CHILDHOOD

IN CONTEMPORARY CULTURES

Edited by **MARGARET MEAD**

and **MARTHA WOLFENSTEIN**

ways of looking at the worlds of childhood, presented by fourteen distinguished contributors.

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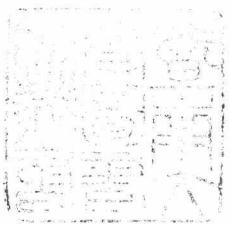

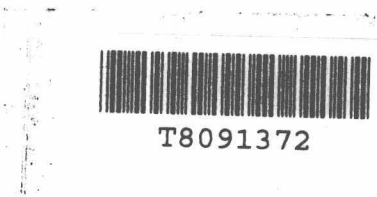

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO PRESS

CHICAGO AND LONDON

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO PRESS, CHICAGO 60637
The University of Chicago Press, Ltd., London

Published 1955. Printed in the United States of America

85 84 83 82 81 80 79 78 17 16 15 14 13

ISBN: 0-226-51506-0 (clothbound); 0-226-51507-9 (paperbound)
Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 55-10248

TO NATHAN LEITES

Acknowledgments

THIS book grew out of the Columbia University Research in Contemporary Cultures, inaugurated by Ruth Benedict in 1947; it also includes research done under the American Museum of Natural History Studies in Contemporary Culture. Both these projects were conducted under grants from the Human Resources Division of the Office of Naval Research. According to the terms of the contract, all the articles stemming from these two projects may be reproduced in whole or in part for any purpose of the United States government. We have also drawn on the materials of the American Museum of Natural History Studies in Soviet Culture, conducted under a contract with the RAND Corporation. Various aspects of the work of these projects have been reported in *The Study of Culture at a Distance*,[1] as well as in a number of other publications on particular cultures. Comparative studies of child rearing, which formed part of the project, have been reserved for the present volume. We have also included some subsequent researches which developed from the project; some earlier, closely related studies; and concurrent work of other investigators.

We wish to acknowledge our thanks for permission to reprint to: *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, for "Sex Differences in the Play Configurations of Preadolescents," by Erik Erikson and for "Patterns of Social and Cognitive Outlook in Children and Parents," by Else Frenkel-Brunswik, both of which articles appear in this volume in revised form; *Harvard Educational Review*, for "The Place of Book-Learning in Traditional Jewish Culture," by Mark Zborowski; International Universities Press, New York, for Martha Wolfenstein's "Some Variants in Moral Training of Children," which appeared in *The Psychoanalytic Study of the Child*, Volume V (1950); *Journal of Social Issues*, for "Fun Morality," by Martha Wolfenstein; McGraw-Hill Book Company, New York, and RAND Corporation, for selections from Margaret Mead's *Soviet Attitudes toward Authority;* the New York Academy of Sciences, for passages from "Themes in Japanese Culture," by Geoffrey Gorer, which appeared in the *Transactions*, Series 2; *Psychiatry*, for "Continuities and Discontinuities in Cultural Conditioning," by Ruth Benedict; Yale University Press, New Haven, Connecticut, for David Riesman's "Tootle: A Modern Cautionary Tale," a chapter adapted from his book *The Lonely Crowd.*

1. Margaret Mead and Rhoda Métraux. *The Study of Culture at a Distance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953).

For permission to use some of the illustrations in this volume, we wish to express our thanks to the following: *Current Digest of the Soviet Press,* New York, for the cartoon reprinted from *Krokodil* and used in chapter 11 of this volume; John Day and Company, New York, for illustrations from Colin McPhee's *Club of Small Men* and *House in Bali;* London Film Productions, Inc., and the Motion Picture Association of America, Inc., for illustrations used in chapter 17 of this volume; the New York Academy of Sciences for Plate 67, No. 7, Plate 10, No. 3, and Plate 61, No. 4, taken from *Balinese Character* by Gregory Bateson and Margaret Mead and used in chapter 4 of this volume; the Yiddish Scientific Institute (Yivo), New York, for the illustrations used by Mark Zborowski in chapter 8.

For editorial assistance in the preparation of the manuscript, we have to thank Mrs. Leila Lee and Mrs. Constance Sutton.

M. M.
M. W.

NEW YORK
October 31, 1954

Table of Contents

List of Illustrations

PART I

Cultural Approaches to the Study of Childhood

CHAPTER 1

Theoretical Setting—1954

MARGARET MEAD

CHILDREN are newcomers as a subject of literature, newcomers in the study of human physiology and anatomy, newcomers in the social sciences. Although each historical period of which we have any record has had its own version of childhood—in paintings of the Christ Child and St. John, in portraits of little princes and princesses, in charming compositions of languid ladies and their lovely children—childhood was still something that one took for granted, a figure of speech, a mythological subject rather than a subject of articulate scrutiny. As in all areas in which disciplined observation replaces traditional points of view, the study of real children has met with many kinds of opposition. Members of different Western cultures have reacted—in terms of their own cultural predispositions—against robbing childhood of its innocence, denigrating adults by suggesting that their characters are formed in childhood, frightening mothers by insisting that irreparable damage can be done in childhood, stirring up adult emotions to an uncomfortable degree by activating memories of their childhood, giving the maladjusted adult an alibi for avoiding moral responsibility by permitting him to blame his present shortcomings on his childhood, denying the full assimilation of adult immigrants or adult revolutionaries, or—in the words of a psychiatrist from modern India—paying attention to the past rather than to the future in countries which are attempting to escape from the thralldom of their traditions.

In the present social ferment, when we live in a world in which peoples jostle one another in the news, in the corridors of the United Nations, as students in universities all over the world—some of whom are just escaping from the Stone Age, some battling with elaborate and sophisticated oriental and Near Eastern traditions far older than the West's, some attempting to recapture lost homogeneities, some clinging fanatically to new, just attained, cultural styles—it is inevitable that the whole problem of how childhood is to be conceptualized, how studied, how utilized in cultural change, should become a focus of controversy.

Although the chief impetus to the study of children came from psychology, on the one hand, and from medicine—through Freud—on the other, even in these fields there have been and still are many unresolved hostilities. Psychologists have concentrated on "child psychol-

ogy"[1]—the accumulation of specific bodies of information based on tests and on controlled and severely limited experimental situations, and students have been inducted into the field by reading books about experiments and test results, not by the study of live children. Too often the only live children seriously observed were the one or two children of the psychologist, who provided him with anecdotal material which frequently overweighted his judgments. Thus it became necessary to introduce a new field called "child development," in which live children could be studied in nurseries and play groups; but even here, over and over again, the demands for standard examinations, standard test situations, home visits and parental interviews, have come to replace the study of children, even in the limited natural setting of the nursery school. In turn, these segments of certain aspects of the child—its growth curve, its somatype, its test performance, its school performance—have been laboriously put together again, using elaborate statistical devices, to reconstruct that which had been dissected. In psychoanalysis it took some time for child analysis—the study of real children in analytic situations—to replace constructs of childhood derived from the associations of adult patients; and the conceptions of childhood which recur in psychoanalytic theory are still more often based on such reconstructions of infantile omnipotence or infantile diffused identity than upon the careful detailed observations made by modern students of infants and children.

In anthropological work the same history was repeated. First came vivid naturalistic accounts of primitive childhood by a few amateur observers, notably Kidd and Grinnell;[2] then the development of a technique of formally including childhood within the account of any primitive culture, under the heading of "the life-cycle" or "the development of the individual"; then a theoretical *tour de force,* such as Malinowski's construct of the way in which Trobriand matriliny and denial of paternity might have influenced the character structure of the Trobrianders[3] and Piaget's use of Lévy-Bruhl's concept of primitive mentality as childish;[4] and, finally, the serious study of primitive children themselves.[5]

The interest in children in culture, as part of the culture and personality field, and in the "socialization process," as studied today by psychologists and sociologists, is an outgrowth of work in these three fields: psychology, particularly psychoanalysis, child-development research, and cultural anthropology. Although there are distinguished male workers in the field, notably John Dollard, Erik Erikson, Arnold Gesell, Geoffrey Gorer, Jean Piaget, and René Spitz, it is probably not an accident that all of them have worked closely with women teachers or collaborators. This volume of primary studies owes a great deal to

their theoretical formulations, and the contributors to this volume have worked in collaborative two-sex teams in doing their research.

The last thirty years, when serious work on children was beginning, have also been a period when women played an increasingly serious professional role in medicine, psychology, psychoanalysis, and anthropology. Women's traditional preoccupation with young children made the study of children a natural choice, and there is also reason to believe that the study of children may be easier—in the present generation of research workers—for women than for men. Although we are now entering a new era in which fathers take a great deal of care of young children, the present working generation grew up in a period when child care was women's work. For men who are studying infants and young children, if they are not comfortable in a temporary identification with a woman's role, the alternative route to understanding is remembering their own childhood feelings and experiences. Like all intense retrospective work, this is psychologically expensive. Women investigators need not take this arduous route but, instead, can identify easily with the remembered roles of mother, grandmother, nurse, and primary teacher, as they spend hours working with, or thinking about, young children.

In this volume we do not propose to present an exhaustive study of ways of studying children within a cultural context but rather to give the student and interested reader some idea of the kinds of research which may fruitfully be explored from the standpoint both of method and of results. We have included several kinds of studies on the same culture, so that the student can see what it looks like to study French films, French children's drawings, and French children in a park, or German child-care literature, German juvenile fiction, and story completion by German children.

It has long been the experience of workers in the cultural field that a great deal is lost to science if the research worker does not approach each new piece of work with a fresh mind, ready to learn new things as well as to recheck earlier insights, repeat former check lists, and try the same tests over again. What is needed is a general sense of problem, of what it means to look at something from the cultural point of view, of what kind of observations are used, what kind of material can be analyzed and how. Mere repetition of work on one culture or a different culture is a stale and tasteless operation. The initial exploration of cultural material must be free, resourceful, and disciplined, but untrammeled. Once the basic regularities have been outlined, cross-cultural tests, check lists, projective techniques, as validation, may be used with some confidence that something new will be added to our knowledge of human behavior. But the mere mechanical repeating of any approach such as a thematic analysis of films, on different films in

the same culture or of the same themes in another culture, constricts rather than expands the field.

This means the use of a closed system of reference—to the extent that all research on human beings must include the species-specific characteristics of human beings—and an open system in which we may expect to find entirely new patterns of behavior, depending on different historical circumstances and utilizing hitherto unguessed potentialities of human nature. Concentration on oedipal themes is more rewarding in some cultures than in others, but limiting analysis to oedipal themes would do serious violence in those cultures where the first two to three years of life provide the ground plan for later periods of development. Furthermore, the verification of a pattern by the use of a larger number of cases, a wider choice of materials, or by materials drawn from a longer period of time, while useful and necessary parts of scientific work, do not call for the special skill of initial pattern recognition on which the studies in this book are mainly based.

So in looking at the various sources of material on childhood, child-training literature, children in fiction and drama, observations on children, interviews with children and adults, games and toys and children's books, it is important to look not just for "oedipal fantasies," "rejecting mothers," "castration fears," "initiatory rites," "inner directedness," or "mesomorphic emphases," but to look instead at the living material and to place it within the entire context of our knowledge of cultures and of our knowledge of human growth and development. The work in this book was done by examining such areas, bearing in mind that the parent-child relationship was always a fruitful source of inquiry, that the role of the body, the attitude of the parent toward the child's body and of the child toward its own body, would always appear somehow in the material and that children in each society develop some kind of character which enables them to function within that society.

In the study of personality in culture we start with a recognition of the biologically given, of what all human beings have in common. In every human society, human infants are born helpless and relatively undeveloped, dependent upon adult nurture and adult transmission of the great body of culture—beliefs, practices, skills—which make it possible for any human group, and for this human group in particular, to function as human beings. Humanity as we know it is not merely a matter of our human physique, of our prehensile thumbs, upright posture, and highly developed brains, but of our capacity to accumulate and build upon the inventions and experience of previous generations. A child who does not participate in this great body of tradition, whether because of defect, neglect, injury, a disease, never becomes fully human.

As every child must learn to accept food, to trust those who care for him, to make his wants known, to walk and talk and assume control of his own body and actions, to identify with own sex and age and develop appropriate behavior toward individuals of the opposite sex and other ages, we may expect that in the course of this long maturation and learning there will be a great deal in common between childhood among the unclothed, nomadic Australian aborigines and childhood on Park Avenue, or in rural Alabama, in Paris or Bali, Devon or Provence. Whether children are breast-fed, bottle-fed, cup-fed, or spoon-fed, they must eat with their mouths, learn to suck or drink, chew their food, swallow, and discriminate between that which is and that which is not food. They may learn to walk by being hand-led, by being given a walking rail, put in a harness, kept in a play pen, but they all learn to walk within relatively close age limits. Whether they learn to swim, climb, roller skate, or dance will depend on their own culture; minor sequences like standing, then squatting, or squatting, then standing, may be altered by culture. Whether their movements will be rigidly stylized and resistant to new learning or flexibly adjustable to new requirements will again depend on their culture. But walk they must and do, walk in a world where adults are taller, much taller than they, pygmies among giants, ignorant among the knowledgeable, wordless among the articulate, with incomprehensible urgencies and desires and fears among adults who appear to have such matters reduced to a system—a system which must be mastered. And to the adults, children everywhere represent something weak and helpless, in need of protection, supervision, training, models, skills, beliefs, "character." Children cling and grab and scream, children are periodically inaccessible to any appeal, children in their lack of control represent the impulses which the adults in their childhood laboriously learned to discipline and control. The double threat of fearing to behave like a child and of yearning to behave like a child runs through all adult lives, just as the fear and hope of some day becoming an adult inform the play and fantasies of children.

Because of these recurrent biological similarities—of growth, of parent-child relationships, of needs and fears, and resonances—it is possible to compare childhood in one society with childhood in another. The common elements, the uniformities, are the basis of the comparisons. In some primitive tribes infants born with teeth will be killed as unnatural; Russian children were terrified by the image of the witch baby born with iron teeth,[6] but most babies continue to be born without teeth and to cut their teeth within narrow chronological limits.

Furthermore, men everywhere have to solve certain problems if they are to live in societies—problems of food supply, shelter, and protection from sun, rain, and cold; of sexual jealousy and permanence of mating

for the care of children; of social order, protection against enemies, disease, and catastrophe; of a relationship to the world around them and to the conceived universe which gives them spiritual balance, patterns their fantasies, stylizes their aspirations, and releases their capacity to invent, create, and change. The solution to these problems provides a second set of uniformities. Children will have to learn to live in houses, to use tools, to observe social rules, to respect the person and property of others, to see the stars—as the lights of heaven, the frozen residue of celestial mischief, miraculous embodiments of the animals which they must hunt to live, or as future husbands for young girls who wish hard enough. Houses have to have entrances and vents for smoke; clothing has to be put on and taken off; with growing complexity, people have special places to sit, to sleep, to eat. Furthermore, culture grows by borrowing; people incorporate traits of their neighbors, learn their myths, sing their songs, or copy their clothes. People of areas which are in touch with one another—contiguous in space or because of political or religious ties—share the same solutions, and such institutions as currency or law courts, libraries, hospitals, schools, purification offerings or confession, armies and navies and embassies, become characteristic, and characteristic in their particular forms, over large sections of the world.

If the naïve reader encounters a statement on child-rearing practice in modern society, nine-tenths or more of it will seem very familiar. The reader who is not trained in noting small details as significant and who is unaccustomed to thinking in patterns will say, "Why practically everything those people do to their children is just like what we do—babies are breast- or bottle-fed, trained to be clean, learn to talk, go to school, join the church, pass examinations, etc." Often the next step is to seize on the one or two things which do sound a little peculiar—such as the use of wet nurses or swaddling or being constantly carried on the back—and to treat these unfamiliar details as if they had unique importance in producing any differences in adult character which may be admitted.

But, while striking differences in behavior may give rapid clues to important differences in the whole pattern, it is important to realize that it is not any single item of child-rearing practice or of culturally patterned child behavior—not the presence or absence of feeding bottles or slates, skates or hoops or balls, prayers or homilies or bribes—which is significant in isolation.[7] It is the way in which all these thousands of items, most of which are shared with other cultures, some of which are shared with all other cultures, are patterned or fitted together to make a whole. Within these patterns children grow up, young people learn to be parents, people age and die in terms of the complex