Cultural Transmission and the Paradox of Children’s Agency

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Cultural Transmission and the Paradox of Children’s Agency

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Perspectives on Children in Cultural Preservation and Change

10:40 Carol Markstrom (West Virginia University)
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10:55 Jeanine Anderson (Pontificia Universidad Católica de Perú)
Mistaken agency. Child domestic workers in Peru

11:15 Aviva Sinervo (University of California, Santa Cruz)
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11:30 Ashley Maynard (University of Hawaii)
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Introduction

Participants in the 2009 AAA meetings are being urged to examine the continued relevance of key anthropological constructs, such as “cultural relativism.” We intend to revisit a closely related construct—cultural transmission. It is a venerable idea and flows from the assumption that all cultures are worth preserving and transmitting to the next generation. It has come under attack recently by numerous childhood scholars who assert the primacy of children’s agency. Many contemporary child scholars see children as fully autonomous, actively involved in creating cultures of their own, often in opposition to the dominant culture and, ultimately credit children with bringing about significant culture change. The fundamental problem with this position is that it accords almost no role for cultural transmission and fatally undermines any credible argument that culture is adaptive in the evolutionary sense. Far from denying that children actively participate in their own socialization, it is our intention to resolve the paradox in the title. We will do so by examining the critical role that autonomous children play in maintaining the continuity of cultural practices as well as facilitating change. These points will be expanded on in my talk which follows this brief introduction.
Introduction

The key points in our argument are as follows. First, all societies rely implicitly on children’s innate predilection for curiosity, observation and imitation to learn their culture. Indeed, among the Aka forest foragers, the hierarchical roles of teacher and pupil are antithetical to their cherished egalitarianism. The Aka, among many others we might cite, assume, correctly, that their children will exercise agency in deciding what to learn, from whom and how to go about choosing appropriate role models to emulate and learn from. In the process, Aka acquire their culture which includes, of course, a suite of tools to make a living, establish a family and, ultimately, pass on one’s genes.

Second, agency is exercised when the child chooses when to learn and from whom she may learn. For aspirant potters in Conambo, a village in lowland South America, children are encouraged to exhibit artistic individuality, yet an older girl may relinquish, albeit temporarily, her artistic freedom. She does so to develop artistic excellence by apprenticing herself to a master potter. In another example of strategic autonomy, from Anderson’s research, rural Peruvian girls elect to place themselves as servants in urban households to gain access to “better” schools.
Introduction

Third, children are expected to *exchange* one kind of agency—freedom—for efficacy, the agency that a mature adult exercises in forming a household and producing a family. Among Native Americans, as discussed in Carol Markstrom’s talk, initiation rites facilitate this very necessary function as youth accept their role as culture bearers while they bid farewell to the autonomy of childhood.

And fourth, dramatic social change enhances children’s autonomy and efficacy as they may adapt more readily than their elders. This last proposition is exemplified in Aviva Sinervo’s recent study of children adapting quickly to the economic opportunities afforded by tourists in the city of Cusco.
Perspectives on Children in Cultural Preservation and Change

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Abstract

This introductory presentation will review the core ideas that inform the session including cultural transmission and children’s agency. From the earliest ethnographic accounts, anthropologists—some with wonder—noted the reliability with which children voluntarily turned themselves into students of and, ultimately, transmitters of culture. Also noted, however, is the tendency for adults to withhold agency or influence from children until they’ve gone far towards mastery on their own initiative. This relationship is turned on its head in the current dominant culture where children’s freedom is limited while they are granted enormous influence over adults. It will be argued here that much current writing re children’s agency is driven more by the latter world-view than the former. In the session we will focus on these native or emic views of agency.
Methodology

This talk is based on over 6 year’s study of childhood in the historical and ethnographic archives—culminating in a comprehensive survey.

The method is referred to as ethnology. Material is gathered from literally hundreds of archived accounts on a particular topic to establish consistent patterns which are interpreted in light of evolutionary principles.
Folk Models Derived from the Ethnographic and Historical Records

Folk Model Derived from Contemporary Sources
The Agency Declaration

One of the earliest exponents of children’s agency published an article in *American Anthropologist* a few years ago with the title: “Why don’t anthropologists like children?”

“Children also create and inhabit cultures of their own making, cultures that in significant measure are independent of and distinct from those of the adults with whom they live. In making their own cultural traditions, children…significantly constrain and mold not only their own cultural productions but also those of adults (Hirschfield 2002: 612).”
The Agency Declaration

Somewhat earlier, British sociologists had heralded the creation of a “new paradigm” for the study of childhood. They also argued that children should be viewed as autonomous inventors of culture and powerful shapers of society at large and that our inability to recognize children’s power was due to the failure of researchers and interventionists to seek out their opinions and views (Prout and James 1990: 22; Pufall and Unsworth 2004: 3; see also Corsaro 2005: 232). While there is a growing literature that incorporates these ideas about children’s agency, and that listens to children’s voices, the concept remains analyzed and untested. Many researchers have, mantra-like, adopted the agency declaration without question—even when the findings of the study are directly contradictory (Poluha 2004; Trawick 2007).
Evolutionary Perspectives on Children’s Agency

Scholars who see culture as a critical element in human evolution theorize that culture is fundamentally conservative and that cultural evolution should be rare. That’s because, in order for culture to have evolved, humans should be predisposed to imitate others, rather than make things up as they go along. This tendency towards social learning means that successful—and some unsuccessful—adaptations are preserved from one generation to the next. It also implies cumulation. Inventions are copied by others and the cultural repertoire expands. All of this argues very much against the notion that children are, by nature, rebellious vis-à-vis cultural traditions and eager to establish their own. This would not make sense in evolutionary terms (Boyd & Richerson 1996). Additionally, we can assume that parents have a genetic interest in protecting their children and insuring that they not only survive to adulthood but have the means to establish and support a family, leading to the production of grandchildren (Blurton-Jones 1993). Clearly, parents genetic interests are NOT served by children who seek to participate in or create “…cultures that in significant measure are independent of and distinct from those of the adults” (Hirschfield 2002: 612).
Agency as *Freedom* and Agency as *Influence or Efficacy*

However, before going further, I want to make a distinction between agency as *freedom* and agency as *influence or efficacy*. As we will see, in contemporary elite society, children are granted an enormous amount of influence or power over others while being granted relatively little real freedom. Precisely the opposite case is true for village children who are given enormous autonomy and expected to use it in learning the culture. On the other hand, they are granted very little access to or influence over adults. This is a distinction that is neither made nor appreciated by the agency advocates.

For example, at least year’s AAA, I attended a talk entitled: “Learning to Be Social: A Study of Socializing Practices in Danish Daycare Institutions.” The presenter noted that the goal of pre-school pedagogy is to foster cooperation and social relations, how to get along in a group, rather than preparation for academic instruction.
Agency as *Freedom* and Agency as *Influence or Efficacy*

The presenter referred to this policy, without irony, as “civilizing” the child. When I asked, after the talk, how this philosophy squares with the philosophy of granting “agency” to children—a position the presenter aligned herself with at the outset—her reply was “Yes, they are given agency but they must learn to use it in the proper way.”

This distinction is critical for assisting us to resolve the paradox in the title of our session. We do that by noting a widely shared and efficacious folk model of children’s development. That model proposes that children are eager to acquire their culture, take the initiative to do so and, at the appropriate age, will have and use the cognitive tools necessary. And this process unfolds with only limited modeling and guidance, particularly from older siblings and peers. Children are expected to turn freedom into efficacy.
I would argue that the current crusade to grant children “agency” grows out of the parenting practices of the modern intelligentsia. As a collective, these individuals are deeply engaged in the quest to optimize their children’s experiences in the present and opportunities in the future. This group also happens to be the pool from which social researchers, members of advisory panels re government policy, and textbook authors are drawn. Secondarily, as suggested by my colleague John Lucy, this may be another instance of identity politics as children are perceived by the intelligentsia as an oppressed, silent, powerless interest group whose rights have been denied.

In the next few slides, I will offer some examples of parents’ granting or withholding agency.
My colleague David Bergin proudly relates, in the annual family holiday letter, the following anecdote: As he was seated in a wooden chair working at his computer, his 5-year old son Sam, started climbing on and hanging off the back of it. David: "Sam, stop doing that, you might pull the back off." Sam walks around to face his father and, with hands on hips, rejoins: "Well, I guess we'll just have a stool, then." It is relevant to this discussion to mention that David is a well-published Educational Psychologist.

Contrast this neo-centric view of children with:

As they begin to become more and more children rather than babies, and begin to be a bit irritating and willful because they are ‘thinking for themselves,’ [Tahitians] begin to find children less amusing. Instead of being the center of the household stage, the child…becomes annoying (Levy 1973: 454).
From Adrie Kusserow’s research on children’s agency as a function of Social Class in 3 samples from New York City:

[In the upper class (Parkside) sample] It was quite evident that by age three Parkside children were already considered…small but complete “little people” with their own tastes, desires, needs, and wants (p. 81). …“Children have a very fundamental right to be treated as a human being, to be shown the same respect for their intelligence, their ability to maneuver through life on their own as any other person. I try to speak to them like normal human beings, the same way I would speak to my husband…Parents implied that it was somehow demeaning to treat the child in a childlike way (p. 105)” “We give our children the right to choose what activity they want to do…so it’s not, “I’m going to read you the book about such and such,” but “Why don’t you pick a book that you’d like me to read?” It lets them have some ownership of the situation and that’s good” (p. 108).

In contrast to many of the Parkside parents…the Queens (Working Class) parents…did not feel it was harming or inhibiting the child’s development if they asserted their power as an adult over the child. Hierarchy was part of life, the way things were, and something the child would have to accept (Kusserow 2004:51).
Granting/Withholding Agency to Infants

“[Baby Signs helps us to meet] the needs of our kids. We know if they are hungry, tired, thirsty, or need a diaper change. My son is only twelve months old and he can communicate what he wants and needs and is very patient with me by nodding “yes” or “no” when I am learning to understand his talk.”

“Hurray for Baby Signs! Considering how slowly babies learn even easy words like ball and doggy, let alone difficult words like scared or elephant, many months are lost that could be spent having rich and rewarding interactions, both for the child and the parent” (Acredolo and Goodwyn 2002).
Granting/Witholding Agency: Infants

Casual nurturance [where Kpelle] mothers carry their babies on their backs and nurse them frequently but do so without really paying much direct attention to them; they continue working or... socializing (Erchak 1992:50).

Essentially, village infants are kept fed, clean and quiet but often ignored versus our preoccupation with attaching ourselves to, stimulating and communicating with our infants.
Granting/Withholding Agency

“Four-year-old Graeme spies his mother at the kitchen counter beginning to make a cake. He walks to the table opposite the counter… and steps onto the chair. He asks, “What are we making?” Then he takes hold of the bowl and a wooden spoon and eyes the ingredients. Meanwhile his mother, who had previously arranged the ingredients, the utensils, and the recipe on the counter, has started to measure the flour. This interaction is typical of the types of social situations young children experience everyday throughout the world. A child and a more experienced partner work together to accomplish a practical, meaningful goal—in this case, making a cake” (Gauvain 2001:3).

“The adult slows down the activity, as when she provides the child with adequate time to add the ingredients to the bowl—something she would ordinarily do much more quickly. She also modifies certain aspects of the task to support the child’s participation. For example, measuring the ingredients proceeds more carefully and overtly than when she works alone… she may coordinate her actions with those of the child to support his participation in activities that are still too difficult for him to do on his own… As an adult and child work together, they learn about each other’s needs, how to help and support one another, and how to enjoy each other’s company… The child may receive instruction from the mother as she tells him what to do in order to help. Such didactic instruction is a mainstay of adult-child interaction” (Gauvain 2001:4) emphasis added
Granting/Withholding Agency

From another developmental psychologist who’s skeptical about claims made in previous slide. “What if one...asks about Vygotskian-based accounts of cognitive development? These accounts contain a strong emphasis on social interactions, especially those where the more and the less expert combine to work out a shared definition of a situation and to move the novice from a state in which performance can proceed only with help to a state in which performance can be carried through unaided... The standard picture is one of willing teachers on the one hand and eager learners on the other. Where are the parents who do not see their role as one of imparting information and encouraging understanding? Where are the children who do not wish to learn or perform in the first place? Those questions were prompted especially by trying to fit Vygotskian analyses to the interactions involved in teaching children to be skilled at some household tasks and to take responsibility for them” (Goodnow 1990: 279) emphasis added.

However, such skeptics are the exception and, indeed, the State of California has launched a program called “First Five” designed to make the parenting practices of the intelligentsia, the norm.
Read, Sing and Talk: By talking to children in full sentences from the moment they are born, you help them build a basis for language and dialogue. This stimulates their minds and helps them develop verbal skills.

Walks: Take a walk with your child and count how many houses you have passed. You can also encourage a conversation by asking him or her what color things are in your surrounding environment. Point out signs and the letters you see.

Sorting Laundry: Your child can help you sort laundry by colors. Have him or her say the color out loud and help him or her differentiate between dark and light.

Cooking: Have your child help with cooking by getting ingredients for you. You can ask him or her to give you a certain amount of something like potatoes. This will not only help encourage his or her verbal skills, but will help develop his or her math skills too.
Children’s Agency in the Village

We see a very different picture in the village, indeed in the US, well into the last century, children were given a great deal of freedom to explore and learn from the neighborhood and surrounding environment.

- No formal instruction is practiced among the [!Kung]… learning…comes from the children’s observation of the more experienced (Marshall 1958: 51).

- [Among the reindeer herding Saami of Norway], the child…is not instructed before starting a project, nor does he solicit help (Anderson 1978: 194).
[There] is remarkably little meddling by older [Inuit] people in this learning process. Parents do not presume to teach their children what they can as easily learn on their own (Guemple 1979: 50).

In contrast to American parents, who seem to feel that knowledge is something like medicine—it’s good for the child and must be crammed down his throat even if he does not like it—Rotuman parents acted as if learning were inevitable because the child wants to learn (Howard 1970:37, emphasis added).

During this period there is no formal training [among the Mbuti Pygmies], but boys and girls alike learn all there is to be learned by simple emulation and by assisting their parents and elders in various tasks (Turnbull 1965: 179).
Freedom to Learn

Belize-playing in tree

Laos-climber

Liberia-roaming toddlers
Unwelcome Precocity

Village adults do not grant children license to interfere with their work or recreation, even when presenting themselves as willing pupils. In the ethnographic record, one not only does not see much evidence of *didactic instruction* of any kind (Lancy 2009) but children behaving like young Graeme are usually rebuffed (Lancy 1996: 149-53; Edwards 2005: 91; Morton 1996: 90; Reichard 1934: 38). There are many examples of what I’ve referred to as “unwelcome precocity” in the literature. Some examples of this attitude follow.

- Lepcha childhood is a time of obscurity, of being unimportant; children are not taken notice of and their tastes are little consulted (Gorer 1967: 314).

- In a Mayan community...children are taught to avoid challenging an adult with a display of greater knowledge by telling them something (Rogoff 1990: 60).

- [Fijian] children of any age should be obedient, quiet and undemanding in the presence of adults (Toren 1988: 240).
Unwelcome Precocity

When it came time for [Trukese maiden] Rachel to learn to make [a] basket…her father took her over to his mother’s house in order to have her teach Rachel this skill [but she] …was indignant that they should be teaching Rachel so much when she was so young. When her father insisted that his mother make a basket she did so; but she did it rapidly and refused to answer Rachel’s questions (Gladwin and Sarason 1953: 414).

[Mende children] who display a precocious fund of knowledge are either ignored or regarded with acute suspicion (Bledsoe 1992: 192).

Young [Telefol] woman, recalling how she learned to loop as a child, told of how she had once tried to carry on with an unfinished *bilum* [string bag] that her mother had left in the rafters of the house before leaving to work in the garden. She had been carefully watching the way her mother’s hands moved as she looped the *bilum*. But on trying it out herself, the result was a disaster. When her mother returned, it took her hours to undo the mess [and] she was angry (MacKenzie 1991: 102).
Cultivating Agency

When public speaking skills are developed at an early age, children are prepared for a lifetime of effective communication. That’s why we teach children to speak clearly and confidently. And we give them the opportunities to perform every day. We’re teaching tomorrow’s leaders—and the future is looking bright.

American ideals.
Eloquent English.
Honorable comportment.
Knowledgeable historical perspective.
90th percentile test scores.

Building America’s future leaders today.
Cultivating Agency

“In Wilton—a middle- to upper-middle-class “historic” suburb of a large Midwestern city that has long been a favored residential spot for the area’s professional class. It has a quaint downtown where the Wilton Inn and various hops and restaurants border the Village Green… Permissive parenting styles, intensive involvement with electronic and commodity culture, and extensive experience in “democratic” classrooms with “student-centered” pedagogies, all share the characteristic of deferring to students’ experience and judgment, and thereby according them significant authority…Discourses of “excellence” and “success” imbued the community and school…Students and parents in WBHS generally evinced a keen awareness of being in competition with others…Parental bragging about children’s accomplishments was commonplace, as was posting AP test results on refrigerators, and discussing the colleges to which children were applying and gaining admission…Throughout the study there were many examples of how students attempted to exert control over their educational experiences, including routinely questioning their teachers’ authority, critiquing how instruction was delivered, judging the utility of what they were learning, and attempting to personalize relationships with their teachers.” (Demerath 2008: 275-7)
Conclusion

My goal in this introduction has been to cast doubt on claims made by childhood agency advocates but not to throw the baby out with the bathwater. That is, I think the issue of agency, especially when bifurcated into the complementary concepts of freedom and efficacy, has a great deal of analytical merit. Hence, we must look for evidence of agency on the part of children, evidence of familial participation in granting/withholding agency and describe the dynamic interaction of freedom and efficacy in children’s development. I also think that agency has particular utility in the study of children in cultures that are undergoing rapid change. Scholars speculate that when the culture is stable, there are greater payoffs to imitators as compared to innovators but that this calculus is reversed during rapid culture change.

In the presentations that follow, my colleagues will share examples of such analyses from their fieldwork.
References


References


References


