Introduction

Most anthropologists—even those who study marriage, kinship and family—often ignore children, in spite of the fact that one of the principal components of culture is the production of each new generation whose agenda, in turn, includes the transmission of that culture into the future. Within anthropology, scholarly interest in childhood has been rather like five blind men describing an elephant. There are vital, but isolated, scholarly communities studying children and their development, including psychological anthropology. Hence, a comprehensive, holistic view of childhood has not yet emerged. We propose to convene a group of scholars whose research perspectives span the entire spectrum of scholarship on culture and childhood. And we will charge this group with the task of constructing a coherent and theoretically robust description of the stages and transitions in childhood.

While psychological anthropologists and others have long taken note of the cultural and biological markers that signal important transitions in the life course (especially during the pre-adult period), recently there been new attempts to examine these transitions across a broad spectrum of societies and across the entire pre-adult portion of the lifespan. In view of recent advances in Life History Theory, new initiatives in archaeology focused on children, and eye-opening studies of street children and child soldiers, we believe an opportunity exists to construct a model of childhood that is fully informed by the findings, methods and theoretical perspectives of anthropology. This new conceptualization of children and childhood within various sub-fields suggests that this is a propitious time to develop an integrative anthropological perspective on children.

We have identified three basic topics (elaborated below) that have the potential of offering a meeting ground for scholars of children from a variety of fields within anthropology: 1) what are the nature and uses of immaturity by individuals and cultures? 2) how does immaturity express itself at different stages of childhood and what processes construct the characteristics of those stages?, and 3) in the contemporary world, are we seeing both increasingly long and increasingly short periods of immaturity, overall and within specific stages? Anthropology, because of its holistic and multi-disciplinary nature, is uniquely positioned to wrestle with these very profound, but unresolved, issues. And psychological anthropology, because of its long-standing interest in childhood and socialization, is uniquely positioned to take a leadership role in integrating contemporary approaches to childhood in anthropology at this ripe moment.
I. Traditional Uses of Immaturity Across Cultures: What are the nature and uses of immaturity across childhood? A major goal of the conference would be to construct a more integrated understanding of immaturity. Is childhood designed, primarily, to enhance the parents’ inclusive fitness? Is childhood a funnel into which culture is poured to produce a culturally competent and active adult or do children construct their own understanding? Is a lengthy period of immaturity necessary because there is so much to learn or because it allows the physical and cognitive growth prerequisite to the assumption of adult roles? Do children participate only in those activities that can accommodate their immaturity or are they given tasks to do that make active use of their failing to be fully legitimate, adult participants? Is childhood a mechanism to facilitate cultural change, exchanging new lives for old?

Additional questions about the nature of immaturity arise naturally from the fact that “stages,” while statistically both common and congruent, are not universal. The biological markers of maturation exhibit a great deal of flexibility in response to social and ecological factors such as access to resources. Having established the empirical reality of socially constructed stages, we would move to define what variations there are across cultures in the staging of childhood, what motivates these differences, and what impact they have. What are the trade-offs between immediate productivity and the acquisition of skills for future productivity? How does the nature of adult activity impact the length of time for children to become competent participants? Whose ends—the child, the family, the community—are being served by particular designations of childhood stages?

II. Lifecourse Stages and Their Consequences for Childhood
Historically, childhood has not been seen as a single, undifferentiated state of immaturity, but rather a series of “stages” or differentiated periods of immaturity each possessing distinct characteristics. The conference will investigate the principal stages that mark the passage from infancy through early and middle childhood and ask how immaturity changes across these stages and why. This tri-fold division correspond reasonably well to what ethnographers observe on the ground and to recent evolutionary analysis. However, we are using stage as an organizing device with very loose, emergent parameters. Our attention will frequently shift between the often ritualized transitions between stages and a consideration of the micro-culture that plays out during infancy, early childhood and middle childhood.

III. Expanding and Contracting Childhood Today: The final issue is a novel proposition that may open avenues connecting research on children in traditional, pre-modern or extinct societies with contemporary childhood. Conference participants will explore the idea that current trends are leading to a bi-modal distribution of communities where the period of immaturity is either quite long or quite short—by comparison with norms drawn from the historical and ethnographic records. Among the educated elite and those with matching aspirations, childhood seems to be dramatically lengthened. By contrast, in communities suffering the impact of rapid social change, overpopulation, civil war and chronic poverty, childhood may be dramatically shortened. These children are sometimes forced to fend for themselves from an early age or participate in war zone atrocities. Or, more positively, they may find their status in the family rapidly elevated as they serve as interpreters or brokers who more readily
acquire the skills and language needed to adapt to a new homeland or new technologies. Variation in the observed length of childhood is often consistent with predictions from evolutionary theory regarding the effect of stress and resource availability on maturation. How closely do social and cultural constructions of childhood stages match the biological markers of maturation across these societies? Using our re-staging heuristic, we will seek to demonstrate how the dynamism inherent in the social construction of childhood can explain the adaptive value of emerging archetypes—the forever young and the never young.

Potential Significance
Within the field of anthropology the relatively few synthesizing works on childhood remain narrow in scope and usually confined to one research tradition. At this time anthropologists from all areas have converged on childhood as a topic of interest, and cross-cultural and evolutionary studies of maturation, in particular, are increasing. The proposed conference will be an opportunity to focus and harness this energy in a synergistic fashion and forge a step in the unification of theoretical and empirical perspectives. To facilitate the process of dissemination, the three conveners would edit a book of participants’ chapters that use re-staging childhood as a heuristic tool to build a new understanding of the interconnections and cross-fertilization possible among disparate research traditions within anthropology.

Most investigators beyond anthropology focusing on children and childhood (e.g., developmental psychologists, educators, sociologists) do not recognize that the flavor of the stages of childhood that appear to be universal within a single culture are in fact constructed by an interaction of many levels of influence. Anthropologists are particularly prepared to develop a more complex model of stages that would integrate these levels (individual, family, society, species) and thereby offer the skeleton of a model of immaturity and maturity that would be a critical resource to others who are trying to incorporate culture or diversity in to their thinking but who do not have the theory or evidence to do so adequately.

Proposed Organization of Conference
Participants will each produce a 15”-20” Powerpoint presentation to offer other participants an overview of their work and how it fits with the conference themes. The focus of these presentations will be guided by the conveners so that the contribution of each perspective and individual is potentiated. Each of the three topics will be the focus of one day of the conference. The sessions will be organized around a series of focused discussions. The goal is for participants to apply the knowledge gained in the sessions to the construction of a paper that grows out of the conference. This paper will form the basis of the chapters in the proposed edited volume.

Proposed Participants
Sixteen-eighteen participants will be chosen from a wide range of fields within anthropology, including cultural, linguistic, biological/evolutionary, archaeological, cognitive, medical, and, last but not least, psychological anthropology, with some participants bridging across multiple perspectives. In developing the list of “dream” participants, we have included people who study children from traditional,
contemporary and historic societies; across a broad geographic spectrum; and with varied modes of production.