The focus of the proposed volume is the intersection of child development and culture—where culture is seen as a critical component of the human species. The volume systematically examines childhood in relationship to a body of knowledge and skill that must be acquired by any competent member of the community. What are the psychological components of this process? How do societies make accommodation for children as learners? How are age and gender taken into account? As culture varies, what are the consequences for the learner?

How Children Learn Their Culture takes advantage of recent breakthroughs in research on human cognition and in the role of culture in human evolution and life history. Historically, culture has been the “noise” in studies of learning and development. Ideally, the subjects of study should be shorn of prior knowledge (their culture) before the start of any investigation. Psychology has not, therefore, offered a pathway towards understanding how children acquire culture. Anthropologists, on the other hand, have generally conceded to psychology theoretical ownership of the processes involved in culture acquisition, limiting their contribution to descriptions of culture as the to-be-learned “content.” Contemporary research and scholarship have been further handicapped by the self-imposition of various taboos including eschewing evolutionary perspectives on culture, a virtual ban on studies designed to separate nature vs. nurture and, an overreliance on data gathered from a single, highly atypical population (Henrich, et al 2010). This status quo is changing as recognition grows that we cannot think about culture in evolutionary terms without considering how it may be transmitted or taught, acquired (in some fairly automatic fashion like language) or learned. And, in trying to understand the processes of maturation and change over the life span, we can no longer ignore the actual stuff that children must learn to become competent members of their society.

My objective for this volume is to take a difficult, complex, multi-faceted yet critical topic and render it coherent and meaningful to a wide audience. I am emboldened to taken on this challenge by earlier success with a similar undertaking: The Anthropology of Childhood (Lancy 2008). The topic under consideration —how children acquire/learn their culture—would be acknowledged as critical by a wide swath of scholars from child development to evolutionary anthropology to cultural history. Many have taken a piece of the overarching topic, rather like the parable of the blind men and the elephant. But while there have been numerous analyses of the tail, the ears, the hide and the trunk, the elephant itself remains obscure. For example, some psychologists (Gauvain 2001) have done a masterful job of infusing culture, as a variable, into the field of child development without addressing the relationship, in evolutionary terms, between ontogeny and culture. Peter Gray is working on a book (Freedom to Learn) aimed at parents that harvests some of the ideas from this body of work and applies them to the challenge of modern child-rearing. The Schönpflug (2009) volume—Cultural Transmission—offers a diverse
array of ideas on the process of cultural transmission but has relatively little to say about the nature of childhood or culture. Boyd and Richerson’s (1985) work on the evolutionary significance of culture has enormous, but largely unrealized, importance for students of child development—largely because the work is highly technical and replete with mathematical formulae. Oswalt’s (1976) and Roberts’ (1964) seminal works offer fruitful ideas for thinking about cultural variability in ways that must affect how children acquire their culture and yet neither are cited by those who venture into this arena.

The proposed volume is based in part on work I’ve undertaken since the publication of The Anthropology of Childhood (noted below). I realized that, while an anthropological perspective on childhood can be extremely powerful and productive, I needed to come to grips with the really big questions. As I’ve undertaken a thorough review of the literature on cultural transmission, it is clear that a vacuum exists but I have already made considerable progress towards filling it. For example, in work on the “chore curriculum” (Lancy in press) and apprenticeship (Lancy 2011), I analyze the processes involved in children’s learning both basic skills for survival as well as more complex skills associated with craft production. In an article just appearing in Human Nature, Grove and I demonstrate how middle childhood is marked largely by the child applying in earnest much of the cultural knowledge that, heretofore, he/she has been “playing” with. In “Learning ‘From Nobody’” (Lancy 2010a), I was able to show that teaching—a dominant mode of cultural transmission today—was historically and cross-culturally, very rare. Jerome Bruner had made the same point much earlier (1966: 59) but the insight was largely ignored.

This book, however, will not just be a summation of these individual insights. I have identified several major themes around which the presentation will be organized. Each theme will be the focus of a chapter.

• **Becoming cultured.** Before we consider how individuals acquire culture, we must ask how our species acquired it. First we must ask whether non-human primates have culture and, in finding an answer, we will delineate aspects of human life history, which are unique. Sarah Hrdy’s book (2009) provides a particularly useful window on the chimps vs. humans discussion as she places children and their development in the center of the scene. Central to the discussion of this vital comparison will be recent work on the inter-generational transmission of skills in non-human primates, particularly the use of tools. It is clear is that, while there is some commonality, *Homo sapiens* can deploy behaviors, including conscious modeling for the benefit of learners, not available to non-human primates. Scholars have also begun to trace the intermingled development of tool use, diet, language, brain growth and social learning in the hominin line leading to our species. In examining these interrelationships, ideas re the acquisition of culture have emerged. Rogers (1989), for example, shows that, in a stable environment, the cost-benefit payoffs for copycats—those who model their behavior on others—is far greater than for individual or trial and error learners.
• **Culture is not transmitted; it is acquired.** There is a growing consensus that the human phenotype incorporates the cognitive and social capacity to acquire culture and that this process is on auto-start. A major theme introduced early in the book will be the details of what I refer to, heuristically, as a Culture Acquisition Device (CAD)—to crib from Chomsky. Indeed, child-initiated “social” learning is earning increased attention (Gaskins and Paradise 2010; Mejia-Arauz, et al 2005). Work on the child’s emerging **Theory of Mind** (TOM) has also given a boost to this line of thought (Tomasello and Carpenter 2007). Studies show that the child does not just slavishly imitate a model but shows awareness of the model’s intentions and goals and may, therefore, replicate a task while avoiding an error made by the model.

• **Developmental transitions in the acquisition of culture.** Recent research on infant cognition has revealed dramatic culture learning capacities in babies (Gopnik et al 2000). These findings were actually anticipated by Barry Brazelton’s research in the late ‘60s among the Zinacantecans. He found that Mayan infants, while receiving none of the cognitive and linguistic stimulation considered essential for normal development, met all the developmental milestones via “the imitative mode for learning” (1977: 177). Further along in development, recent research on neurological change during adolescence (e.g. the “teen brain”) suggests that unique learning targets and processes are in operation. At each stage of the life course—through maturity—there are critical changes in person-culture interaction. Maturation provides new tools for the individual to deploy in learning the culture and societies provide affordances as a function of the individual’s age and gender.

• **The packaging of culture.** A study I published in 1996 carried the sub-title *Cultural Routines for Children’s Development*. During my fieldwork among the Kpelle, I was struck by how little evident “child-rearing” there was. Instead, highly routinized processes aided the child in his/her self-actuated attempts to “grow-up.” Other ethnographers have made similar observations: “The Wolof education system aims less at imposing adult rules on the child, than at creating conditions by which a child gains an awareness and a respect for the ‘law of brothers and equals (Zempleni-Rabain 1973: 233).’” Human groups “package” the culture, sometimes quite explicitly (e.g. initiation rites) to facilitate children’s learning. One extremely diverse and valuable collection of such packages has been labeled, often dismissively, as “play.” But, there is growing consensus that the various kinds of play activity—found in every society and, hence, of evolutionary significance—serve as critical environments for learning (Lancy 1980; Lancy and Grove 2011b).

• **Role models.** If I were discussing contemporary bourgeois society this theme might be labelled “teachers.” But as analysis reveals (Lancy 2010a), active, child-centered instruction is quite rare outside the contemporary elite. Rather, as children assume primary responsibility for learning their culture, they rely on those more expert to serve largely in the capacity of models. However, this should not suggest that parents are uninterested or indifferent towards the
child's acquisition of culture, as the numerous ethnographic studies of folk theories of parenting and child development (Harkness and Super 1995) make apparent. Contrary to authoritative views on what is “natural” (Lancy 2010b) in child development, the prescribed role model, especially for boys, is as likely to be an older sibling or peer as a parent. But, in most societies, role models also carry a responsibility to intervene when the system breaks down and, again, customary remedies are prescribed. In contemporary parlance, we talk about the “failure to launch,” but societies have always had to accommodate individuals whose progress in acquiring the culture was inadequate. Theoretical work on autism, for example (Baron-Cohen 1995), suggests a congenital absence of the ability to learn from role models.

• **Culture as curricula.** In thinking about a modern college student faced with a bewildering array of courses of study from which to choose, we realize that the human Culture Acquisition Device had to be extremely versatile in order to accommodate the great variety of subsistence systems to which children have successfully adapted. This theme allows us to fruitfully explore cross-cultural variability in the kind and amount of information (Roberts 1964, Oswalt 1976) that constitutes the *curriculum* for any given society. It also allows us to ask, for example, how learning to become a competent hunter differs from learning to become a shepherd. Donald’s (1991) identification of human artifacts as “external symbolic storage” is also extremely helpful. Human culture is prolific with respect to the production of enduring artifacts including tools, dwellings and wearables—all of which incorporate information on how they’re used, manufactured, how they match up to a diverse population of users and so on. Learning through the exploration of artifacts begins early. Information on taste, texture and shape is accessible to an infant whose vision is as yet undeveloped but happily sucks or mouths anything available. For the young living in the compact communities of the past and of indigenous peoples today, “culture” is a kind of diorama, which, with continual monitoring, can be read off like a “survival guide.”

• **The necessity for schooling.** This theme allows us to bring the rich resources of the history of childhood and of education to the table. Schooling has both a short history and limited distribution cross-culturally. It is probably safe to say that children, while keen to learn their culture, have never been terribly eager to serve as *students*. So schooling is extremely costly from social and evolutionary perspectives and, hence, there must be a large payoff (Olson 2009). We will examine the kind of change that must occur for society to make the necessary investment in schooling. This investment must also incorporate changes in the behavior of role models, changes in the way culture is packaged and changes in cultural models of child rearing.

• **Children and cultural change.** To this point in the discussion, culture and child development have been frozen in place and they will now be set in motion. First we start with a survey of the role of leaders and followers in cultural stasis and change (Boyd and Richerson 1985; Henrich 2001; Rogers 1989). The more specific role of children has not been addressed but should be as children are
both more open to innovation and change while also more constrained in introducing change because of their low social status. During periods of rapid social change, children may be favored, therefore, as their cognitive and behavioral plasticity renders them more readily adapted to new cultural forms. Recent research on street kids, child soldiers and child migrants offers rich ground for speculation (Lancy 2010c).

The primary contribution to scholarship that I am making with this book is to offer a comprehensive review and synthesis of a diverse and only loosely integrated body of scholarship. Secondarily, I bring forward original research on children’s acquisition of skills (Lancy in press, 2011) and the “packaging” of culture for children’s benefit (Lancy 1996). Although the volume has no competitor at the moment, it falls squarely into an area of scholarship that is “hot,” and includes evolutionary psychology and anthropology, human development and the anthropology, cognitive archaeology and history of childhood. The primary brake on the widespread appreciation and synthesis of this recent scholarship has been the epistemology adopted and/or the style of presentation. That is, scholars are either religiously nomothetic—resisting theory or any attempt at generalization—or flagrantly obscurantist. These were the twin demons I took on in The Anthropology of Childhood and would, immodestly, claim some success. The book is cited and positively reviewed by scholars from both these poles.

On the other hand, the proposed volume relies very little on arguments raised in The Anthropology of Childhood or on the rich store of ethnographic cases that illustrate those arguments. This is possible because, since publication, my annotated bibliography of such cases has grown by some 825 pages. In terms of a timeline for publication, my goal is to produce a draft of approximately 350 pages, including footnotes and references by September 2013.

References


