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Anthropology and Child Development: A Cross-Cultural Reader

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Anthropology and Child Development: A Cross-Cultural Reader. *Robert A. LeVine and Rebecca S. New*, eds. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2008, 324 pp. \$40.00, paper.

Anthropology and Child Development: A Cross-Cultural Reader contains diverse anthropological and social science studies that examine the impact of cultural practices on child development. The book is organized into four parts (“Discovering Diversity,” “Infant Care and Cultural Variation,” “Early Childhood,” and “Middle and Later Childhood”), each of which examines anthropological writings on infancy and childhood. I touch upon all four sections briefly, but given space limitations I cannot mention every chapter.

Part I brings the work of Franz Boas, Margaret Mead, Bronislaw Malinowski, Meyers Fortes, and Ruth Benedict together under the rubric of early-twentieth-century cross-cultural studies of childhood. Selections are as diverse as Boas’s work on skeletal growth and physical development among European immigrants in New York; Malinowski’s recasting of Freud’s psychoanalytical theory through his study of Trobriand kinship relations; Fortes’s work on the social and psychological aspects of children’s knowledge acquisition, social maturity, and inclusion in the adult world among the Tallensi in northern Ghana; and Benedict’s supposition that culture mitigates the effect of biology, at least in terms of human behavior.

Part II pays homage to infant studies. With the exception of Margaret Mead and a few others, although some anthropologists documented practices of childbirth and child rearing, most did not consider infants and children to be viable research subjects. After 1960, however, the commingling of biology, psychology, and linguistics resulted in new perspectives on infant development. The authors in this section focus on gender, inequality, and relations of power as related to the well-being of women and their vulnerable offspring.

Robert A. LeVine’s comparative research of the Gusii in rural Kenya and middle-class urban/suburban Americans presents an analysis of parenting in relation to lived experiences across geographic locations and economic and social classes. Melvin Konner’s portraits of infancy among foraging peoples in southern Saharan Africa as well as Edward Tronick and colleagues’ and Barry Hewlett’s work with the !Kung San of the Kalahari Desert, the Efe of the Ituri Forest in Zaire, and the Aka of the Central African Republic are examples of research linking human studies with those of other primates. Although early hunter-gatherer studies sought to discover traces of the “ancestral” child rearing practices in terms of universals, this research shows that contemporary hunter-gatherers are not homogeneous but instead demonstrate striking variations in infant care based on cultural practices and ecological factors. The final chapters in this section focus on populations of European origin. For example, LeVine and Norman’s research reveals striking cultural variation in how people communicate with their infants and the meanings and roles they assign to their children.

A very welcome component of this edited volume is the section on early childhood language acquisition. The main focus is on children’s communication, social interaction, and “play,” each of which demonstrates human agency in the early stages of biological and cultural development. Such research, particularly since the early 1960s, not only demonstrates how children discover, incorporate, and interact with their various environments, but also how

children alter and redefine the worlds in which they live.

Patricia Clancy's chapter demonstrates Japanese mothers' assumption that their children grasp intentions, feelings, and demands without the use of explanations typical of American parents. The author refers to "unspoken expectations of benevolence" that reflect cultural norms of empathy and conformity in this hierarchical society. Sara Harkness and Charles Super study child and maternal speech in everyday social situations among the Kipsigis of Kenya, who emphasize language comprehension rather than production, reflecting cultural values of obedience and respect. Finally, Jean Briggs explores the social and cultural context of emotional development of young children among the Utku Eskimo. Briggs challenges Erik Erikson's universal stages of psychosocial development (Briggs 1987; Erickson 1950), demonstrating the variability found cross-culturally in conceptions of autonomous behavior in child development.

Another important contribution to this volume is the work of William Corsaro and Thomas Rizzo, who argue that children are not only active social agents but also participants in a collective process of socialization—that is, children collectively create processes of appropriation and produce, maintain, and extend peer culture as they reproduce aspects of their culture at large. Indeed, this perspective recognizes the full spectrum of influence children embody as powerful cultural beings.

Part IV explores the middle and later phases of childhood—for example, in the studies of Suzanne Gaskins in a Mayan community and Martha Wenger in a Giriama community of coastal Kenya, both of which incorporate work, play, participation, and learning. Anthropological research on child learning has focused on school-aged children in "developed" countries; little research has focused on children in parts of the world where formalized schooling does not exist.

Through the work of Lev Vygotsky (Vygotsky 1978), cognition has been understood to be a "situated" phenomenon, related to the diverse environments in which children live and learn. However, Rogoff and colleagues argue that some stages of cognitive maturity are recognized universally. Weisner and Gallimore discuss cross-cultural data on child responsibilities in agricultural societies, particularly with regard to sibling care, and John and Beatrice Whiting's "Six Cultures Study" examines altruistic and egoistic activities of children in the outer suburbs of Boston and in rural Mexican communities. They identify trends specific to early and middle childhood and document the ways in which children who contribute to agricultural production spend their time. Gaskins emphasizes the importance of work for older children, while Wenger points to the importance of gender in differentiating activities in rural societies.

The authors acknowledge the Eurocentric influence of 19th century Anglo-American and Western-European psychological and biological sciences upon early childhood anthropological studies, and provide the reader with important theoretical and methodological changes that have resulted in the transformation of the anthropological study of children and childhood. I recommend this book as a good introduction to the study of child development that draws upon anthropology's unique ability to hone in on both the extraordinarily complex phenomenon of individual childhood agency, and the social constructions that tend to bind and limit our notions of who children as social actors.

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