Ethnographic Studies of Childhood: A Historical Overview

ABSTRACT In this article, I briefly survey the ethnographic research literature on childhood in the 20th century, beginning with the social and intellectual contexts for discussions of childhood at the turn of the 20th century. The observations of Bronislaw Malinowski and Margaret Mead in the 1920s were followed by later ethnographers, also describing childhood, some of whom criticized developmental theories; still others were influenced initially by Freudian and other psychoanalytic theories and later by the suggestions of Edward Sapir for research on the child’s acquisition of culture. The Six Cultures Study led by John Whiting at midcentury was followed by diverse trends of the period after 1960—including field studies of infancy, the social and cultural ecology of children’s activities, and language socialization. Ethnographic evidence on hunting and gathering and agricultural peoples was interpreted in evolutionary as well as cultural and psychological terms. The relationship between ethnography and developmental psychology remained problematic.

I N THIS ARTICLE, I present an overview of ethnographic research on childhood during the 20th century, including works in biological, linguistic, social, and psychological anthropology. The literature is extensive and interdisciplinary, appearing in journals of psychology, psychiatry, and linguistics, as well as anthropology, and in monographs and volumes of collected papers. It grew during the second half of the century, covering all regions of the world, and in the 1990s there were more ethnographic studies of childhood published in book form than in any previous decade.

The aim of this article is to show the extent and diversity of published ethnographic accounts of childhood over the past 80 years, providing a bibliography and a basic historical background that might prove useful for future analyses. In the interests of brevity, I have limited this account to ethnographies of infancy and childhood in domestic and community settings. That has meant omitting not only theoretical treatises, psychometric studies, and school studies but also other bodies of anthropological research on childhood: studies of immigrant children (e.g., Suarez-Orozco and Suarez-Orozco 2001); studies of chronically ill, dying, or disabled children (e.g., Bluebond-Langner 1978, 1996); research on child abuse and other social problems of children in diverse cultures (e.g., Korbin 1981; Montgomery 2001; Montgomery et al. 2003; Scherper-Hughes 1987); the “cultural politics” literature on childhood (e.g., Scherper-Hughes 1992; Scherper-Hughes and Sargent 1998; Stephens 1995); and the archaeology of childhood (e.g., Baxter 2005). These bodies of research deserve, and in some cases have had, overviews of their own.

An ethnographic study of childhood as used herein is a descriptive account, based on field observations and interviews, of the lives, activities, and experiences of children in a particular place and time, and of the contexts—social, cultural, institutional, economic—that make sense of their behavior there and then. There would be no need for such descriptive accounts if childhood in ideal and practice were uniform across human populations and historical periods or if the developmental pathways for children were randomly distributed among humans. The ethnography of childhood, then, is based on the premise—constantly reexamined in empirical research—that the conditions and shape of childhood tend to vary in central tendency from one population to another, are sensitive to population-specific contexts, and are not comprehensible without detailed knowledge of the socially and culturally organized contexts that give them meaning.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The recording and publishing of descriptions of the lives, activities, and experience of children did not originate with anthropology, but in the course of the 20th century anthropologists gave such accounts a distinctive stamp
as research to enhance knowledge of human variation for scientific and policy purposes. From the 1920s onward, anthropologists published ethnographic reports on childhood among human populations across the world, devised and refined observational approaches, and developed and borrowed theoretical frameworks for analyzing data collected in fieldwork.

Descriptions of customary practices regarding children and their activities appeared in the texts of many cultures, non-Western as well as Western, before the 19th century, including travelers' reports on foreign practices that seemed strange (and therefore noteworthy) and clergymen's advice to parents in a particular context. The 19th century saw a heightened public interest in children in Western countries, manifested in literary and journalistic representations of children as innocent victims of economic exploitation, the "child-saving" movement that sought to abolish child labor and provide care for orphans, the laws that made school attendance compulsory, and efforts to create an empirical science that would replace religious doctrine and philosophical speculation in public discourse about children. This public interest had been institutionalized—in school systems, orphanages, and academic and medical specialties—by the end of the century, when anthropology and other social science fields were taking their modern forms.

In the United States and western Europe soon after 1900, there were some fundamental alterations in the conditions of children's lives: (1) Infant and child mortality began to decline, partly as the result of public health measures (purification of drinking water, pasteurization of milk, etc.) and sanitary practices in the home and other settings; and (2) mass secondary school enrollment extended schooling throughout childhood and into adolescence.

The biomedical changes formed the basis of what might be called the "medicalization" of childcare, as illustrated by the hygiene movement in the United States, which was actively promoted by government and medical authorities (Ewbank and Preston 1990; Preston and Haines 1991). The vast increases in school attendance during the late 19th and early 20th centuries called public attention to the processes of learning and developmental change during childhood and stimulated the emergence of child psychology and educational psychology, led by pioneers such as G. Stanley Hall, Edward L. Thorndike, James Mark Baldwin, and (in France) Alfred Binet. In the United States, questions of learning were made urgent by the problems of educating large numbers of immigrant children.

Thus, from about 1880 to 1920, childhood was increasingly formulated in what might be called pediatric and pedagogical terms, and there was public discussion about how science might improve the care and learning of children in the contexts of newly expanded medical and educational institutions. There were also new and radical ideas about the family, women, and child rearing that arose during this period in the Anglo-American world, although their greatest impact would be later. Women were to be freed from the home to study at postsecondary institutions, vote, and participate in public life; fertility was to be voluntarily controlled through contraception supported by sex education, so that families could be kept small; and children were to be raised "scientifically" rather than according to the dictates of custom.

In this milieu, Sigmund Freud's writings became available (in what he regarded as inadequate translations) and influential. Freud was hardly an extreme environmentalist, but he was widely interpreted as claiming that young children were not only sentient and passionate beings but also highly vulnerable to parental and other early influences, for worse as well as for better. By 1920, a "Freudian" context for the interest in children's experience, often based on an exaggeration or distortion of Freud's ideas, was becoming widespread in public discourse on childhood. Freud's works drew unprecedented attention to the subjective experience of children and added a public preoccupation with the new and anxious questions: What is the best way to raise a child? What is the normal child? Through what stages of child development do infants become adults?

Christian missionaries and colonial administrators of the late 19th and early 20th centuries wrote books describing the customs of the peoples with whom they worked in Oceania, Asia, Africa, and the Americas and included sections (often with photographs) on customs of child rearing that struck them as noteworthy, including adoption, naming and initiation ceremonies, practices of breast feeding and sibling care, and children's houses. Although these observers were not as deliberate, comprehensive, or disciplined as the anthropologists who followed them, and although they were more likely to make ethnocentric judgments, such writers often had a good command of the local language, having spent long periods among the peoples they wrote about, with many opportunities to observe children. Some of the later missionary ethnographers like Henri Junod (1927), who wrote about the Thonga of Mozambique, were trained in anthropology and published valuable if fragmentary accounts of children's lives in cultural context. Ethnographies of childhood by missionaries and colonial administrators continued into the 1940s (e.g., Childs 1949; Elwin 1947; Raum 1940).

This early ethnographic literature provided the initial evidence for wide cultural variations in childhood environments used by anthropologists in generalizing about human childhood (e.g., Mead 1931; van Gennep 1960). Examination of this literature made it clear that there was divergence among peoples of the world in their concepts of the best way to raise children and of what constitutes normal child development. The stage was set for future confrontations between ethnographic evidence and the concepts of "normal" child development emerging from theory and research in Western countries.

By 1928, professional anthropologists were publishing ethnographic accounts of childhood based on their own fieldwork in non-Western communities. Margaret Mead (1928a, 1928b) and Bronislaw Malinowski (1929) were
among the first. In her brief article “Samoan Children at Work and Play” in *Natural History*, Mead presents a number of ways in which childhood in Samoa as she observed it differs from that of children in the United States: Samoan children change their own names, move from one relative to another, live in families of as many as 20, and are “spoiled and pampered” until the age of five years old, when they become the caretakers or trainers of younger children. They have to work at gender-specific tasks of increasing difficulty as they get older during childhood. (No ages are given.) They have no toys, but they participate in adult life almost from the start and play games in which they imitate adult activities. Yet they are punished if they stand out conspicuously above other children or attempt grown-up tasks above their status. These are themes that would be elaborated in detail in the ethnographies that followed over the 20th century.

Like Mead, Malinowski, in *The Sexual Life of Savages in North Western Melanesia* (1929), was addressing the general public rather than other professional anthropologists, and his whole book was intended to describe Trobriand ideas and practices concerning sexual behavior that contrast with those of the West. But he also sought to show (as he had argued in his earlier book, *Sex and Repression in a Savage Society* [1927]) that Trobrianders, being matrilineral in social organization, had family dynamics and sexual development contrasting sharply with those Freud claimed to be generically human in his concept of the Oedipus complex. Malinowski’s crystalline descriptions and vivid anecdotes were carefully selected to make this point: Trobriand father and mother are of equal status; fathers participate in infant care and take great pride in their infants; children are free and independent; and, although parents sometimes beat their children, Malinowski also observed “quite as often” children beating their parents (1929:45). He reports the children’s sex games he observed (with “no interference by older persons” [Malinowski 1929:50]) and those he heard about but was unable to observe. While making his case for a revision of Freud’s ideas, he was demonstrating the ethnographer’s command of language, context, culture, and behavior that would set a standard for future studies.

### The Plasticity Principle and Human Variability

The precursor to ethnographic research on childhood in U.S. anthropology was Franz Boas’s anthropometric work on child growth among immigrants to the United States. Boas had been trained in anthropometric methods in 1883 in the Berlin laboratory of Rudolf Virchow, the pioneer of medical pathology (and physical anthropology), for whom *plasticity* was a major biological principle, operating at every level from the cell to the organism (Stocking 1968:139, 1974:22). Virchow argued, and Boas later taught, that the plasticity characteristic of biological processes often made it difficult to distinguish between normal and pathological variants, mandating caution in claiming as pathological a variant form that might actually represent an adaptive response to a particular environment. In other words, difference may betoken adaptive variation rather than deficiency or defect (Boas 1902; see also reprint in Stocking 1974:36–41).

Boas brought this perspective to his studies of child growth among immigrants, first in Worcester, Massachusetts, when he was teaching in G. Stanley Hall’s Psychology Department at Clark University from 1889 to 1892, later in New York from 1908 to 1910. After the large New York study, Boas (1912) formulated a developmental perspective suggesting not only that human growth is influenced by environmental factors but also that, given the gradual maturation of the human nervous system, the child’s “mental makeup” must also be affected by “the social and geographical environment” (1912:217–218).

Boas left further specification of this perspective to his students Edward Sapir, Ruth Benedict, and Margaret Mead—the founders of the culture and personality movement—although it is unclear whether he liked what they did with it (Stocking 1992). His silence during the next 30 years on the very cultural psychology of child development to which he had opened the door was no doubt related to his well-known antagonism to theoretical speculation. But as he was well acquainted with the psychologies of his time, the silence seems to indicate an especially prescient skepticism about psychological theories and methods, many of which were eventually thrown aside by child psychologists themselves in the course of the 20th century.

This instability in psychology points to the paradox later anthropologists of childhood would face: Anthropologists are at least partly dependent on developmental knowledge from other disciplines in their assumptions about how children experience their environments—including the environmental features to which they are sensitive and their age-related concepts for understanding—and they have often turned to psychology and psychiatry for guidance in making these assumptions plausible. For much of the 20th century, however, this guidance was unreliable, as one developmental theory followed another into the trash heap of history.

The Freudian theory of psychosexual stages led some ethnographers to focus their data collection on feeding, toilet training, and emerging sexuality in young children, whereas behavioristic psychology recommended recording the rewards and punishments in the child’s environment. When these theories lost credibility, so did the ethnographic accounts based on them as adequate records of childhood experience.

The turnover in developmental theories in psychology continued after 1960, as the influence of Jean Piaget and other cognitive theorists waxed and then waned, and the social-cognitive formulations of Lev Vygotsky and his students and the attachment theory of John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth introduced a new but not universally accepted focus on social interactions.

Thus the chronic instability of dominant theories concerning the child’s psychological development during the 20th century posed a quandary for ethnographers of
childhood. If they organized their fieldwork around the “best knowledge available” at a particular moment, they risked having their account of childhood become obsolete and inadequate by the time they published their findings. Yet they had to make some assumptions about what was worth observing and recording in the environments and activities of children in diverse settings, and it was the developmental psychology of the day that offered attractive if potentially faulty assumptions. The ways in which anthropologists of childhood dealt with this dilemma is taken up in the following sections.

CULTURAL CRITIQUE AND ETHNOGRAPHIC EXPLORATION

A characteristic response of anthropologists to the claims of developmental psychology and psychiatry was to use ethnographic evidence to prove them culture bound, suggesting that a theory needed to be modified to encompass cultural variation or abandoned as a false generalization about the human species. Malinowski and Mead led the way. Malinowski (1927) proposed that Freud’s concept of the Oedipus complex in young children had to be modified for matrilineal societies like that of the Trobriand Islanders, and Mead (1928b) argued that the Samoans she studied did not experience the adolescent turmoil posited by Hall (1904) as a human universal. Thus, before 1930, anthropologists had initiated a critical ethnography of childhood that could play a decisive role in rejecting “universal propositions falsifiable by a single negative instance” (Kaufmann 1944) in the study of child development.

Mead (1932) provided another example of this gadfly role for ethnographic research on childhood when she published an article criticizing Piaget’s theory of childhood animism on the basis of interviews she conducted with Manus children in Melanesia. Psychologists nevertheless continued to generate developmental propositions claiming universal validity during the rest of the 20th century, even after John Whiting’s (1954) persuasive case for cross-cultural analysis in the Handbook of Social Psychology, so the gadfly role has remained relevant, and anthropologists have continued to exercise their veto with evidence from non-Western cultures.

Piaget’s universalist account of childhood cognitive development, which became influential among U.S. psychologists after 1963, also came under empirical attack with cross-cultural evidence at that time (e.g., Greenfield 1966; Shweder and LeVine 1975). Other proposed universals of child development that were subject to cultural critique included Lawrence Kohlberg’s (1984) cognitively based model of moral development (Shweder et al. 1990), Carol Gilligan’s (1982) conception of gender differences in development (Miller 1994), and the John Bowlby-Mary Ainsworth attachment theory (Harwood et al. 1995; LeVine and Norman 2001). However powerful these cultural critiques may seem to anthropologists and to some leading psychologists such as Jerome Bruner (1990), developmental psychology has consistently immunized itself not only to evidence from ethnography and cross-cultural replications that casts doubt on its theories du jour but even to the gross limitations of its empirical base for generalizing about childhood. As of 2000, 88 percent of the primary school-aged children in the world lived in the “less-developed regions” (UN Population Division 2005:10) where anthropologists typically work, but most psychological studies of children are conducted in the United States and a few other Western countries. The resulting knowledge deficit has not been recognized by the child development research field, even in the agenda-setting report by a National Academy of Sciences panel on “The Science of Early Childhood Development” (Shonkoff and Phillips 2000).

Thus, relations between anthropology and developmental psychology have been sporadic and often distant. Yet there have been anthropologists throughout the century who addressed their research to issues in child development, and psychologists who have conducted culturally informed contextual research on children in diverse cultures. The field studies of psychologists such as Wayne Dennis (1940), Patricia M. Greenfield (1966, 2004), Heidi Keller (in press), Barbara Rogoff (2003), Charles Super (Super and Harkness 1985, 1986), and Edward Z. Tronick (Tronick et al. 1992; Tronick et al. 1987) are examples of this latter tendency.

ETHNOGRAPHY OF CHILDHOOD AS PART OF ANTHROPOLOGY

Anthropologists, regardless of their developmental assumptions, sought to describe child rearing and the activities of children throughout the world. Even Mead (1930) did not intend to limit the anthropology of childhood to disproving the propositions of psychologists. She characterized world cultural variation in child rearing as a laboratory in which “thousand-year” experiments were being conducted by different peoples. The results were retrievable through ethnographic fieldwork in distant places like Melanesia, to be brought back to the Western world for the resolution of issues like whether “permissive” rearing was advisable for U.S. middle-class children. Although they might have disagreed with the broad sweep of this claim, anthropologists were inspired by Mead’s metaphor of a laboratory and its mission of “learning lessons” about childhood from other cultures. Thus, in the 1930s and later, ethnographers sought to add to our knowledge of childhood by publishing their field observations.

In Britain, the students of Malinowski—Raymond Firth (1936), Audrey I. Richards (1932, 1956), Ian Hogbin (1931), C. H. Wedgwood (1938), Phyllis Kaberry (1939), E. E. Evans-Pritchard (1940, 1953), and Margaret Read (1960, 1968) and those directly influenced by him like Meyer Fortes (1938, 1949)—published accounts of childhood in varying amounts of detail. In his ethnographic classic, We, the Tikopia: Kinship in Primitive Polynesia (1936), Firth described the relational context of childhood and the initiation rituals for boys. In Chisungu (1956), Richards devoted an entire
monograph to the description of girls’ initiation among the Bemba of Zambia. Evans-Pritchard, in *The Nuer* (1940) and *Kinship and Marriage among the Nuer* (1953), offered generalizations about Nuer childhood and father–child relations based on his field observations. Read, a student of Malinowski who pursued a career in colonial and international education, published a book-length study, *Children of Their Fathers* (1960, 1968), of childhood among the Ngoni of Nyasaland/Malawi. Fortes, who had received a Ph.D. in educational psychology before turning to anthropology, produced an unsurpassed observational account of learning and social relationships among Tallensi children in 1938, and then published more about the course of childhood in *The Web of Kinship among the Tallensi* (1949).

These works by a generation of anthropologists influenced directly by Malinowski leave no doubt that by the 1930s childhood was an established topic of ethnographic description, often in the context of kinship or ritual, sometimes in relation to education or socialization, only occasionally with psychological interpretations. Childhood was part of their anthropology, not a topic borrowed from developmental psychology or other disciplines (although Richards and Fortes knew the child development literature of their time). Future generations of British and U.S. ethnographers would continue to describe the care, relationships, and learning of children, and their social participation, in published reports from Africa (e.g., Gibbs 1965; Goody 1982; Grindal 1972; Leis 1972; Peshkin 1972; Smith 1954), the Americas (e.g., Bolin 2006; De Laguna 1965; Hughes 1974; Lantis 1960), Asia (e.g., Lebra 1976, 1990, 1994; Peak 1991; Schwalb and Schwalb 1996; Stafford 1995), Oceania (e.g., Fajans 1997; Howard 1970; Mead and MacGregor 1951; Ritchie 1957; Toren 1990, 1993; Williams 1969), and Europe (e.g., Mead and Wolfenstein 1954; Norman 1991).

### THE INFLUENCES OF FREUD, THE NEO-FREUDIANS, AND EDWARD SAPIR

Some anthropologists in the first half of the 20th century conducted ethnographic fieldwork focused on the Freudian stages of psychosexual development in early childhood. This began with Geza Roheim’s attempt—suggested by Freud and funded by his disciple Marie Bonaparte—to prove Freud right in claiming the Oedipus complex to be universal and, more urgently, to prove Malinowski (1927) wrong in his claim, based on ethnographic evidence from the Trobriands, that the Oedipus complex takes a distinctive form in matrilineal societies. In 1928, Roheim began a three-year trip that involved fieldwork of varying durations among four non-Western peoples, two of them matrilineal. His results were published in 1932. Roheim’s conclusions were predictably supportive of Freud against Malinowski, but some of his field methods, including observations of child behavior with dolls to elicit reactions, were innovative then and interesting even now. (His more detailed observations in Australia were not published until 20 years after his death as *Children of the Desert* [1974].)

Erik Erikson’s (1950) work among the Yurok Indians of California was also based on Freud’s psychosexual stages of child development, although he superimposed on them his famous “psychosocial stages.” But there was a wider and subtler Freudian influence on many ethnographers, then and later, who assumed, for example, that breast feeding, weaning, toilet training, and sexual behavior were the most important events of early experience to investigate and describe, whether or not they interpreted them in terms of Freud’s concepts of oral, anal, and phallic-genital stages or fixations. Melford E. Spiro’s (1958) comprehensive and richly detailed account of childhood on an Israeli kibbutz, for example, devotes a chapter to the socialization of the oral, anal, and sexual “behavior systems”—following the concepts and terminology of Whiting and Irving Child (1953)—and another chapter to the Oedipus complex and sexual identity. Ironically, Whiting (1994:24–25) himself saw the findings of their 1953 book, *Child Training and Personality: A Cross-Cultural Study*, as casting doubt on the validity of Freud’s psychosexual stages, and in his own later research and writing they were rarely mentioned.

Years later, Jean Briggs (1972) criticized Erikson’s stages of early childhood from the perspective of her study of Inuit children.

For many U.S. anthropologists interested in childhood during the 1930s and 1940s—participants in the culture and personality movement initiated by Edward Sapir, Ruth Benedict, and Margaret Mead—it was the “neo-Freudian” psychoanalysis (more accurately termed *interpersonal*) of Harry Stack Sullivan, Karen Horney, and Erich Fromm that supplied its conception of childhood experience. In this conception, there were no libidinal or psychosexual stages, and the focus was on the quality of the child’s interpersonal experience with parents and siblings during the early years. Unlike the orthodox Freudians, the neo-Freudians were open to the study of cultural variation, and their theory could be related to social relationships as ethnographers observed them. The pioneering monograph in this vein was *Balinese Childhood: A Photographic Analysis* by Gregory Bateson and Margaret Mead (1942).

Abram Kardiner—a psychoanalyst who, after graduate study with Boas, was trained as a physician and then was analyzed by Freud in 1921—formulated another line of theory and research similar to the neo-Freudians, replacing Freud’s biological drives unfolding in the course of early child development with a culturally variable theory of ego development. Kardiner organized an interdisciplinary seminar on culture and personality in New York that ran from 1933 onward, with numerous anthropologists participating. He also published (with the collaboration of Ralph Linton) two influential volumes, *The Individual and His Society* (1939) and *The Psychological Frontiers of Society* (1945), based on the seminar proceedings. The anthropologist Cora DuBois (1944) worked with Kardiner in the seminar and then carried out fieldwork among the Alorese in Indonesia that included ethnographic observations of childhood, based in part on Kardiner’s approach.
In retrospect, these psychiatrically inspired ethnographies (i.e., Bateson and Mead 1942 and DuBois 1944) have a judgmental cast—Balinese mothers torment their toddlers, Aloren mothers neglect theirs—and imply pathological consequences of the culture-specific parental practices they describe. This was consistent with neo-Freudian approaches, in which the mental illness of children was blamed on parents whose practices failed to give their children “emotional security.” The parents’ point of view on these practices is not given prominence in the ethnographic accounts. Furthermore, despite the claim of Bateson and Mead that Balinese culture provides therapeutic ritual dramas for the childhood conflicts of adults, these ethnographies are not portraits of alternative normal or healthy pathways for child development. At the time, however, they represented a new focus on interpersonal relationships in early childhood, and Bateson and Mead’s photographs enabled readers to share a microscopic view of childhood social interaction in sequence.

Jules Henry and Zunia Henry’s (1944) study of sibling rivalry among Pilaga Indian children of the Argentine Gran Chaco, attempting to replicate a doll play experiment devised by the psychoanalyst David Levy (1937), was also focused on interpersonal relations in psychiatric perspective. In this case, however, the ethnographic observers tended to see the Pilaga parents and children with whom they worked as freer of pathogenic sibling rivalry—and of “remorse and self-punishment” after their sibling conflicts—than their counterparts in the United States. Henry and Henry concluded that sibling rivalry is as inevitable among the Pilaga as anywhere else, yet the Pilaga children’s lack of remorse is “culturally determined.”

Finally, there is the influence of Edward Sapir (1884–1939), who never did an ethnographic study of childhood but who proposed research on the child’s acquisition of culture to his students and others who carried out such studies. Sapir had a long-standing interest in the “psychology of culture” and gave a course of lectures on that topic at the University of Chicago from 1926 to 1931 and at Yale until 1937. That course, reconstructed as a book from students’ lecture notes and published in 1993 by Judith Irvine, contained the following passages:

[Perhaps we can say something more about] the personal world of meanings, [if we consider] the field of child development. As soon as we set ourselves at the vantage-point of the culture-acquiring child, [with] the personality definitions and potentials that must never for a moment be lost sight of, and which are destined from the very beginning to interpret, evaluate, and modify every culture pattern, sub-pattern, or assemblage of patterns that it will ever be influenced by, everything changes. Culture is then not something given but something to be gradually and gropingly discovered.

[If we are to understand the transmission of culture, or indeed the whole problem of culture from this developmental point of view,] the time must come when the cosmos of the child of three will be known and defined, not merely referred to. The organized intuitive organization of a three-year-old is far more valid and real than the most ambitious psychological theory ever constructed. [Yet our three-year-olds are not all the same.] Our children are fully developed personalities very early. [We do not quite know how this comes about, but it depends considerably on] the interactions between the child and his early environment up to the age of three.

In the child’s cosmos, patterns of behavior are understood emotionally, [in terms of a particular constellation of relationships].

Study the child minutely and carefully, from birth until, say, the age of ten, with a view to seeing the order in which culture patterns and parts of patterns appear in his psychic world; study the relevance of these patterns for the development of his personality; and at the end of the suggested period, see how much of the total official culture of the group can be said to have a significant existence for him. Moreover, what degree of systematization, conscious or unconscious, in the complicating patterns and symbolisms of culture will have been reached by this child? [Sapir 1993:197–198; square brackets in original]

These excerpts show that Sapir, prior to 1937, was constructing and advocating a view of childhood that, although influenced by the interpersonal theory of psychiatry of his friend Harry Stack Sullivan, was focused on meanings, patterns, and organization in the child’s experience rather than questions of pathology, emphasized the subjective experience rather than the behavioral conformity of the child, and assumed the child to be an active and definitive decision maker concerning the meanings of culture patterns. This is a subtle conception of cultural acquisition that seems as good a basis for research today as it was 70 years ago.

Did anyone pursue these leads so cogently expressed by Sapir in his lectures? Not really, at least for a long while. Many of his graduate students at Yale were linguists with no apparent interest in childhood, but two who took his course were John W. M. Whiting and Beatrice Blyth Whiting, who devoted their careers to the anthropological study of childhood. John Whiting conducted fieldwork on the transmission of culture to children among the Kwoma of New Guinea in 1936–37 and wrote a monograph entitled Becoming a Kwoma (1941) that contains much ethnographic data Sapir would have appreciated. In analyzing the data, however, Whiting followed the lead of John Dollard who, although brought to Yale by Sapir as a kindred spirit, was soon attracted to the (behavioristic) “learning theory” of the Yale psychologist Clark L. Hull. So Whiting’s account of the acquisition of culture by Kwoma children, although representing the descriptive and contextual richness of a Malinowskian ethnography (Malinowski was at Yale in 1938–39 and advised Whiting on the writing of the book), was interpreted (in the last two chapters) not in terms of Sapir’s concepts but according to the stimulus-response theory of learning derived from laboratory experiments with animals.

Although not his student, Clyde Kluckhohn was also influenced by Sapir and in 1939 published an article on the acquisition of culture (the “culturalization” of the child) in which he made recommendations for data on this process to be collected by field workers. Like Whiting, however,
Kluckhohn was concerned with developing an empirical method for studying how children acquire culture, and his emphasis is on a quantitative approach, illustrated by the sample of 48 children in his Navajo research, which formed the basis for the monograph Children of the People (Leighton and Kluckhohn 1948). There is nothing of Sapir’s focus on symbolic meanings and the child’s subjective perspective in the article.

It would be the 1980s before linguistic anthropologists translated Sapir’s vision of the cultural study of childhood into ethnographic research. Yet several ethnographers working after 1950 focused on the subjective experience of the child in terms close to those Sapir was advocating: Hildred Geertz (1959) in Java, William Caudill (1972) in Japan, and Robert I. Levy (1969, 1973:430–469) in Tahiti, for example.

Thus, from 1928 to 1950, professional anthropologists led by Mead and Malinowski created an anthropology of childhood that was grounded in ethnographic fieldwork in diverse cultures and critical of developmental formulations in psychology. They experimented with interpretive frameworks drawn from psychiatry, psychoanalysis, and academic psychology. They constructed concepts to study the child’s acquisition of culture. The collection of ethnographic data on childhood—in relation to kinship, religion, the family, the life cycle, and other standard ethnographic topics, as well as psychological development—became part of the ethnographer’s conventional toolkit, as field studies were conducted in many parts of the world.3

THE SIX CULTURES STUDY OF SOCIALIZATION AND OTHER WHITING PROJECTS

The Six Cultures Study (SCS), launched in 1954 by John Whiting (by then at Harvard) and two psychologists, Irvin L. Child at Yale and William Lambert at Cornell, was an ambitious project in the anthropology of childhood and deserves a separate article dedicated to its history. From the perspective of the present overview, it was a unique effort to harness six ethnographic studies in different parts of the world to collect comparable data, following a single detailed field manual (Whiting et al. 1966), on childhood in social and cultural context.

The six ethnographic studies of the SCS were conducted by trained anthropologists between 1954 and 1957 in a Mixtec community in Mexico (Romney and Romney 1966); an Ilongot community in the Philippines (Nydegger and Nydegger 1966); a Rajput community in India (Minturn and Hitchcock 1966); an Okinawan community in Japan (Maretzki and Maretzki 1966); a Gusii community of Kenya (LeVine and LeVine 1966); and the small town of West Acton in eastern Massachusetts (Fischer and Fischer 1966).

Apart from the last, all were sedentary agriculturalists; none were hunter-gatherers or pastoral nomads, and none were urban. The studies were published in 1963 as a single volume edited by Beatrice Whiting and then as separate monographs in 1966.

The six monographs combined the topics covered in a conventional “general ethnography” of the time—to establish the contexts of life for families, parents, and children—with a special focus on the course of childhood that went beyond description of norms to report the frequency of specific practices in a sample of 24 families. Thus, the SCS described the variability of child rearing within a community as well as its culturally distinctive ideals and practices. Because the ethnographers had carried out naturalistic observations of children between three and 11 years of age, their accounts were enriched by anecdotes of child behavior from their many hours of observation. Each book constituted a record or reconstruction of the routine practices, relationships, settings, and activities that made up the environments of children—and their interactions with those environments—from birth to adolescence in a particular local community at a particular moment in time. The SCS ethnographies established a new standard for the detailed examination of childhood through ethnographic fieldwork.

The original plan of the SCS, however, was not simply to “contribute toward . . . more useful ethnography in the study of socialization and enculturation” (Whiting et al. 1966:3) but also to test hypotheses relating child rearing to its “causes and consequences”—that is, the socioeconomic and cultural factors that constrain and direct child rearing practices, on the one hand, and the psychocultural patterns resulting from childhood experience, on the other hand. This hypothesis-testing program proved problematic, largely because the processes posited by the SCS framework of psychoanalytic behaviorism were not adequately assessed through the data collected. The child interview and projective test designed to assess the psychodynamic outcomes of child rearing were difficult to apply in some of the communities, and the Field Guide provided no alternatives. Furthermore, the SCS used a mother interview to assess child rearing at the individual level (Minturn and Lambert 1964), but such retrospective interview approaches to childhood environments were shown to be unreliable even in the United States (Yarrow et al. 1968). When the Whitings (1975) published the final report, they narrowed its analysis to relationships between the socioeconomic environments of families and the behavior patterns of children assessed through naturalistic observation, from which valid conclusions could be drawn. So, in the end, the SCS had little to say about the causal influence of child rearing on personality development and cultural expression.

Apart from the monographs, the most enduring (and largely unanticipated) contribution of the SCS may have been the introduction of systematic naturalistic observations of children—that is, repeated and aggregated observations of children in their routine “behavior settings” as a method for recording the interactions of children with their environments in diverse cultures. Beatrice Whiting salvaged the observational data for analysis and developed this method further for the comparative study of childhood in 14 diverse communities she conducted with Carolyn P. Edwards (Whiting and Edwards 1988) years later.

While the SCS fieldwork was being conducted, John Whiting became interested in male initiation ceremonies and, with his students, launched a program of cross-cultural
research on male identity. Its basic hypothesis linked the conditions under which boys were raised in infancy and early childhood to rituals ranging from circumcision to the couvade that socialized them into aggressively masculine adult roles or permitted them to act out female roles. The ideas involved were developed in cross-cultural analyses of published ethnographic data (Burton and Whiting 1961; Whiting 1964; Whiting et al. 1958) and led to the fieldwork by Robert L. Munroe and Ruth H. Munroe among the Black Caribs of Belize (Munroe 1980; Munroe et al. 1973, 1981) and to Beatrice Whiting’s analysis (1965) of “protest masculinity” among the six cultures of the SCS. Judith Brown (1963) extended the comparative analysis to female initiation rituals.

INFANT STUDIES, EARLY SOCIAL INTERACTION, AND GUIDED PARTICIPATION

The last four decades of the 20th century saw anthropologists—biological and linguistic as well as social and psychological—and some developmental psychologists take new directions in ethnographic studies of childhood. There were no projects approaching the scale of the SCS, but this was an expansive period in which a greater number of academic scholars did more kinds of research in a wider variety of places. (The growth of U.S. universities and of funding for research in the 1960s facilitated this expansion; so did the extension of jet aircraft service to all parts of the world.)

Infant research was one of the new directions for ethnography during this period. Even though it had been taken for granted by anthropologists of the culture and personality movement in the 1930s that the child’s acquisition of culture began in infancy (e.g., Linton 1936), hardly any post–WWII fieldwork was focused on that period. By the 1960s, evidence from psychological experiments was showing that shortly after birth human infants were capable of perception, cognition, memory, imitation, and social engagement (Osofsky 1987). This evidence was often interpreted as revealing “hard-wired” universals of development, but it also indicated a much greater and earlier sensitivity to environmental influence than had been previously imagined. And the ethologists and behavioral biologists studying imprinting and other aspects of parent–offspring relations in nonhuman species provided models for analyzing how both innate and environmental factors influence behavioral development (Blurton-Jones 1972).

Ethnographic observations on infancy and infant care during this period were carried out by numerous social and biological anthropologists, mostly in sub-Saharan Africa but also in Japan and among the Navajo of New Mexico. The first studies were those of William Caudill (Caudill 1972; Caudill and Frost 1974; Caudill and Weinstein 1969) among middle-class families in Japan and the United States and Melvin J. Konner (1972, 1976, 1977) among the !Kung San foragers of the Kalahari Desert in Botswana, both of whom conducted their fieldwork in the 1960s. Caudill and Konner were followed by many others. All focused their efforts on parental concepts and practices of infant care, the infant’s changing social environment, and the infant’s communicative and other social interactions, but they differed in their approaches, methods, and theoretical frameworks.

It is noteworthy that the contributors to this literature include biological anthropologists (Konner, Chisholm, and Hewlett), who were often but not always studying hunter-gatherers, and psychologists (Super, Tronick, Morelli, Greenfield, and Keller), as well as social and cultural anthropologists. Super and Sara Harkness (1986) formulated the concept of “the developmental niche” to integrate diverse analytic perspectives on the observable conditions of infancy. There are rich ethnographic descriptions in some of these publications, whereas in others ethnographic evidence is used primarily as context to interpret quantitative observational data from ecological, cultural, developmental, and evolutionary perspectives.

A related new direction for ethnographies of childhood after 1960 concerns the child’s social relationships and social participation. These topics had been covered in earlier reports from the field, but the new research involved closer examination of specific patterns and broader concepts to make sense of them. Adoption, for example, was studied in eastern Oceania (Carroll 1970), and the fostering of children in West Africa (Goody 1982). Thomas Weisner and Ronald Gallimore (1977) summarized the evidence on sibling care giving, suggesting that it was widespread among human societies (although not in contemporary Western ones) and had some advantages for infants and their older siblings who cared for them. Weisner (1984, 1987, 1989) later published more on this subject from his fieldwork among the Abaluyia of Kenya and set it in the context of an ecocultural approach to childhood, drawing on the social developmentality of the Soviet psychologists Lev Vygotsky (1978) and A. N. Leont’ev (1981) and requiring ethnography for its implementation. In a parallel move, Barbara Rogoff (Rogoff et al. 1993), a developmental psychologist who had done fieldwork in a Guatemalan Mayan village over a 30-year period, coined the term guided participation to refer more accurately than earlier terms like rearing, training, and socialization to the way in which children take part from their early years in the social activities of their environments, with guidance from those around them. An extensive example of ethnographic description in this mode is provided by Suzanne Gaskins’s (1996, 1999, 2000, and 2003) articles on Yucatec Mayan children.

Children’s play also received ethnographic attention during the last quarter of the 20th century, in the studies by David Lancy (1996; see also Lancy and Tindall 1977), Helen Schwartzman (1978), and Lawrence Goldman (1998), as well as in the observations of children’s activities provided by the comparative study of Whiting and Edwards (1988), the ethnography of Gaskins (2003), and in many ethnographies not focused on play.
THE ACQUISITION OF LANGUAGE AND CULTURE

Sapir’s question of how three-year-old children acquire culture began to find answers many years later through the work of linguistic anthropologists inspired by the sociolinguistics movement (Ervin-Tripp and Slobin 1967; Gumperz and Hymes 1972; Hymes 1974), who began to study the child’s acquisition of communicative competence. Between the late 1960s and the early 1990s, child language was established as a significant focus for the ethnography of childhood.

Early field studies of child language and language socialization in non-Western societies included those of Keith Kernan (1969) in Samoa, Benjamin Blount (1971, 1972, 1975) among the Luo of Kenya, and Sara Harkness (Harkness and Super 1977) among the Kipsigis of Kenya. After Shirley Brice Heath’s (1982, 1983) pioneering work on children’s communicative development in North Carolina, Elinor Ochs and Bambi Schieffelin launched an extensive series of publications on language acquisition and language socialization in different cultures (Ochs 1988, 1990; Ochs and Schieffelin 1984; Schieffelin 1990; Schieffelin and Ochs 1986, 1987). Their edited volume Language Socialization across Cultures (1987) featured the studies of numerous other linguists and linguistic anthropologists, and their monographs on, respectively, Samoans (Ochs 1988) and the Kaluli of New Guinea (Schieffelin 1990) showed the depth and value of sociolinguistic fieldwork on language socialization. They used electronic recording to shed light on cultural meanings as children construe them and learn them through communicative participation. Their findings indicate not only that children in the second, third, and fourth years of life acquire fundamental aspects of cultural communication as they learn a first language (e.g., the conventions of conversing, expressing, and suppressing emotions, as well as giving social signals) but also that this early learning provides symbolic elements for the growing sense of self.

During the 1990s, Peggy Miller and colleagues (Miller et al. 1996; Miller et al. 1990; Miller et al. 2001; Miller et al. 1997), particularly Heidi Fung (1999), carried the sociolinguistic approach to the development of the self into the three-year-old child’s acquisition of cultural narratives. In analyzing the videotapes of personal storytelling concerning the transgressions of young children in the United States and Taiwan, they provided vivid ethnographic evidence of culture-specific maternal communications and the coconstruction of narrative between mother and child that contribute to the child’s sense of shame, self-esteem, and other culturally organized aspects of self. Although it is not possible in this brief article to summarize or illustrate further the findings from sociolinguistic research on childhood, it has clearly emerged as an important naturalistic strategy for understanding the ways in which communicative interaction during childhood helps shape both cultural acquisition and psychological development.

CONCLUSIONS

In the 20th century, an anthropology of childhood was created, grew, and diversified, with the ethnographic field study of children in context as its core empirical approach. This historical overview has noted some major trends and problems without conducting an exhaustive, analytic, or critical review of the literature. Anthropological pioneers like Malinowski, Mead, and Sapir identified ways in which childhood was worthy of ethnographic attention, and the literature grew at an increasing pace from the 1920s to the present.

Ethnographers conducted fieldwork among hunter-gatherers and agriculturalists and in some urban settings on virtually every continent. The entire corpus of data is still fragmentary, but there have been ethnographic profiles of childhood environments in many different societies, and the past 15 years have seen the publication of an unprecedented number of monographs and other books (e.g., Bolin 2006; Briggs 1998; Goldman 1998; Gottlieb 2004; Hewlett 1991, 1992; Hewlett and Lamb 2005; Kramer 2006; Kurtz 1992; Morton 1996; Norman 1991; Riesman 1992; Seymour 1999). In addition, there have been specialized field studies of infancy, adoption and fostering, children’s relationships, play, and language, as mentioned above.

The ethnographic exploration of childhood has taken many different pathways over the past 75 years. Some early studies were guided by Freudian or neo-Freudian premises, but from the beginning ethnographers used the data they had collected in the field to criticize developmental formulations in psychology, and the cultural critique of developmental theory became an established genre. Developmental psychology’s changing theoretical orientations, and its reluctance to take seriously evidence from field research, posed obstacles to sustained interdisciplinary engagement and made the building of cumulative knowledge difficult. Ethnographers, including biological and linguistic anthropologists, nevertheless constructed approaches to fieldwork on childhood and interpreted their findings in theoretical perspectives that were variously ecological, cultural, evolutionary, and sociolinguistic, as well as developmental.

Ethnographers have documented the diversity across human populations in parenting, both in the norms and practices that form childhood environments and in the baseline developmental pathways of children from birth to adolescence. They have described the ways children learn through participation in differing social and symbolic environments and acquire cultural meanings during the early years. The research conducted to date, however, has just begun to realize the potential of anthropology’s contribution to the understanding of childhood in the human species.

Ethnographic studies of childhood could be improved in their depth and sophistication and even in their technology. The time seems ripe for a new field manual recommending methods to ethnographers. Mead ( Bateson and Mead 1942; Mead and MacGregor 1951) advocated the use of visual records to deepen the ethnographic
understanding of childhood, and although powerful and portable video recording technology is now available, it has only rarely been used outside of linguistic studies. Joseph Tobin and colleagues (1989) showed in *Preschool in Three Cultures* that videos of child-care practices in one culture shown to parents and teachers of another can elicit not only emotional expressions of shock and disapproval but also a spontaneous explication of indigenous assumptions concerning children that had eluded conventional ethnographic interviewing.

Furthermore, despite the global reach of ethnographic research on childhood, there is hardly any area of the world in which coverage could be called adequate and many others to which ethnography of childhood needs to be extended. But ethnographic documentation by itself, however excellent, cannot create an anthropology of childhood of more than marginal significance to anthropologists (Hirschfeld 2002), or for that matter to other social scientists, without further theory building and cross-cultural comparison (Quinn 2005; Shweder et al. in press).

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NOTES

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1. The claim that the topic of childhood has been neglected by anthropologists (Benthall 1992; Hardman 1973; Hirsclhelm 2002; Schwartzman 2001), without reference to many of the works reviewed here, leaves the impression of a small or declining literature that is inconsistent with the results of this overview.

2. Some of my own interpretations of this literature and more extensive historical accounts of the anthropology of childhood will appear in future publications (Levine in press a, in press b; Le Vine and New in press).

3. The numerous case studies in cultural anthropology, edited by George Spindler and Louise Spindler and published by Holt, Rinehart, and Winston from the 1960s to the 1980s, illustrate this point with their chapters on “Growing Up” or “The Life Cycle,” which contain ethnographic data on childhood from a particular society.


5. A special issue of *Ethos* (31[2], June 2003) devoted to “The Cultural Construction of Childhood” is also worth noting here.

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