MYRA BLUEBOND-LANGNER
JILL E. KORBIN
Guest Editors

In Focus: Children, Childhoods, and Childhood Studies

Challenges and Opportunities in the Anthropology of Childhoods: An Introduction to "Children, Childhoods, and Childhood Studies"

ABSTRACT   Anthropological attention to children and childhoods has had an uneven but lengthy history, both within the discipline and in interdisciplinary endeavors. Recently, there has been a resurgence of interest in the study of children, with work often carried out under the rubrics of "Childhood Studies" or the "Anthropology of Childhoods." In these frameworks, children are at once developing beings, in possession of agency, and to varying degrees vulnerable. It has been a hallmark of anthropological work to recognize that these attributes manifest themselves in different times and places, and under particular social, political, economic, and moral circumstances and conditions. The five articles in this "In Focus" put forward some key challenges and opportunities for the anthropological study of children and childhoods. [Keywords: children, childhood, childhood studies]

ANTHROPOLOGICAL attention to children and childhoods has had a long but uneven history, both within the discipline and in interdisciplinary endeavors. For example, during some periods, such as the height of "Culture and Personality" studies in psychological anthropology, child socialization patterns were a core explanation for adult personality and cultural patterns. At other points in the history of the discipline, work on children and childhoods has depended on individual research interests rather than concentrated programs or schools of thought. Recently, there has been a resurgence of interest in the study of children, with work often carried out under the rubrics of "Childhood Studies" or the "Anthropology of Childhoods." This "In Focus" section includes accounts of the history of the study of children and childhoods in anthropology and the products of such research. In addition, this "In Focus" highlights major theoretical and methodological issues in the study of children and childhoods, as well as the opportunities and challenges facing those who would like to see the study of children be more central to anthropology and to policy development.[1]

The emerging anthropology of children and childhoods must of necessity take into account the rights of children as set forth in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC; see UNICEF n.d.). The UNCRC was a pivotal event, not only in the development of policies for children but also in terms of scholarship. In its basic form, the convention includes three interlocking principles: *protection, provision,* and *participation.* The first two, *protection* of children from harm and *provision* of needed resources, have resonated with international agencies and children's rights groups, and are consistent with child protection efforts in the United States. The third principle, *participation,* has stimulated a research and policy agenda that includes children's views and perspectives. This expanded research interest is interdisciplinary and falls under the rubric of "Childhood Studies." Anthropology's long-standing orientations toward an emic view and multivocality dovetails with these emerging interests in studies of children and childhoods.

The increase in global communication has brought daily reminders of children's suffering around the world. With those reminders have come reinvigorated scholarship, new policies and approaches to children's lives, major humanitarian relief, and increased philanthropy. There are now major initiatives directed at eradicating problems afflicting children, both biological (e.g., disease) and social (e.g., poverty). Attention to global problems of children— war, poverty, abuse, sexual exploitation, and so forth—have raised the visibility of children and childhoods and created

a sense of urgency about the study of children and childhoods as a microcosm of concerns facing contemporary societies and an increasingly global world. Studies of these problems have uncovered the reality that children are not only aggressed against but also aggressors (e.g., child soldiers). Children are not only acted on by adults but also agents of political change and cultural interpretation and change.

The recognition of the multifaceted nature of children and childhoods has stimulated not only efforts to ameliorate the difficulties that children and youth face but also a backlash against those children and youth who are both victims and perpetrators. With the uncovering of the reality of children's lives has come a blurring of the distinction between pure and applied work. Contemporary studies are often politically charged with implications for policy and practice.

Developments in the study of children and childhoods, and more recently the field of childhood studies, are strikingly parallel to the developments we have seen in the study of women and women's studies: As it is with the study of women as social actors and the need to place women in theories of behavior, culture, and society, so it is with children. Studies of children and childhoods are the next logical steps in a more inclusive view of culture and society. In this more inclusive view, rather than privileging children's voices above all others, it is more productive to integrate children into a more multivocal, multiperspective view of culture and society.

Children are at once developing beings, in possession of agency, and to varying degrees vulnerable. It has been a hallmark of anthropological work to recognize that these attributes manifest themselves in different times and places, and under particular social, political, economic, and moral circumstances and conditions. The coexistence of agency and vulnerability influences how we conduct research with children and affects our ethical responsibilities both to children in our studies and to future children occupying the space of childhood. These obligations are particularly important because while we increasingly look at children as having agency, they nevertheless are among the most vulnerable members of society and have particular needs for nurturance. The articles in this "In Focus" section speak to these major issues in evolving conceptualizations about children and childhoods. They address the challenges of concerted attention to the complexity of contemporary issues in a way that is inclusive of children.

DEVELOPMENT AND CONTEXT: AGENCY AND VULNERABILITY

Anthropology's core concern with the contextual nature of child development and emic perspectives perhaps inevitably led to greater inclusiveness of children's own views and thus to confronting the dilemmas involved in recognizing both agency and vulnerability. Robert LeVine's article, in taking us back through the work of Franz Boas, Margaret Mead, Bronislaw Malinowski, and Raymond Firth, to name but a few, shows us how the physical, emotional, and social growth of children as members of a society was an early concern of anthropologists, and how the temporal, social and cultural contexts in which children live continue to be a hallmark of anthropological studies:

> 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. [LeVine this issue]

This concern with the particular and with context in the study of children and childhoods at different times and in different places leads anthropology to resist universal definitions of *children* and *childhood*. However, whether or not anthropology is inclined toward such universal definitions, one is used in the international human rights community and in laws regarding such matters as child soldiers, child labor, and age of consent to marriage. It is found in international documents like the UNCRC as well as other treaties and statutes. These definitions feature a "bright line" of age: years lived. In the case of the UNCRC, a child is a person under 18.

For the anthropologist, "bright lines" are immediately problematic considering the variation by culture, ethnicity, gender, history, and location found in the cross-cultural record. Studies by anthropologists raise questions about models or approaches that assume a universal progression from childhood through adulthood, from incompetency to competency and from immaturity to maturity. In this issue, David Rosen discusses how these assumptions operate in humanitarian discourse particularly with regard to child soldiers. In so doing, he throws into bold relief not only the problems with universal definitions of *children* and *childhood* but also some of the problems in matters of theorizing about children, methods for study, and policy that come with the ascription or recognition of agency in children.

In the past few decades, anthropologists have both asserted and clearly documented children's agency, singly and in groups, in a number of situations. What is less clear is the degree of agency, the impact of that agency, let alone the nature of that agency—points that could also be made about the agency of adults—singly or in groups. Children, like adults, do not escape structural constraints. Adults' decisions and actions, be it about taking up arms or making decisions about care and treatment or the like, also are affected by emotional, social, and political pressure. Similarly, the effect that any one individual or groups of individuals can evince in a situation or society is variable and requires interrogation; so too with regard to children.

As LeVine's article would suggest, agency is a concept that we have embraced in part as a reaction to studies that proceeded from models of children and childhood with more structural and chronological substrates. In these

models, Piagetian for example, emphasis is on becoming, maturing, reaching a particular end state. When such models are in play, the child is measured against "an excessively idealized version of adult autonomy, independence, and maturity" (Rosen this issue), which in itself is flawed.

Ascription of agency to children also fits well with a long-held tenet in anthropology about individuals as meaning makers. In this issue, Christina Toren reminds us, this is no less so when the subjects are children. Children are meaning makers. In referring to her studies of Fijian children's ideas of kin, Toren writes,

> Like the rest of us, each one of these children was born into a world in the making that was already rendered meaningful in all its material aspects, and with time they are making these meanings anew. [Toren this issue]

Toren, like others in this issue, locates this meaning in the children's interactions, "in particular intersubjective relations with particular others" (Toren this issue).

With an emphasis on agency and a move away from children as passive recipients of action has come a parallel and consistent move away from relying on statements by adults about children's worlds and experiences and, instead, toward considering statements by children themselves. This shift in positioning of children's voices has led research, policy, and practice to what might be labeled a commandment to listen to the voices of children. Allison James (this issue) claims this was heeded in England and Europe, while going largely unheeded in the United States, with the exception of the work of some U.S. anthropologists (e.g., Bluebond-Langner 1978) and sociologists (e.g., Corsaro 1979), whose work demonstrated the need for children's voices in understanding children's experiences as well as processes of socialization and sociocultural reproduction and change.

James describes "practices and problems, pitfalls and potentials" involved in trying to give voice to children, including issues of authenticity, children's perspectives, and the nature of their participation in the research process. As James notes, while these problems are not unique to the study of children, there are unique aspects when the subjects are children. Moreover, in failing to address these issues, "childhood research risks becoming marginalized once more and will fail to provide an arena within which children are seen as social actors who can provide a unique perspective on the social world about matters that concern them as children" (James this issue). She finds the work of James Clifford and George Marcus (1986), Clifford (1988), and Clifford Geertz (1988) especially useful in dealing with issues of children's voices and representations, and sees Geertz's work in particular as "a new critical stance [that] might re-energize childhood research" (James this issue).

The articles in this volume remind us by example and exhortation that in using quotations from children we have to be cognizant of all of the following: selectivity of representation, uncritical quoting, polyphony of voices, whose point is being made (e.g., the anthropologist's or the children being quoted), and whose agenda is being served (e.g., the human rights community or the people of the community in which the child lives). James comments:

> For anthropologists the dilemmas raised by the politics of representation are by now well rehearsed; for anthropologists of childhood, however, these have yet to be fully articulated, and they remain a very present and pressing concern given the rhetorical power that "the voice of the child" wields. [James this issue]

We need not only to document what children say but also to accompany those statements with accounts of how what they say is played out with attention to the social and cultural constraints in operation at that time.

In this "In Focus," we are continually reminded of the diversity of individual children's lives and experiences, as well as the problem of generalization within any society, let alone across societies and cultures. A key question, as James points out, is

> how might childhood researchers hear, at one and the same time, children speaking both as individuals, with their unique and different experiences, and as the collective inhabitants of that social, cultural, economic, and political space that in any society is labeled as "childhood"? [James this issue]

Although the category of "childhood"—and of "children," for that matter—may be necessary for research and practice, how do we render it meaningful?

When we move away from a view of children as passive recipients of action and ascribe them agency and competency, or even when we shift weight to agency and away from children as developing beings in need of protection, what happens to vulnerability? How do we deal with our ethical and moral responsibilities to children and to others in the communities in which they live? The discourse surrounding the prosecution of child soldiers—as manifest in international treaties; testimonies by NGOs, adults, and children at truth and reconciliation committees; and statements by those who were victims of attacks by child soldiers—underscores the tension between conceptions of children as developing beings who are vulnerable and in need of protection and of children as in possession of agency, capable and able to make interpretations of their worlds and act on them. As Rosen points out, there are

> thousands of children and youth caught up in armed warfare who are committing horrible crimes. How should we see them: as innocent victims of political circumstance who should be protected and forgiven, or as moral agents who should be held responsible for their actions? [Rosen this issue]

Rosen cites numerous examples of children's participation in war, revolution, and terror regimes throughout history and across the globe. He suggests that not acknowledging children's conscious decision to participate in such violence, with all the attendant positive and negative pressures, fails to respect children and to recognize their agency. Although we may want to attribute agency to acts we label as morally good or right, we do not want to do so in acts

we regard as morally wrong, particularly when committed by children. Rosen shows how greater agency is ascribed to children's participation in war when war is seen as good than in times when it is seen as evil. In the former, the child is seen as a hero, in the latter as an exploited victim in need of protection. James (this volume) also remarks on the long and persistent history in the social sciences and humanities of seeing children as innocent.

The desire to protect children is strong in various professional organizations, including in anthropology. In 2006, the Executive Board of the Society for Medical Anthropology (SMA) approved a policy statement urging "immediate ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child" (SMA 2006). This resolution proceeded despite recognition that the UNCRC has at its core a universalized and essentialized view of "the child" based on Western assumptions about children's best interests and a single standard of age (18 and under). Although such a universalized view is antithetical to most anthropological thinking, interests in protecting children around the world prevailed. The SMA resolution also occurs at a time when the United States remains one of only two nations (the other is Somalia) that has not yet ratified the convention. The SMA resolution makes a compelling case that nonratifaction precludes participation, noting that:

> American exceptionalism undercuts recognition of children's rights broadly endorsed by diverse nations, and eliminates the opportunity to participate in monitoring and improving standards. [SMA 2006]

REAL CHILDREN, REAL ISSUES: THE BLURRING OF BOUNDARIES BETWEEN RESEARCH AND POLICY

LeVine points out that anthropological research on children and childhoods was motivated by questions that went beyond descriptions of the everyday lives of children and in so doing gave "[anthropological] accounts a distinctive stamp" (this issue). For early anthropologists, the research on children was "to enhance knowledge of human variation for scientific and policy purposes" (LeVine this issue). In addition, as LeVine notes, anthropologists such as Mead and Malinowski were also addressing the general public. A modern manifestation might be, as James suggests, that "the divide between pure and applied work may be beginning to dissolve" (this issue), and, as a consequence, the audiences to whom we speak are changing.

In this "In Focus," we see a similar pattern of contributions both within and outside of the academy. Toren, for example, takes us into questions of our historical nature, and illustrates how the study of children enhances our understandings of such bread-and-butter issues in anthropology as social and cultural continuity and change, as well as kin and non-kin relations. She takes the position that failure to look at children's perspectives in such realms as kinship leads to incomplete understanding not only of the kin and non-kin relations in any one culture but also of the process of cultural continuity and change within and across

cultures. Hence, the study of children's views becomes a call for a reexamination of our approach to major issues within our own discipline.

Work in anthropology also has stimulated reexamination in other disciplines. The "anthropological veto" of too-facile positing of universals in child development is as powerful a tool in scholarship as it was in the days of Malinowski and Mead. David Lancy's article is an example of employing anthropological research to call for an end to "wholesale exportation of a culture-specific childrearing practice" and for arguing against the prevailing view in developmental psychology that mother–child play is universal and essential for children's development. Lancy takes the position that the lack of mother–child play does not represent a deficiency, as many in the West would claim, but, rather, reflects other concerns and responsibilities of parents, as well as in some cases a value system that is counter to mother–child play. He cautions that

> there are plentiful examples throughout the ethnographic record in which mother–child play is not valued, and these should not be viewed as signs of deficiency or neglect. Parents in these societies can, when pressed, cite numerous reasons why playing with children might not be a good idea. [Lancy this issue]

One might characterize Lancy's article as an example of what LeVine describes as the "confrontations between ethnographic evidence and the concepts of 'normal' child development emerging from theory and research in Western countries" (this issue).

Although anthropological studies of children and childhoods have led others to reexamine work in other disciplines, so too have anthropological studies borrowed from these disciplines, often with dire consequences. As LeVine points out, in referring to anthropologists' use of the work of Sigmund Freud and other psychologically related theories, "When these theories lost credibility, so did the ethnographic accounts based on them as adequate records of childhood experience" (LeVine this issue). As various theories were shed, so too was the work that had been done in that context. The newer work, however, served as both reexaminations of reigning theories and important contributions to the ethnographic record on children. These problems aside,

> 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. [LeVine this issue]

The Six Culture Study and the studies in language acquisition noted by LeVine are indicative of a long and continuing tradition within anthropology of trying to understand the everyday lives of children and the processes of enculturation and socialization.

The ethnographic record on children and childhoods continues to grow, as LeVine and James both note. The work also is taking the field in new directions. For example, James suggests that

> listening to what children say about their everyday lives and experiences can allow us to both theorize and act on their understandings in relation to larger issues of social and political change. [James this issue]

James also points out how the growing studies of children and childhoods "[present] adults with provocative accounts that challenge many of the taken-for-granted assumptions about what children do or think," not least among them "the 'difficulties some children encounter in being children'" (this issue). Past work that has documented children's harsh experiences in their own words and from their own perspectives reveals what James describes as "the hidden hurts and humiliations that many children experience and which adults often dismiss as unimportant or regard simply as playground rough-and-tumble" (this issue). Thus, ethnographic work on children serves not only to challenge dominant theories and orientations but also to modify and correct current assumptions about children's daily lives and lived experiences.

In evaluating the contributions of the study of children and childhoods within and outside the academy, no area of study can be separated from the larger intellectual, political, and social climate. For example, LeVine notes how the pediatric and pedagogical conceptualizations of children in 1880–1920 reflected the emergence of pediatrics as a medical subspecialty and the mass schooling of children as a social solution. Fast-forwarding to current work, James suggests that having "children's voices [speaking] loudly and boldly within the text" is in some measure the result of "the desire to portray children as social actors and the attribution of competence rather than incompetence to children" (this issue). Portraying children as social actors not only renders them worthy of study in their own right but also increases interest in studies of children among those who would not necessarily see their value for development of social theory.

CONCLUDING REMARKS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

This "In Focus" section speaks to some of the challenges and opportunities in a resurgence of anthropological interest in children and childhoods. It speaks to the tensions in the study of children and childhoods across cultures and time. It speaks to the need for finding conceptual frameworks and research strategies that enhance our understandings of the multifaceted nature of children and childhoods and which recognize both children's vulnerability and agency. It speaks to the need to find a balance for children's voices such that their voices are not privileged above all others but, instead, are included in the complexity of social and cultural relations. It speaks to the basic strength of anthropology to strive for understanding, in Malinowski's words, "the native's point of view" (1961:25). In addition, the notion

that children live in and negotiate worlds that they create for themselves (e.g., play, peer groups, games), worlds others create for them (e.g., schools, hospitals), and worlds in concert with others (e.g., families, marketplaces, neighborhoods) must be simultaneously visible in the study of children and childhoods.

As we study children and childhoods, we need to confront the messiness and untidiness of social reality, not reduce it. Similarly, we need to continue to problematize the nature and development of the individual. As these articles demonstrate, studies of children and childhoods are important resources for such work. Embedded in these articles is a reminder that we are still struggling with definitions of the terms *child, youth,* and *childhood.* In defining these concepts, issues of age, agency, development, roles, and responsibilities—not to mention those of essentializing and generalizing—raise their hoary heads. How do we maintain a healthy tension between the individual and the group, the universal and the particular? How do we generalize and particularize in a meaningful way? These articles also serve to remind us that as a discipline we are still grappling with the questions of cultural relativism, pluralism, multiculturalism, and globalization.

Methods of study also need to be reexamined. LeVine suggests that we need to revisit the use of technology, and James comments that we need to consider the use of children as researchers from a less polemical base. More specifically, how do we move from interviews, naturalistic observations, and recordings of children's voices at home, at school, on the street, and in the hospital to theorizing about children and childhoods or to developing policies and programs in areas like education and health? At the same time, we need to insure that the studies we conduct do not become the illustrative cases for the latest fashionable, rediscovered, or borrowed social theory or political agenda.

Myra Bluebond-Langner Department of Sociology, Anthropology, and Criminal Justice, Rutgers University, Camden, NJ 08102

Jill E. Korbin Department of Anthropology, Case Western Reserve University, Cleveland, OH 44106-7125

NOTE

1. These articles represent only a portion of anthropological work related to children and childhoods. Some subfields of the discipline are notably absent: among them, archaeology, linguistics, and biological anthropology, as well as areas within social and cultural anthropology such as medical anthropology or educational anthropology, in which a robust body of literature exists on children and childhoods. This literature includes accounts indicating how children apply their intelligence, strategize, enter into relationships, engage in conversations, and view themselves and the worlds they inhabit.

REFERENCES CITED

Bluebond-Langner, Myra
  1978 The Private Worlds of Dying Children. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
Clifford, James
  1988 The Predicament of Culture. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
Clifford, James, and George E. Marcus, eds.
  1986 Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography. Berkeley: University of California Press.
Corsaro, William
  1979 We're Friends, Right? Children's Use of Access Rituals in a Nursery School. Language and Society 8:315–336.
Geertz, Clifford
  1988 Works and Lives: The Anthropologist as Author. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Malinowski, Bronislaw
  1961 Argonauts of the Western Pacific. New York: Dutton Publishers
Society of Medical Anthropology
  2006 Public Policy Statement: The Rights of Children. Council on Infant and Child Health and Welfare (CICH) Policy Statement Task Force. Electronic document, http://www.medanthro.net/stand/childrights/revised.html, accessed January 3, 2007.
UNICEF
  N.d. Convention on the Rights of the Child. Electronic document, http://www.unicef.org/crc, accessed February 5, 2007.