

Re-Visualizing Childhood in Cultural Context



ROBERT A LEVINE
HARVARD U

Every ethnographer has had the experience of witnessing childhood events and activities that could not be adequately rendered in words. Starting in 1936, Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson tried to remedy this deficit through visual recordings, using a 35 mm still camera and a 16 mm black and white motion picture camera, the most advanced technology of the time. Their results from Bali and New Guinea, gained at great expense and with cumbersome equipment, may seem limited today, but they demonstrated that visual aspects of children's behavior—and of the spatial, interpersonal and symbolic environment constituting its context—could be preserved for re-viewing not only by the field worker (as in field notes) but also by other students of childhood.

Advances in visual and audio recording technology since that time hold the potential for a fundamental transformation of anthropological research on childhood. We now have small, hand-held cameras that can make high-resolution digital video

and audio recordings, even in bad light, with capabilities for editing, coding and Internet file-sharing. Most of these features were barely imaginable even 20 years ago, and their low cost makes them readily available. These recording technologies could be used to create a new and improved anthropology of childhood in many ways we can imagine as well as ways not yet imaginable. Here I describe three examples.

Ethnographic Description

Malinowski (1928) tells us that Trobriand parents sometimes beat their children "in an outburst of rage; but I have quite as often as often seen a child rush furiously at his parent and strike him." Last March, Harold Odden of Indiana University-Purdue University at Fort Wayne showed the Society for Psychological Anthropology confer-

entially slaps him once (in a desultory manner). He looks angrily at her and then returns to striking the other woman in an aggressive attempt to lure her back into a "game" in which the adult threatens and attempts to scare the child (with faked punches, staring with crossed eyes and assorted other aggressive actions). Odden showed the clip several times so we could discern on subsequent viewings details we had not noticed the first time. As a group we could validate Odden's observation that a toddler's parent-hitting is tolerated by adults (up to a point) and see that the child was about two years of age and had an angry look on his face. Thus the video was not only more specific than Malinowski's description but also provided visual confirmation of key elements in Odden's verbal description, especially through facial expressions

and physical gestures. Furthermore, although Malinowski was sometimes accused of exaggeration to prove a theoretical point (in this case, that Trobriand families are egalitarian), Odden submitted his vignette for the viewing and re-viewing of other anthropologists who, with the additional contextual evidence he supplied, could judge for themselves what to make of it. Putting aside the issue of how representative this vignette is of Samoan parent-child interaction (or even of this child's interaction with his caretakers), the video lends a depth and a confidence to our semiotic interpretation of the action in context that would be hard to achieve through verbal description alone.

Cross-Cultural Reactions

My thought on seeing Odden's video clip was that I would like to show it to Gusii parents of Kenya, who I believe would be shocked by it because of its dramatic contrast with their own expectations of *ogosika* (respect) in two-year-olds—I have never seen a Gusii toddler strike an adult. This is the "Tobin method" of semiotic analysis: the use of unfamiliar action on video to elicit basic cultural assumptions and expectations, as proposed and illustrated in *Preschool in Three Cultures*

See *Re-Visualizing* on page 18

COMMENTARY

ence a video clip of a two-year-old Samoan boy repeatedly striking his adult female caretaker, who makes no effort to stop him. His grandmother, on the other side, even-

and physical gestures. Furthermore, although Malinowski was sometimes accused of exaggeration to prove a theoretical point (in this case, that Trobriand families are egal-

Perceiving Dissent in Research with Children

PATRICIA E SMITH
MCMASTER U

Assent forms facilitate an ethically engaged anthropology of children by acknowledging children as active social agents who have a right to assent or dissent from participating in research. Gaining informed consent from parents or guardians is not enough to ensure the standards set by most ethical review boards. However, based on my research with children in Oracabessa, Jamaica, when it comes to ethical concerns regarding consent, real-life research with children does not always neatly follow the expected script. Going forward with research when a child's assent is unclear can place the anthropologist in an ethical and practical dilemma. In my research the particularities of the Jamaican context, such as a strong authoritarian family structure that places children at the bottom in the chain of power, coupled with children's general unfamiliarity with research, sometimes resulted in them verbally assenting when they wished to dissent.

What would you say is a good child? ... Why are you covering your face? Are you afraid of me? ... Can you take your hands from your face, so that I can see your lovely face? ... All I can see are your braids! ... Shyanne? Can you hear me? Shyanne?

Shyanne's body language—averted eyes, chewed lips and whispered responses—suggested that she did not wish to continue the

interview. Despite my discussion of her rights, in particular her ability to stop the interview at any point without consequence, Shyanne was unable verbally dissent. It became my responsibility to stop the interview when she indicated dissent indirectly.

This is not an unfamiliar situation. Researchers working with children note that children report feeling pressured to please adults. In Jamaica this is exacerbated by children's awareness of their low status. Terminating the interview in this and other cases was an ethically responsible action to take. It also made me wonder: How could I emphasize to participating children that they have the authority to dissent in a research interview when they might not normally have that choice in everyday interactions with adults? In considering this I recalled one of the main goals of the project: learning about the particular social worlds of children. To some people (both children and adults) the ability to verbally dissent is a clear potential expression of agency, but perhaps these children communicate dissent in other more subtle, but no less important, ways. Indeed, Shyanne was able to express agency by indicating her desire to not participate through body language. This was not only effective in terminating the interview, but also in highlighting for the researcher one means by which children enact agency from within a disproportionate power relationship.

Patricia Smith is interested in a variety of childhood issues, particularly mental health. Her dissertation research focuses on how children cope with adversities, such as poverty, crime and violence. □

Revisualizing

continued from page 17

by Joseph Tobin, David Wu and Dana Davidson (1989). The method brings out reactions and explanations that are illuminating semiotically, sometimes confirming or modifying ethnographically based interpretations as when, in the original study, Japanese preschool teachers were highly critical of the low teacher to child ratio in a video of a US classroom, on the grounds that it would retard the children's formation of bonds with their peers. In addition to identifying points of contrast across cultures, the shock produced by the Tobin method elicits verbal explanations from informants that they might not ordinarily produce. In other words, it deepens our access to the cultural meanings guiding actors who shape children's environments.

Using Video Archives for Analyses

The following questions suggest problems that we might use video

data collected in the field to address: Does the frequency or distribution of behaviors like *child striking adult* and *adult striking child* vary significantly across samples drawn from people like Samoans, Gusii and Japanese? Do cultures vary in the frequency with which mothers talk to their infants and praise or play with their young children? How do fathers interact with their infants and young children, and how often? How often do children engage in symbolic play and what forms does it take? Ethnographic vignettes alone cannot answer such questions, which require repeated and representative observations recorded on video that show similarities and differences in the same child across different age points and across individuals in the same and different populations. We need, in other words, to build a video archive that can be accessed, aggregated and quantitatively analyzed to reveal developmental trends and variations in central tendencies, and to identify possible determinants of child behavior with greater confidence

than previous naturalistic observations of children.

There are precedents for such an archive, including the Child Language Data Exchange System (CHILDES) at Carnegie Mellon University (<http://childes.psy.cmu.edu>), which stores and makes available to researchers audio and video data on children's language development from more than 60 countries. With these data it is possible to answer questions about the universality or cultural specificity of linguistic features and their age-relatedness during the years of language acquisition. An archive of this sort for visual records of children's environments and behavioral development would be challenging to create, but it could offer great rewards in comparative and developmental insights into children's acquisition of cultural meanings.

Another available resource is the Smithsonian Institution's Human Studies Film Archives, which Margaret Mead was instrumental in founding and which includes films of children in diverse cultures,

along with a great many other ethnographic films not focused on children. So far, however, there is no video equivalent to the Human Relations Area Files, which serves as the major archive for ethnographic texts and provides categories for written records of ideas and practices, including those related to childhood. The file-sharing capabilities of the Internet mean that field workers can now share their visual experiences of researching children and childhood as they have shared their written observations. This should lead to a wide variety of advances in the anthropological study of childhood.

Robert LeVine is professor emeritus of education and anthropology at Harvard University. He has done extensive research on parenthood, childrearing and child development in Africa, Asia and Latin America. His recent books include Anthropology and Child Development: A Cross-Cultural Reader (2008) and Childhood Socialization: Comparative Studies of Parents, Learning and Educational Change (2003). ☐

Children and Families in Neighborhood Contexts

Ethnography and a Multi-Method Approach

JILL E KORBIN
CASE WESTERN RESERVE U

A long and rich history of anthropological research on children and childhoods has contributed to understanding children's experiences and well-being across a range of contexts and circumstances. Neighborhood contexts afford rich opportunities to engage anthropological theory and methods to study and address child, adolescent and family well-being, and the neighborhood level of analysis is particularly relevant to practice and policy. Over the past few decades many services to children and families have been decentralized and relocated to neighborhoods, with the rationale that the neighborhood is more proximate and therefore more sensitive to the issues confronting children and families than are more centralized services and policies. Examining factors impacting the design and implementation of social policies enacted at the neighborhood level is complex, as not only do low income neighborhoods vary widely in rates of child maltreatment and other indica-

tors of child well-being, but even the basic child, parent and census definitions of what constitute a neighborhood can vary dramatically.

Why are child maltreatment and other adverse outcomes for children so unevenly distributed across poor neighborhoods in Cleveland, Ohio, a city that consistently has among the highest rates of child poverty in the US? Poverty is one of the major threats to child well-being globally and in US, and has been strongly associated with a range of negative outcomes, including child maltreatment. Many programs and approaches (for example, Weisner, this issue) have been applied to addressing poverty and its consequences for children and families, some more successfully than others. Mixed results reflect, in part, that not only are poor families diverse, but poor neighborhoods also vary, both in the conditions they provide for children and families and in outcome indicators of child well-being.

Our approach to understanding the impact of neighborhood conditions on child well-being is the close coordination of epidemiologic, or aggregate,

and ethnographic approaches. Aggregate statistical analyses of neighborhood conditions, in which a neighborhood is represented by census tracts, are powerful due to large sample sizes and generalizable findings. Census-defined areas (tracts and block groups) also make replication feasible. Ethnographic approaches offer a perspective on how neighborhood conditions are experienced and given meaning by children and families, shedding light on the processes by which neighborhood conditions translate into diverse outcomes. We sought to emphasize the value of combining the strengths of both approaches.

Aggregate Analysis

We began with an epidemiological approach for assessing neighborhood conditions using data available through the decennial census and other administrative sources. We found that child maltreatment and other adverse outcome rates for children varied widely across Cleveland's neighborhoods, and that this variation could not be explained by poverty rates alone. That is, poor

neighborhoods differed significantly from one another in the conditions they offered to children and families, and in their rates of adverse outcomes for children, including rates of child maltreatment.

Our aggregate analyses used a principle components analysis to identify four factors that accounted for half the variance in child maltreatment rates across neighborhoods: "impoverishment" (poverty rate, unemployment rate, vacant housing, population loss, female headed households, percent African-American); "child care burden" (ratio of children to adults, ratio of males to females, percent of population over 65); "instability" (proportion of moves, length of time in current residence); and whether or not the census tract was adjacent to another concentrated poverty tract (Coulton, Korbin, Su and Chow's "Community Level Factors and Child Maltreatment Rates," *Child Development* 66:1262-76).

The factor "child care burden" can be used to illustrate the value of employing multiple methods. In the aggregate analyses, child care burden