole.

exploring childhood across these temporal scales, the form and means of cultural and behavioral transmission across generations will become clearer. This in turn can bring a new understanding of cultural change in the large sense, that is, how behaviors, beliefs, attitudes, perceptions and practices have changed between generations, what the mechanisms are of these changes, and why they have changed in particular patterns.

Childhood as Phase and Process

Recent perspectives in cultural anthropology and linguistics see children as cultural participants and potentially as experts. More traditional perspectives from psychological anthropology and biological anthropology have seen childhood as consisting of a number of sequential stages leading to maturity. In the most extreme form, these view childhood as a holding pattern until growth is complete and adult roles can be assumed. By integrating these perspectives, we begin to view children as independent actors negotiating and navi-



Moving Beyond our Comfort Zones

The examples presented here, while clearly not exhaustive, illustrate some of the ways in which subfield and interdisciplinary cross-fertilization will move the anthropological study of childhood forward in terms of exposure to more complete data and the integration of theory. In a sense, disciplinary boundaries provide comfort zones for the members of each discipline. We can easily remain within those boundaries and focus on the relevant body of literature. Yet, we are convinced that the benefits of exploring the literature of other subfields and integrating data and theoretical perspectives will bring benefits that outweigh the costs of moving beyond our disciplinary comfort zones. If we view anthropological subfields as an alliance, anthropology is in a unique position among scholarly endeavors to foster exchange and interaction among its practitioners. We are both specialists and generalists, and our strength is that the specialized focus of each subfield exists under the holistic umbrella of the larger discipline.

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Children's Rights and the International Community

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Anthropologists are increasingly concerned with the issue of children's rights. Since the Convention of the Rights of the Child (CRC) came into force, virtually all nations (the US and Somalia excepted) have committed themselves to advancing children's rights and to enacting legislation and policy in accordance with the doctrine of the "best interests of the child." Central to the CRC is a universal definition of childhood that defines childhood as beginning at birth and ending at age 18.

In enumerating children's rights under the CRC it is common to speak of the convention as embodying four basic sets of children's rights: the rights of participation, protection, prevention and provision. The right of participation includes the right of the child to participate in decision making and also includes freedom of conscience. The rights protection and prevention deal with protecting children from exploitation and abuse while the right of provision addresses issues of access to the resources of society including food, shelter and education. In practice, the central focus of political and legal action has been protection and prevention. Even more remote are rights such as freedom of conscience for children, which have been formally rejected by many state parties to the convention. All this should not be surprising because in contrast to other rights movements, the prime forces behind the CRC are not disenfranchised groups seeking to gain full participatory rights in society, but adults who seek to spread a protective mantle around the world's children.

The sweeping definition of childhood contained in the CRC challenges anthropological understandings of childhood. By adopting a single universal definition of childhood, international law ignores the fact that childhood is understood and experienced in different societies in divergent ways. There is a strong theoretical conflict in that law and anthropology tend to approach and define childhood in antithetical ways. Law codifies bright-line distinctions between childhood and

adulthood that are largely indifferent to context, whereas anthropology understands context as informing virtually all knowledge about children. Indeed, if anthropology has anything to contribute to an understanding of childhood, it is that there are a multiplicity of childhoods, each culturally codified and defined by age, ethnicity, gender, history and location, among other factors. The children's rights movement is part of a social movement whose intent is to create a universal system of rights. Recognizing the children's rights movement as a movement for directed social change is important for anthropology because it opens up a mode of analysis with which we are familiar. Although ideas about children's rights have many sources, their translation into practice is rooted in operations of civil society where social change is sought largely through lawmaking and the courts. It is a movement led by lawyers in tandem with those helping professions (such as psychology and social work) that are ancillary to the legal system. Looking at the children's rights movement with the same theoretical perspective and techniques

that local access to resources in post-conflict Sierra Leone was often contingent upon villagers publicly embracing international concepts of childhood including the idea that child soldiers were "victims" rather than "perpetrators" ("The Rites of the Child," *Journal of Human Rights* 4:197-211). My own work, which compares the experiences of child soldiers in Sierra Leone, Palestine and elsewhere, makes plain that the experiences of child soldiers are often at variance with the assumptions that underlie the development of international humanitarian law.

In the past both anthropologists and historians have tended to see law—particularly family law, with its express concerns for the welfare of children—as flowing from custom. There are, of course, notable exceptions where law is used as an instrument of social change or even of oppression. Whenever there is an enormous gap between law and the manner in which lives are actually lived there is vast room for both conflict and resistance. At the same time this creates remarkable opportunities for anthropologists to examine the forms of accommoda-

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that have informed the anthropological study of other forms of directed social change enhances the understanding of a process that is rooted in the social.

The development of the children's rights movement in the international arena is tied to the explosive growth of civil society and the close relationships that the institutions of civil society have with the United Nations and its agencies. The increasing power and influence of civil society has led many organizations to abandon ideas of political neutrality which were once the hallmark of these institutions. While these organizations are hardly imperial states, they do serve as key gatekeepers to significant economic resources, especially in the poorest places in the world. This strategic position affords them the ability to demand conformity to particular ideas about childhood. In Sierra Leone, which has recently emerged from civil war, Susan Shepler reports

and opposition that arise under these situations. The gap between legal form and substance, between the kinds of children and childhoods the law recognizes and privileges and the real lives of children, is often enormous. It may be even more extreme in the international arena, where lawmaking is in the hands of the institutions of civil society and its so-called "norm entrepreneurs" for whom lawmaking involves the creation of aspirational rules that develop outside the framework of any arguably democratic processes or cultural consensus.

The effects of the gap between new rules of law and the lived experience of childhood have been observed by ethnographers, especially those examining various forms of child labor. Rachel Burr, for example, examined attempts by the Vietnamese government, aided by a variety of local and international NGOs, to control child

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