Cultural Views of Life Phases

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Abstract

The knowledge base in the study of human development is built primarily from work with children from the modern, global, postindustrial population. This population is unrepresentative in many respects, not least in that childhood and adolescence is dominated by the experience of formal schooling, an experience missing from the lives of most of the world's children until very recently. This entry will examine child development from the perspective of premodern societies as described in the ethnographic, archaeological, and historic records. Specifically, we will review material indicative of cultural or indigenous models of development, phases, and phase transitions, in particular.

Introduction

Our goal is to convey the variability and commonality that exists in culturally constructed views of life phases. When examining these cases it becomes clear that societies differ in their models of development. However, nature provides predictable transitions (e.g., walking, speaking, theory of mind, puberty) upon which most societies build in constructing models of development. We describe these patterns and provide examples that best illustrate the variety and/or similarity found in culturally constructed views of life phases. An anthropological analysis of phases and transitions in children’s development takes into account three data sources. First, and most obviously, we consider nomenclature that is used to mark phases or transitions. Second, we take note of particular rites or ceremonies – also known as ‘rites of passage’ – associated with life-phase transitions. Third, we draw on the ethnographic and historic records for evidence of changes in the behavior of children and their families that signal a shift in the child’s status. We utilize these data to construct broadly applicable cultural models of child development. These models coalesce around six phases in the life cycle, which, not coincidentally, correspond to evolutionary biologists’ partitioning of the lifespan (Bogin and Smith, 2012: 521 – Lifespan Development: Evolutionary Perspectives) This entry draws on a long-term project designed to develop an anthropological perspective on human development (Lancy, 2007, 2008, 2010, 2012a,b 2013; Lancy and Grove, 2011a,b; Lancy et al., 2010). Our database consists of archival accounts of childhood from nearly 1000 societies, ranging from the Paleolithic to the present and from every area of the world.

Phase Terminology

The Bonerate are representative of the majority of societies that fail to name or identify transitions in the life course. They “cannot define precisely the onset of childhood ... they have difficulty describing the boundaries between childhood and adolescence and between adolescence and adulthood” (Broch, 1990:15). When we look at societies that do make such distinctions, we see great variability. At one extreme, the B usability of E. Kalimantan name 24 distinct phases from lemaub, meaning ‘to be able to roll over,’ to nysagawan dungai lungad, meaning ‘to carry a small bamboo water tube,’ to impun simigod gegalu, meaning the first appearance of breast buds (Appell-Warren, 2012). By contrast, the Inuit of the Belcher Islands have only three named phases: (1) up to 1 year – natarak, (2) 12–18 months – qitungak, and (3) from 3 years until they become betrothed they are tuguai (Balikci, 1970: 41).

The basis for named transitions also varies. For example, the Tukano of Brazil take note of physical features in designating phases. They have terms for 12 developmental transitions – birth through puberty. For example, Suagakaka means ‘little red one,’ noting a change in skin color after birth; Duhing means ‘one who sits down’; Bugo means ‘to creep’; Syagoo ‘to walk,’ and so on (Silva and Lillios, 1962). The Igbo also use terms that note physical maturation: ino edu (be-sit) a child who sits at around 3 or 4 months; igbe igbe (crawl-crawl) when the child begins to crawl at 7 or 8 months; iguzo mpe (stand up) when the child starts to walk; and ifuteleze (teething) when the child begins to sprout teeth (Ottenberg, 1989: 20).

The Baining (of New Britain Island) use mode of locomotion as the basis for phase-naming conventions. A newborn baby is carried in an adult’s arms or in a sling tied across the chest. In answer to the question ‘how old is he (or she)?’, a child of this age is described as ta tal ka (kt) or ‘they carry him (her).’ After the age of 5 or 6 months, parents begin to carry their children on their shoulders. This form of transportation requires that the child have some sense of balance and support and takes some part in maintaining his or her posture. Children of this age are described as ka (kt) kalak or ‘he (she) sits on the shoulders.’ An older child is identified by the phrase ka (kt) tit or ‘he (she) goes’ which refers to crawling and, then, walking. An older child who has become even more independent (e.g., 7–9 years) is referred to as ka (kt) tit mas or ‘he (she) goes fully,’ meaning that he or she goes for water, firewood, or to gather in the bush (Fajans, 1997: 86–87). In naming practices that focus on physical maturation and basic skills of locomotion and
speech, the first 3 years are partitioned many more times than later periods in the life cycle.

Other societies use terms that call attention to the child’s accomplishments: Among the Giria of Kenya, a two- to three-year-old is labeled, in effect, ‘water carrier.’ An eight-year-old girl is defined as a ‘maize pounder,’ a boy of the same age is muho ho murisa ‘herb boy’ (Wenger, 1989: 98). In premodern Russia ‘our plowboy,’ ‘our herd boy,’ and ‘our nanny girl’ were habitual terms parents used to address their children (Gorshkov, 2009: 15). Ages 16–20 years in post-Inkan Peru were collectively designated cocapulla or ‘coca harvester’ because youths of this age were expected to reap the state-owned cocoa crop (Dean, 2002: 43). The Savras (India) recognize five phases in human development and name them according to the primary chores carried out at each age (Mohammad, 1997).

**Rites of Passage**

Life-phase transitions may also be marked by ‘rites of passage.’ These celebrations denote the transition between one life phase and the next. Most rites include a separation from the previous life phase, a period of transformation, followed by a ceremony marking integration into the next phase (van Gennep, 1910). As with naming conventions, rites of passage center around milestones in physical maturation or mark achievements or ‘firsts.’ These rites are rarely tied to precise dates, such as the birthday, because preliterate societies do not keep track of birth dates or the passage of years.

**Naming Ceremony**

Although birth would seem an obvious candidate for a rite of passage, it is interesting to note just how few societies treat this as worthy of such a celebration. We discuss below how early infancy is characterized, but the main reason that the birth is not seen as cause for celebration is that both mother and baby are in an extremely precarious state. Once it is clear that the infant has a good grasp on life and is acknowledged, the infant is introduced to the community via the naming ceremony, which can occur days, weeks, or even months after birth. During this liminal period, there is a clear sense that the infant is still in the process of becoming a human being (Lancy, 2013). This is conveyed by the timing of the naming practices. For example, in Brazil, Wari babies usually do not receive a personal name until they are about 6 weeks old. Until then, babies of both sexes are called arawet, which translates literally as ‘still being made’ (Conklin and Morgan, 1996: 672). The confirmation of personhood is delayed on Gau Island in Fiji, Melanesia until the infant is 4 days old after which a celebration called the “falling of the umbilical cord (lutu na nona i viscono) occurs” (Toren, 1990: 169). In the Himalayas, the Lepcha of Sikkim, continue to refer to the newborn as a ‘rat child’ as if it were still inside the mother’s womb. After three days and a thorough cleansing, the infant is welcomed into the community with a feast (Gorer, 1967). Among the Masai of East Africa, the first name is given on the fourth day after birth, when the child is brought outside to be shown the sun. The child is named in the presence of the father, mother, and three elders (Huntingford, 1953: 116–17). Among the Azande of north-central Africa, the midwife is not paid and the infant is not named until they are sure that it will survive. When survival seems likely, the whole community takes part in a ceremony in which the infant is removed from the birthing hut and passed through the smoke of a Greenwood fire (Baxter, 1953: 72).

**First Haircut**

The ‘first haircut’ can occur with the naming ceremony, but usually happens some time after. The first haircut does not necessarily correlate with a particular age as concerns about viability are not easily set aside. Rather, the first haircut seems to commemorate the child’s successful survival during a very difficult period. The rite may also be used to signal a weakening of the child’s exclusive ties to its mother and the establishment of ties to its father and extended kin network (Fricke, 1994: 133). With the first haircut we also see the beginning of differentiation between the sexes. The Kurds of Rawanduz give the first haircut after the child has survived a year (Masters, 1953: 159). The equivalent Balinese rite occurs at about the same age and until the first haircut the child is not allowed to touch the ground and must be carried at all times (Geertz, 1961: 104). In northwestern Africa, the Bambara of Mali shave only part of the child’s head. Somelocks are kept in a container, some thrown into the river as a sacrifice, and elders examine the remaining hair to determine the child’s tere or character (Paques and Turner, 1954: 119). The Navajo see the first haircut as a necessary step on the path to Navajo personhood, attained only after the child speaks its first words demonstrating that it has control over its thought and voice (Schwarz, 1997: 146–47).

**Accomplishments**

Once the child is free and clear of threats to its existence, the next major milestones are related to puberty and marriage. However, it is not uncommon to make a minor rite of passage out of the child’s accomplishments or ‘firsts.’ These celebrations mark the child’s developmental progression as a contributing member of the family. For example the Kaoka of the Solomon Islands allocate small plots of land to their sons and boast of the yams they will grow (Hogbin, 1969: 39). In central Africa a Mbui boy bringing home his first ‘real animal’ is immediately proclaimed a hunter and receives scars (cicatization) incised by one of the ‘great hunters’ indicating his changed status (Turnbull, 1965: 257). In North America, Hopi girls who have mastered grinding corn are ‘shown off’ to visitors (Hough, 1915: 63). Among the Saami of northern Europe there are no rites of passage or acknowledgment of any kind for a growing girl until she completes her first pair of reindeer shoes or some other complex needlework (Pelto, 1962). Other examples of the marking of firsts with rites of passage are a Netsilik girl’s first caught salmon or a Netsilik boy’s first goose (Balikci, 1970: 45); a young Kaoka boy’s first pig (Hogbin, 1969: 39); a Wogeo child given his or her first garden plot (Hogbin, 1969: 139–40); the first shepherd’s crook given to

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a Vlach six-year-old (Campbell, 1964: 156); and the first bow and arrow provided to a Kutenai Indian boy (Grinnel, 1923: 115).

Adolescent Initiation

The timing of the most commonly employed rite of passage is dependent on the appearance of the first signs of puberty. Once the growth spurt, deepening of the voice, menses, breast buds, or pubic hair become visible, a rite of passage may follow. On the island of Vanatinai in Papua New Guinea, at approximately 14 years of age, the first signs of puberty become apparent. "For a girl that is when her breast buds are 'the size of betel nuts,' and for a boy when his voice begins to change" (Lepowsky, 1998: 128). Physiological change and emerging sexuality are often one of the foci of initiation. Among the Muria of India, the political and economic control of the family is forcibly weaned from the aspirant bride, demanding "evidence of okongainia … which means … being willing and able to do the work of an adult woman … and perform these duties without having to be ordered" (LeVine and Lloyd, 1966: 167). As we will discuss shortly, there are multiple, cross-cultural pathways, to full adult status. Consequently, marriage is often treated as only a very minor rite of passage.

Life Phases

Our survey of ethnographic literature shows that one cannot rely on semantically or ritually marked transitions in the life course as guides to the cultural construction of child development. This is because phases are rarely specified in full by formal means; rather, one must construct them from descriptions of the child’s behavior and the behavior of others toward the child (Mead, 1947: 234). For example, in an earlier and widely cited survey, the authors identified a widespread but unnamed phenomenon they referred to as ‘toddler rejection’ (Weisner and Gallimore, 1977: 177), which defines conceptually how many societies view the postweaning period. Anthropologists consistently note a significant shift in the status and treatment of the child between 2 and 3 years but this phase is rarely labeled as such.

Phase One: Birth and the External Womb

As noted earlier, the child’s birth may be shrouded in secrecy. Pregnancy itself is rarely acknowledged publicly because there are many factors that might adversely affect the outcome. A ‘wait and see’ attitude is adopted, as the mother may not be physically able to carry the pregnancy to full term due to poor health or she may choose to terminate it due to lack of support from family or the community. This ‘wait and see’ attitude is carried into the birthing process and postpartum seclusion provides a curtain of secrecy and security behind which the fate of the infant is decided. After birth, an infant may be seen as still intimately linked with its mother for survival and in mortal danger. “[The Somali] conception is that the newborn child for a certain time after birth is still … part of the flesh and blood of the mother” (Cerulli, 1959: 25). “[Wari] mother and infant are treated as a unit; for about six weeks after birth they remain secluded together inside their house … babies of both sexes are called arawet, which translates literally as ‘still being made’” (Conklin and Morgan, 1996: 672). The newborn is not fully human: it’s bones are soft (Helander, 1988: 150); it is pale and lacks the proper human color (Childs, 1949: 120); it has no mind or thoughts other than the breast (Shostak, 1981: 113); it can’t speak and is as yet, empty (Du Bois et al., 1944: 76). And these folk beliefs are consistent with most theories of
human ontogeny that suggest the infant is ‘born three months too early’ (Bogin and Smith, 2012).

The postpartum womb is a key component of the way the infant is conceptualized and cared for. So tight is the bond, that the Japanese infant is looked upon as part of the mother’s body (Lebra, 1994: 260). The use of swaddling and severely confining cradles or cradleboards is widespread. In the high Andes, babies are almost constantly confined to a ‘mana pouch,’ which functions to reduce the baby’s metabolism and need for energy (Tronick et al., 1994: 1009–1010). Nurzay women explained that “the newborn baby’s flesh is oma (unripe) like uncooked meat, and that only by swaddling it will become strong (chakahast) and solid like cooked (polhe) meat” (Casimir, 2010: 16). Navajo babies are kept “in the cradleboard to make them straight and strong. Some women let their children lie on sheepskins and roll about, but they are always weak, sick children” (Leighton and Kluckhohn, 1948: 23).

Even more common is the practice of attaching the baby to its mother via a length of cloth or a sling. The nursing mother shifts the baby quickly to the breast at the first sign of movement (Broch, 1990: 31). The infant remains within a cloth envelope throughout and the nursing process passes completely unnoticed by others. A baby should be invisible (Lancy and Grove, 2011a: 283) to protect it from many threats, including witchcraft and the supernatural. Even the father may be seen as dangerous (Gray, 1994: 67) and the postpartum taboo prohibiting contact between the nursing mother and her husband is widespread (Lloyd, 1970: 81).

Another component of this phase is the widely distributed notion that the infant is in a liminal state suspended between the human and spirit worlds (Razy, 2007). There is the idea that the soul and body are only loosely connected and that, if the infant is not closely confined, its soul will escape back to the world of spirits and ancestors (Arden, 2011; Leavitt, 1998). Care must be taken to prevent the infant from moving its limbs vigorously or becoming agitated (Nicolaisen, 1998; Lancy, 2013).

Phase Two: Joining the Community

As we have indicated in Phase One, the infant does not exist as a distinct entity. The likelihood of death or infanticide are so great that the infant’s passing goes unmarked and there will be no formal funeral, burial, or mourning (Becker, 2007: 282). In effect, gestation continues beyond birth. The infant must exit from this metaphorical womb and enjoy a second birth. This second or social birth (Fabian, 1990) may be marked by a rite of passage such as naming or the first haircut or nail-trimming (Masters, 1953), as discussed earlier. An important element in the construction of personhood is the child’s acquisition of kin and linkages to the father, his clan, and extended family (Blanchy, 2007). “Many Hubeer ... postnatal practices [involve the] shedding of the symbols for maternal ties [and establishment of] agnatic links” (Helander, 1988: 150). The transition from crawling (which is animal-like) to walking (human) may be highlighted. The child is now acknowledged as human or at least as potentially human.

Another very important attribute of the baby’s ‘coming out’ is a very sharp spike in the involvement of allomothers. Humans are cooperative breeders and, within a few months of birth, the baby is increasingly under the care of grandmothers, older siblings, and fathers (Hurdy, 2005: 65–91), so that mothers can return to their labors full-time. Mothers may be so eager to attract the assistance of allomothers that they market their babies in interesting ways to neighbors and kin (Ochs and Schieffelin, 1984: 279; Gottlieb, 2004). A thriving infant will attract the caring attention of many, as well as threats from those who might be envious of the fertile mother, so steps must be taken to protect the now very public baby from malevolence (Einarsdóttir, 2006: 116–17; Friedl, 1997: 88; Jenkins et al., 1985: 43). The nursling enjoys a kind of honeymoon of affection and care from all sides but as weaning approaches, a change is evident.

Phase Three: Separation

This phase corresponds to our western notion of ‘early childhood’ (Historical Change and Human Development). As noted earlier, a prominent feature of this phase is ‘toddler rejection’ (Weisner and Gallimore, 1977: 176). Weaning, sometimes early – long before the child might wean itself – and severe, is widely reported. “A [Luo] woman who is pregnant is supposed to stop breast-feeding, since it is believed that the milk will be poisonous to the nursing baby and will cause it to get the illness ledho” (Cosminsky, 1985: 38). Numerous ethnographic accounts show mothers imposing early and abrupt termination of breast-feeding. Extended nursing may be condemned as prolonging the infancy phase, resulting in a ‘weak, simpering’ adult (Turner, 1987: 107). The mother is also eager to wean the child from her back, which may be as just as tearfully resisted as weaning from the breast (Maretzki et al., 1963: 447). The Yoruba are quite typical in averring that “mothers and grandmothers [prefer] wiry and agile babies who learn to walk early” (Zeitlin, 1996: 412). The Nso of the Cameroons believe that: “A standing baby … makes less work for the mother” (Keller, 2007: 124).

Aside from the attentions of allomothers (often a grandmother at this phase), separation from the mother is aided by the child’s powerful attraction to the neighborhood playgroup. “With the arrival of the next sibling, dénanola (infancy) is over. Now, play begins … and membership in a social group of [Mandinka] peers is taken to be critical to … the forgetting of the breast” (Whittemore, 1989: 92). The locus of the playgroup may be in a space that the Kpelle label the ‘mother ground’ as it lies in the vicinity of at least a few working but attentive adults (Lancy, 1996: 85). Aside from freeing up the mother for other pursuits, sending toddlers off in the company of sibling caretakers and playmates is seen as an essential component of their socialization. For example, in rural Bengal “little girls accompany older girls in gathering, and they gradually learn the needed skills” (Rohner and Chaki-Sircar, 1988: 33). Marquesan mothers see toddlers as developing skills because they want to hang out with and emulate their older siblings. By imitating their sibling caretakers “toddler learn to run, feed, and dress

themselves, go outside to urinate and defecate, and help with household chores" (Martini and Kirkpatrick, 1992: 124).

Once the child has accepted its separation from the mother’s breast and back, it is readmitted into the family circle, so to speak. The behaviors and conversations of those older constitute a kind of classroom where the child rapidly learns its culture. Matsigenka “infants and young children are embedded in the middle of quotidian activities where they are positioned to quietly observe and learn what others are doing” (Ochs and Izquierdo, 2009: 395). “At the age of three he chooses his own place at the [Wolof] family meal and here he is encouraged to acquire social norms” (Zempleni-Rabain, 1973: 222).

In addition to learning social graces, this period constitutes the child’s induction into the family economy (Lancy, 2012a). Margaret Mead offered one of the earliest descriptions of a phenomenon often recorded since. (On Samoa), “the tiniest little staggerer has tasks to perform during a hunt, so that they would not scare it off and little Inuit boys are kept some distance from the prey for fear they will let it spill on the ground (Matthiasson, 1979: 74). Around 5–7 years, a shift in expectations occurs. Tolerance for the child’s helpful but clumsy and inconsistent contributions wanes.

**Phase Four: Getting Noticed**

Around 5 years, children become ‘useful.’ They are expected to contribute to the household, by helping with chores, taking care of siblings, and acting as examples (Broch, 1990: 28). Although children may participate in household chores from an early age, they may not be trusted with more serious responsibilities until they ‘gain sense’ (Harkness and Super, 1986). The child’s lack of sense is also cited to excuse them from misdemeanors that would be chastised in an older child (Maretzki et al., 1963: 481; Read, 1960: 89). Pashtun girls in middle childhood are sent by their mothers to discreetly scout out and give voluminous reports on the latest events in the village or on a recent scandal (Lindholm, 1982: 181). The workload and responsibility grows with the child’s size, strength, and competency. Javanese and Nepalese children work about 4 h a day as six- to eight-year-olds; this rises to 10 h or more by age 15 years (Nag et al., 1978). By age 12 years, Aka and Hadza children are already self-supporting in terms of foraging ability (Hewlett and Cavalli-Sforza, 1986: 930; Hill and Hurtado, 1996: 223). Twelve-year-old Bakgalagadi girls can run an entire household (Lancaster, 1984: 86).

Gender differentiation becomes much more pronounced in middle childhood (Lancy and Grove, 2011a). Girls become more closely associated with the domestic sphere. Conversely, boys may actually gain more freedom from the home and their mother’s control (Pope-Edwards, 2005: 87), especially if they are relocated to an all-male domicile (Morton, 1996: 112). There are limits placed on interaction with the opposite sex and clothing reflects heightened modesty requirements (Lawton, 2007: 46). At this age, Berber boys will have “only limited contact with their mothers and are given a pair of undergarments (serwai) to wear under the jelloba and also a skullcap” (Hatt, 1974: 139). The Dusun call boys, ‘without loincloth’ and girls ‘without a skirt’ until they are about 5 years old, when they are then called ‘child man’ or ‘virgin’ and given appropriate clothing to wear (Williams, 1969: 86). A gap opens between the relative workloads of girls and boys and relative freedom to roam (Nag et al., 1978). Girls are expected to help with the care of siblings and the daily routine work of their mothers (Nerlove et al., 1974: 275). But in an Iranian village, boys are ‘turned out in the morning like cows,’ coming home for nourishment and sleep (Friedl, 1997: 148; Watson-Franke, 1976: 194).

**Phase Five: Youth in Limbo**

No phase in the life cycle is variable, cross-culturally, as adolescence. In the most thorough review of the literature, Schlegel and Barry assert that adolescence is discernible in all societies (1991: 18). However, puberty and the onset of adolescence may be evident as young as 12 years in well-nourished populations and as late as 17 years, in societies where nutrition is poor (Evleth and Tanner, 1990: 170). Marriage, child-bearing, and the establishment of an independent household mark the end of adolescence. In Kau Sai, a traditional Chinese fishing village, marriage and household formation begin at 16 years, immediately following the first menses (Ward, 1970: 115); while Masasi males are not permitted to marry before 30 years (Spencer, 1970: 137). In the first case, development into adulthood proceeds seamlessly as children reliably acquire the skills appropriate to adults of the same gender and are fully competent at an early age. In the second, a rigid hierarchy among males diverts pubertal males from sex to warrior status – a role they can only fulfill by avoiding women and living at the outer perimeter of the group’s territory. Pubescent girls join the polygynous households of much older, senior men as junior wives.

For most societies, adolescence, especially if it lasts longer than a year or two, is somewhat problematic. First there is the challenge of adolescent sexuality. Young people are typically interested in sex well before society thinks they are capable of managing a family. We discussed earlier the initiation rite as a means to enforce emotional maturity and deference to one’s elders. Other tactics include seclusion. The Khmer seclude daughters after first menses in a state referred to as coul plap, or ‘entering the shade.’ The period varies but a longer period of seclusion provokes a more generous bride price (Smith-Hefner, 1993: 145–146). While the primary purpose of seclusion seems to be to preserve the girl’s virtue to insure a successful marriage, a secondary purpose may be to shape the girl’s outlook to more closely match that of the older women. A high-ranking Tlingit girl spends 2 years in seclusion during which she is informed of her clan’s history and provided with homilies and more forceful reminders.
to maintain behavior consonant with her rank, such as avoiding gossip (Markstrom, 2008: 145). Following seclusion, the Tlingit girl is considered marriageable and "prudent ... parents took pains to marry her off promptly" (De Laguna, 1965: 21). Even in the absence of seclusion or initiation, pubertal girls are sheltered by the distaff side of the household. Their association with, and close ties to the mother begin quite early as they assist with their younger siblings and with work in the house and garden, with livestock, and craft production. So while adolescent males enjoy a wider compass for their activities, adolescent girls rarely leave their mothers’ orbit.

The process for boys – parallel to girls’ seclusion – is removal to a dormitory or men’s house. An Igbo boy moves out of his natal home to an all-male compound (Ottenberg, 1989: 118). This men’s sanctuary is the haus tambaran in the Sepik River area of Papua New Guinea (Tuzin, 1980). Tapirapé adolescent boys are moved into the tabana or men’s house where their proximity to men affords them the opportunity to observe and replicate typically male behaviors (Wagley, 1977: 149). Boys are sequestered to erase the taint of femininity acquired during years of association (primarily) with women while becoming imprinted with the male ethos. Around the world societies that devote attention to masculinizing youth are often quite warlike, and male adolescence may be synonymous with warriorhood. Creating a cohort of new warriors is not the only means societies have of taming the adolescent male ‘gang.’ They can be conscripted to serve in work details that benefit the village as a whole. Temne living in the young men’s house “habanka kali served as a cooperative work group for the chief, their fathers, and other big men of the chiefdom” (Dorjahn, 1982: 41). Not so subtly, they will be reminded of their subservient status vis-à-vis the village elite.

Aside from physical and social maturity and the acquisition of critical survival skills, the portal from adolescence to adulthood is usually opened only when the requisite property is available. This may include payment of a bride price or dowry, the construction of a home for the new couple, the provision of critical resources, such as tools or livestock. When the traditional pathways to adulthood break down through the abandonment of these traditional practices and customs or their suppression by church or government authorities, adolescents can’t become social adults (Biersack, 1998). Instead, they become ‘insurgents’ (Honwana, 2006; Rosen, 2005) or village bikhets (Leavitt, 1998).

Phase Six: Adulthood

The most important thing to understand about adulthood is that, outside the contemporary bourgeoise, societies are organized as gerontocracies (Lancy, 1996: 13, 2008: 11). One’s status is governed by age and fertility. Marriage per se may carry little weight and children aged 10 years may already be capable of the full range of adult subsistence tasks (Lancy, 2012a); hence, it may take many years after marriage to become accepted as an adult. The Javanese marry their daughters as early as 9 or 10 years to stave off any hint of premarital sex and illegitimacy. A girl becomes a woman under the guidance of her mother-in-law (Geertz, 1961: 56). A Bagisu bride is given a ‘woman’s skirt,’ but she can’t wear it until the birth of her first child (La Fontaine, 1986). In Sumatra, a married Malay woman is dependent on her father, much like her unmarried sisters, until she gives birth to her first child (Swift, 1965: 124). The same criterion is often applied to young males (Leavitt, 1998: 186). For the Sambia, adulthood status is denied to the young couple until they have successfully conceived and birthed at least two children (Herdt, 2001: 164). Progeny are so important to the Akan that a man without children may be called a ‘wax penis’ and upon death, childless adults may have thorns driven into the soles of their feet (Warren, 1986: 11). A Chuukese man will take an additional wife if his first wife does not give him children; his first wife, if she is a ‘good’ wife will gladly encourage him to do so (Bogoraz-Tan, 1924: 600).

Conclusion

Cultural models of human development (Strauss, 1992) vary cross-culturally but shared patterns can be detected in the ethnographic record. Clues to discerning such patterns can be sought in milestones of biological development, such as first menses and in indigenous nomenclature and rites of passage. One must also examine child care, dress, patterns of residence, selection of caretakers, assignment of chores, and other culturally sanctioned practices that change reliably over the life cycle. These broadly applicable cultural models coalesce into six life phases in the life cycle. Phase I includes the birth of the infant and early infancy. Unacknowledged by society, the newborn is still seen as part of the mother and therefore still in the process of being made. Its survival not guaranteed, the infant is kept tucked away in some form of an external womb, until its survival is sure. Phase II occurs when it is clear that the infant will survive. The infant is introduced to the community, usually through a rite of passage that may include a first haircut and/or a naming ceremony. Alloparents join the mother in caring for the child. Phase III removes the child from the mother’s breast and provides a push toward independence with weaning, walking, and toilet training. Toddler rejection, as this is often called, is mitigated by the lure of the playgroup. In Phase IV children become useful. Younger children are expected to do chores and, as they gain common sense, are entrusted with ever more difficult tasks. Gender differentiation is expressed as girls become tied to the domestic sphere and boys are allowed more freedom from the domestic sphere. Phase V or adolescence is highly variable and elastic across and within cultures. Passage into or out of this phase may be marked by an initiation rite. In some cases, adolescence is short, as youth begins cohabitation leading eventually to family formation. Lengthening this phase often creates a social problem with youth aggregating into gangs and behaving antisocially and we discussed a suite of culturally constructed responses. Phase VI commences with marriage, but marriage is not the key to adulthood – the entry to adulthood is rather the successful siring/bearing and raising of children.
Outlook

The ethnographic record – with well over 1000 discrete reports of childhood from hundreds of societies – has proven a rich source of ideas for reconsidering child development. We have drawn on such sources in constructing this brief overview of life phases. However, we can identify a number of additional issues and questions that might be pursued. For example, in the ethnographic record, infant and child mortality is very high. This tragedy has been largely eliminated in postindustrial society. On the other hand, children in economically developed societies suffer from emotional stress, depression, and disorders like ADHD – all completely unknown in indigenous societies. Are genotypes now preserved that would not have survived prior to the development of modern neonatal medical care? Here is another paradox. Children in small-scale societies are eagerly involved in daily routines and eagerly help out with chores. This contribution to family life continues throughout childhood. Such predilections have almost completely disappeared in contemporary bourgeois society and parents lament their children’s selfish, self-centered attitudes. Could there be a critical period at 18 months to 2 years where the child’s prosocial attempts are rebuffed (because letting them help makes extra work or is too dangerous), thus extinguishing the motivation? Or are contemporary parents so concerned about raising unique individuals that they give little thought to prosociality, whereas traditional economies are dependent on and seek to foster cooperative, sociocentric children? In the ethnographic record, we see that children are rarely pushed to learn or develop; they progress at their own pace. Recognition of achievement or celebrating a child’s birthdays and other milestones are rare to nonexistent. Praise and gifts are offered rarely. In contrast, we track age and many other milestones, carefully calibrating progress against a ‘standard.’ In contemporary societies a child can be identified as failing or ‘developmentally challenged’ almost from birth. At the same time, we lavish praise on our children, all of whom are ‘special.’ So, for 1 min they are perfect, the next, flawed. Could this be the source for the epidemic of emotional disorders? In indigenous societies adolescence varies in length, but in most societies children have mastered the full suite of adult subsistence skills and are self-sufficient not long after puberty. In contemporary society, preparations to become employed and self-sufficient and then get established in a career may prolong the adolescent phase for a decade or more. Are there social consequences of this drastic increase in the period of juvenility? Until quite recently, formal education affected a tiny minority. In traditional societies children are primarily social learners and parents rarely see the need to teach. Children learn largely through observation, imitation, and practice. It is our impression that we are witnessing the rapid spread of a form of learned helplessness. Youth in bourgeois society seem unable to learn without guidance from a teacher. The belief that children’s activities require the careful guidance of an adult extends to play, an activity formerly the exclusive domain of children. Are we undermining our children’s very powerful abilities (the basis of human culture) to learn socially? Analysis of the ethnographic record provides numerous examples of the incongruity between how indigenous and bourgeois societies view and structure childhood. This contrast sheds light on the lives of all the world’s children, enriching conversations about the course of development.

See also: Human Development, Successful: Psychological Conceptions; Human Development, Theories of; Lifespan Development: Evolutionary Perspectives.

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