

David F. Lancy

The Anthropology of Childhood

Cherubs, Chattel, Changelings

SECOND EDITION



The Anthropology of Childhood

Cherubs, Chattel, Changelings

Second edition

David F. Lancy

Utah State University



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The Anthropology of Childhood

How are children raised in different cultures? What is the role of children in society? How are families and communities structured around them? Now available in a revised edition, *The Anthropology of Childhood* sets out to answer these questions, and argues that our common understandings about children are narrowly culture-bound.

Marshaling evidence from several lines of research, David Lancy shows that, while the dominant society views children as precious, innocent, and preternaturally cute “cherubs,” there are other societies where they are regarded as unwanted, inconvenient “changelings,” or as desired but pragmatically commoditized “chattel.” Enriched with anecdotes from ethnography and the daily media, the book examines family structure and reproduction, profiles of children’s caretakers within family or community, children’s treatment at different ages, their play, work, schooling, and transition to adulthood. The result is a nuanced and credible picture of childhood in different cultures, past and present.

Organized developmentally, moving from infancy through to adolescence and early adulthood, this new edition reviews and catalogs the findings of over 100 years of anthropological scholarship dealing with childhood and adolescence, drawing on over 750 newly added sources, and engaging with newly emerging issues relevant to the world of childhood today.

DAVID F. LANCY is Emeritus Professor of Anthropology at Utah State University. He is author/editor of several books on childhood and culture, including *Cross-Cultural Studies in Cognition and Mathematics* (1983), *Studying Children and Schools* (2001), *Playing on the Mother Ground: Cultural Routines for Children’s Learning* (1996), and *The Anthropology of Learning in Childhood* (2010).

"If I were to assign just one book as required reading for students of child psychology, this would be it. It opens our all-too-parochial eyes to childhood's possibilities."

Peter Gray, Boston College

"The scholarship in this book is incredibly sound and thorough in breadth and scope."

Rebecca Zarger, University of South Florida

"the most comprehensive, and perhaps only, review of the human child in terms of evolutionary biology and sociocultural anthropology. Based on the best of theory and field ethnography, it is essential for any study of human development and human nature."

Barry Bogin, Loughborough University

"David Lancy's *The Anthropology of Childhood* was essential the moment it appeared; the second edition is even better! He has digested the survey material even more, used updated materials, and held back less on his criticism of contemporary Euro-American childrearing."

Susan D. Blum, University of Notre Dame

"a valuable forum to better understand childhood as a rapidly growing sub-field of anthropology."

Akira Takada, Kyoto University

"this revised version of the volume is very welcome, providing students, teachers and generalists who are interested in the subject with a broad overview of the anthropology of childhood, supported by a comprehensive and helpfully interdisciplinary bibliography."

Sally Crawford, The University of Oxford

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Cover plate, Barbara Polak photos. Used by permission.

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Preface

Second edition preface

The Anthropology of Childhood was first published in November, 2008; however, I had delivered the manuscript to the publisher much earlier. At that time, I did not feel that the book was “complete.” The flow of “new” sources was unabated. So, I proceeded as if the book was incomplete and continued to collect and annotate relevant work. Then too, there has been a virtual explosion in the size of our formerly rather miniscule community of anthropologists (and archaeologists!) studying childhood. This has produced a spate of journals and books. New scholarly organizations have sprung up, including the Anthropology of Children and Youth Interest Group (ACYIG, of the American Anthropological Association) and the Society for the Study of Childhood in the Past. Several institutions in North America and Europe host regular, open seminars highlighting recent research, and international conferences have been convened in the US, Canada, UK, Belgium, Greece, Norway, and India.

This edition incorporates over 750 sources that were not referenced in the first edition, which drew on roughly 1,400 sources. Certain topics have been blessed with lots of new material, in particular: infancy and “delayed personhood”; child labor; adoption and fosterage; infants and children as autonomous learners; the limited role of teaching in children’s acquisition of their culture; gamesmanship; the benefits of free play; the chore curriculum; apprenticeship; the impact of economic transformation and civil conflict on childhood; children as a reserve labor force; the historical antecedents of schooling; resistance to education; the impact of schooling on thought; the culture of street kids; and children’s *agency*. Readers familiar with the first edition will also find a great deal of new visual material to complement the text.

The second edition also afforded me an opportunity to refocus the book to make it even more useful to the intended audiences. First, I can unashamedly claim that this is a reference volume, given the comprehensive nature of my literature survey and the thoroughness with which I document each source, including specific page numbers. I couldn’t have done it without Google

Books and Google Scholar! Second, I know very well that readers find this work to be extremely accessible, all-encompassing, and engaging. Feedback suggests that students feel a justifiable sense of mastery of the field, once they've read it. Third, I want to provide a valuable resource to childhood scholars, whether in anthropology or elsewhere. Child psychologists, in particular, may be blinded by the dominance of Western culture in their theories, methods, and population samples. There are many ideas here that correct or even overturn conventional wisdom regarding child development and, particularly, the role of parents.

I likened the production of the original book to the careful handling of an awkward and obtrusive gorilla. For the second edition I would invoke the metaphor of a barn-raising. I have always been fascinated by the idea of a barn-raising, and one of my favorite cinematic moments is the Amish barn-raising in the 1985 film *Witness*. I have gained a wonderful community of friends and scholars in the last six years who've created forums for the discussion and promotion of the anthropology of childhood, and these discussions gave birth to many of the "big" ideas introduced in this edition. I would like to acknowledge my enormous debt to these very wonderful organizers/hosts. These include Susan Blum, James and Tanya Broesch, Alyssa Crittenden, Sandra Evers, Peggy Froerer, Rob Gordon, Peter Gray, Diane Hoffman, Marida Holos, Heidi Keller, Stephen Laurence, Alice Lesnick, Courtney Mehan, Leslie Moore, Élodie Razie and Charles-Edouarde de Suremain, Andria Sherrow, and Gerd Spittler. Funding from the Society for Psychological Anthropology allowed me (and colleagues John Bock and Suzanne Gaskins) to host a marvelous interdisciplinary seminar to thrash out the role of stage in theorizing about childhood. As I extended my reach, endeavoring to make this edition more comprehensive, I was aided by numerous patient scholars who expertly fielded my queries. A special thanks to David Bjorkland, John Bock, Barry Bogin, Adam Boyette, Suzanne Gaskins, Heather Montgomery, David Olson, Sanae Okamoto-Barth, and Alice Schlegel. Last, a shout-out to ACYIG board members Kristen Cheney, Jill Korbin, David Rosen, Susan Shepler, Aviva Sinervo, E. J. Sobo, Rachael Stryker, and Tom Weisner, who have been so critical in the process of building an organization to shelter our enterprise.

October 10, 2013

First edition preface

In 2002, an article entitled "Why don't anthropologists like children?" appeared in *American Anthropologist*. The author argued that anthropologists, in their comprehensive study of every society on the planet, had ignored or

mishandled childhood (Hirschfeld 2002). Since I'd devoted my career to the study of children in culture, I was personally affronted. Moreover, I had had no difficulty finding dozens of accounts of children in the ethnographic record to corroborate a thesis I advanced in a book published just a few years earlier (Lancy 1996). Consequently, I wrote a careful and thorough rebuttal and submitted it as a commentary. The journal editors rejected it as too long. I whittled and whittled but it was still over the 500-word limit. I gave up trying to shrink my rebuttal and, instead, decided to expand it. You are reading the result.

I realized that while I might be aware of a treasure trove of material in the ethnographic record, others might not. The field, in fact, seems balkanized. For example, I've noted that anthropologists who study children in schools – there are more than 700 members of the Council on Anthropology and Education – may not pay much attention to the work of ethnographers studying children learning to farm or to hunt. Anthropologists looking at language socialization; archaeologists studying mortuary practices; biobehavioral anthropologists studying fertility – these and numerous other lines of inquiry run in parallel, rarely crossing. Theoretical perspectives that are treated as antithetical when they might better be seen as complementary divide us as well.

This volume aims to include, therefore, the work of anthropologists interested in childhood who, heretofore, may have been unaware or at least unappreciative of each other's work. I achieve this synthesis partly through a comprehensive literature review but also by eschewing lengthy treatment of theoretical formulations that might act as a bar to the uninitiated. Ideally, this work should serve as a catalyst that promotes much greater interaction among those who study children.

The book quite consciously sets out to capture and offer at least a passing reference to most studies in anthropology where children are in the foreground. All of the major themes – for example, infancy, children's play, and adolescent initiation – are covered at length. Furthermore, where these themes about the disciplines of history and primatology, I draw liberally from those bodies of scholarship to strengthen and enrich the presentation.

A seminal work that provided a model for my research was Sarah Blaffer Hrdy's *Mother Nature*. In that book, Hrdy draws on the literature on motherhood outside the dominant culture, and, in constructing a more representative portrait, she also dismantles many taken-for-granted notions about the phenomenon – the maternal “instinct,” to choose just one example. It has been my intent to do for childhood what Hrdy did for motherhood. Here, too, we see that many assumptions that are made about what is “normal” or natural in children's development are, in fact, quite narrowly culture-bound. Indeed, throughout this work, the formula employed in child development texts will be turned on its head. In these texts, research on middle-class Euroamerican

children defines the standard and “anecdotes” from anthropological studies illustrate “deviation from the mean.” In the pages that follow, common aspects of Western childhood are examined through the lens of anthropology. This lens reveals that what we take for granted as customary appears to be rather strange when compared with prevailing practices found elsewhere. The goal is not to offer a competing volume to standard child development texts but, rather, to offer a supplement or corrective.

The alliterative terms in my subtitle suggest three compass points in this landscape. Our own society views children as precious, innocent, and preternaturally cute *cherubs*. However, for much of human history, children have been seen as anything but cherubic. I will introduce readers to societies, indeed entire periods in history, where children are viewed as unwanted, inconvenient *changelings* or as desired but pragmatically commoditized *chattel*. These perspectives will be employed in the study of family structure and reproduction; profiles of children’s caretakers – parental, sib, and community; their treatment at different ages; their play; their work; their schooling; and their transition to adulthood. Again and again, our views and treatment of our cherubs will stand in sharp contrast to views of children constructed by anthropologists and historians from their work in other societies.

Another audience I hope to reach is the legion of teachers, fieldworkers, and policymakers who are laboring to improve the lives of children not fortunate enough to have been born into a privileged society. All are aware of the importance of taking culture into account in their work, and “multiculturalism” has become an oft-heard mantra. But the concept is often used to provide some exotic spices to season the otherwise standard prescriptions for children’s schooling and welfare. Throughout this work we’ll probe deeply into the literature to discover the ways in which child development is truly shaped by culture. But *The Anthropology of Childhood* goes beyond this analysis in consistently building bridges between the rich cultural traditions documented by ethnographers in the past and the contemporary scenarios confronted by interventionists.

Gradually, the 500-plus-word commentary has grown into a 500-lb gorilla dominating my life and rendering me an insufferable companion. I couldn’t see a play or a movie or read a novel without finding something that might fit. Joyce has not only tolerated the beast but has groomed it on regular occasions. Other family and friends fed it snacks. Thank you Nadia, Sonia, Leslie, Bob, Judy, Quinn, Rick, and Melissa. Many others often asked after the gorilla’s growth and wellbeing. At Utah State, these included (among many others) my colleagues Michael Chipman, Richley Crapo, Christie Fox, Kermit Hall, Norm Jones, Rick Krannich, Pat Lambert, Lynn Meeks, and Mike Sweeney. Colleagues elsewhere who joined the vigil included Katie Anderson-Levitt, Nigel Barber, Jay Black, Gary Chick, Gary Cross, Aaron Denham, Bob

Edgerton, Heather Rae Espinoza, Hilary Fouts, Rob Gordon, Judy Harris, Shep Krech, Jon Marks, Jim Marten, David Olson, Aaron Podolefsky, Paul Raffaele, Deborah Reed-Danahay, Jaipaul Roopnarine, Peter Smith, Brian Sutton-Smith, Glenn Weisfeld, and Becky Zarger. Thank you all for your support, guidance, and tolerance of my persistent queries.

As this project took on visible proportions I began to bring the gorilla into my Anthropology of Childhood class. Students in the class also did much to nurture it from toddlerhood on, notably Helen Brower, JeriAnn Lukens, Amy Montuoro, Tonya Stallings, Mary Sundblom, and James Young. However, no one was more critical to this enterprise than Annette Grove, who evolved from stellar student into untiring and incredibly effective research assistant and editor. My debt to Annette is simply incalculable. Cecylia Maslowska assisted with the translation of Gerd Spittler's *Hirtenarbeit* and the late Professor Renate Posthofen with Barbara Polak's work. Professor Sarah Gordon assisted with material in French.

Many colleagues assisted in the creation of what eventually coalesced into this oversize creature, beginning before I had any idea of what was coming. Utah State's Honors Students in 1995 selected me to give the annual "Last Lecture," and I used the opportunity to develop the child-as-commodity ideas presented at the end of the book. A general outline of Chapters 6 and 7 emerged at a presentation I made at UCLA in February 1999. Hosted by Alan Fiske, the talk was followed by extremely stimulating discussions with Alan, Patricia Greenfield, Tom Weisner, Candy Goodwin, and others. In April 2004, Pierre Dasen and Jean Retschitzki invited me to a symposium in Switzerland to present early versions of Chapters 5 and 6 on learning and play. Sid Strauss had me speak in December 2004 to an incredibly diverse and stimulating group – sponsored by the McDonnell Foundation – on culture and children's social learning. Chapter 6 was drafted, initially, in response to an invitation from Gerd Spittler to give a presentation in Bayreuth in July 2005. Bryan Spykerman's inspired photographs of children added personality to the text. These gratefully acknowledged efforts to assist me in gestation are complemented by the work of many midwives who critically reviewed chapters and provided often extensive and invaluable feedback. Chief among these I would thank Rob Borofsky, John Gay, Barry Hewlett, Howard Kress, Mark Moritz, Barbara Polak, Ali Pomponio, Alice Schlegel, and, particularly, John Bock and Suzanne Gaskins. Two anonymous reviewers for Cambridge University Press provided extensive, on-target feedback.

This work is dedicated to the late Nancy Hylin. Our next-door neighbor, she became, in effect, a close older sibling. Nancy, in adulthood, met and married a Norwegian, Hans Jacob Hylin, settled in Norway and proceeded to raise four sons and assist in the rearing of nine grandchildren. She also enjoyed a distinguished career as a secondary school teacher. Nancy was a natural

participant observer and, for nearly fifty years, she shared her observations of childhood and adolescence with me and my family through the media of long, intimate letters and photographs. So, while my research and fieldwork has been episodic, I could count on a steady stream of “field reports” emanating from Norway, year after year. In spite of her passing in 2000, Nancy served as muse throughout this project, a silent but insistent reviewer and critic. Lastly, I need to acknowledge a muse of another sort. Katherine Iris Tomlinson will turn three in a few days and, since birth, her weekly play-dates with “Uncle David” have been both therapeutic and inspirational. As you read this text, please remember that I much prefer cherubs.

April 23, 2007

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1 Where do children come from?

The anthropologist's veto

Americans are the most individualistic people in the world. (Henrich *et al.* 2010: 76)

The field of developmental psychology is an ethnocentric one dominated by a Euro-American perspective. (Greenfield and Cocking 1994: ix)

A robust tradition in anthropology, dating at least to Mead's (1928/1961) *Coming of Age in Samoa*, calls attention to the culture-bound flaw in psychology. Mead's work undermined the claim by psychologist G. Stanley Hall that stress was inevitably part of adolescence. Less well known was Malinowski's earlier critique of Freud's Oedipal theory based on fieldwork in the Trobriand Islands (Malinowski 1927/2012). Universal stage theories of cognitive development, such as that of Jean Piaget, met a similar fate when cross-cultural comparative studies demonstrated profound and unpredicted influences of culture and the experience of being schooled (Greenfield 1966; Lancy and Strathern 1981; Lancy 1983). Ochs and Schieffelin's (1984) analysis of adult-child language interaction also showed that ethnographic studies in non-Western societies could be used to "de-universalize" claims made in the mainstream developmental psychology literature. Bob LeVine has taken on one of psychology's most sacred cows – mother-infant attachment (see also Scheper-Hughes 1987a). LeVine's observations of agrarian, East African Gusii parents suggest the possibility of weak attachment and consequent blighted development. He finds that, while mothers respond promptly to their infant's distress signals, they ignore other vocalizations such as babbling. They rarely look at their infants or speak to them – even while breastfeeding. Later, when they do address their children, they use commands and threats rather than praise or interrogatives (LeVine 2004: 154, 156; in press). In spite of these obvious signs of "pathology" on the part of Gusii mothers, LeVine and his colleagues – who have been studying Gusii villagers for decades – find no evidence of widespread emotional crippling. He argues that the problem of excessive claims of universality arises from the "child development field's dual identity as an ideological advocacy movement for the humane treatment

of children and a scientific research endeavor seeking knowledge and understanding” (LeVine 2004: 151).

Another sacred cow slain by anthropologists has been “parenting style” theory (Baumrind 1971). Central African Bofi farmers fit the so-called “authoritarian” parenting style in valuing respect and obedience and exercising coercive control over their children. According to the theory, Bofi children should be withdrawn, non-empathetic, and aggressive, and should lack initiative. On the contrary, they display precisely the opposite set of traits, and Fouts concludes that the theory may work when applied to Americans, but “it has very little explanatory power among the Bofi” (2005: 361). Throughout this book the reader will find similar examples of anthropologists “exercis[ing] their veto” (LeVine 2007: 250).

The view that many well-established theoretical positions in psychology cannot be as widely generalized as their authors assume was given a boost by a carefully argued paper published in 2010. Joe Henrich and colleagues challenged the very foundations of the discipline in arguing that psychologists fail to account for the influence of culture or nurture on human behavior. From a large-scale survey they determined that the vast majority of research in psychology is carried out with citizens – especially college students – of Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, Democracies (WEIRD). They note that, where comparative data are available “people in [WEIRD] societies consistently occupy the extreme end of the ... distribution [making them] one of the worst subpopulations one could study for generalizing about *Homo sapiens*” (Henrich *et al.* 2010: 63, 65, 79).

Primatologists as well have taken Western psychologists – who rely on lab experiments – to task for claims re uniquely human characteristics that are belied by evidence for these characteristics among free-living non-human primates. “The disdain of observational data in experimental psychology leads some to ignore the reality of animal cognitive achievements” (Boesch 2005: 692).

Some years earlier I had been struck by this same paradox – that both our popular and our scientific understanding of childhood were based on experience with and data from a single and unique culture. In studying Kpelle children in a remote interior village in Liberia, I took note of how radically different their experience of childhood was than that depicted in the textbooks I’d studied from. To capture this difference I created a polemical contrast between the society from which most of the generalizations about childhood had been made with the rest of the world. The contrast was best captured by the terms “neontocracy” and “gerontocracy” – as illustrated in Figure 1.

This contrast, along with continued reference to the atypicality of WEIRD society and field studies of apes, will channel much of the discussion throughout the book. My goal is to offer a correction to the ethnocentric lens that sees children only as precious, innocent, and preternaturally cute