

What Does it Mean to be a Child?

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Review of David Lancy, *The Anthropology of Childhood: Cherubs, Chattel, and Changelings*.

Cambridge University Press, 2015; ISBN 978-1-107-42098-4 (Paperback).

What does it mean to be a child? What is the nature of human childhood? What are the processes underlying human development? These are the big questions that motivate the theorizing and research of child and developmental psychologists. However, most psychological research and theorizing investigating these universal questions has been done by Western scholars living in what have recently been described as WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, Democratic) cultures (Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010). People from WEIRD cultures are, statistically speaking, some of the most unusual people in the world, and this may be especially true of children, and this calls into question the validity of any conclusions psychologists make about children and their development. David Lancy brings this fact to the forefront in his book *The Anthropology of Childhood: Cherubs, Chattel, and Changelings*, as he takes readers on a tour de force of childhood across the globe and over time. In slightly over 400 pages and 10 chapters, Lancy presents thousands of observations from hundreds of cultures, present and past, describing the many facets of childhood, from infancy through adolescence. In the process, he reminds us that the picture we scientists from WEIRD cultures paint of children is a biased one, and that any claims of universality must be viewed with great caution.

There are a number of important messages psychologists can glean from Lancy's book, three of which I will highlight here. The most central message, from Lancy's perspective, is "to offer a correction to the ethnocentric lens that sees children only as precious, innocent, and preternaturally cute cherubs" (pp. 2, 3). He reminds us that in much of the world today and throughout much of human history, infants and children are viewed as property (chattel) of their parents, are the "low person on the totem pole" when it comes to receiving resources, and may in fact be valued for their economic contribution to the family rather than for any inherent quality that immaturity affords. This is related to the second message, that the varied conditions in which

children survive and often thrive – frequently in environments that westerners would describe as harsh and perhaps stultifying – reveal the substantial plasticity of human development. A third message is that children in much of the world educate themselves, with parents and adults in general providing little direct teaching. Lancy’s rich description and interpretation of the lives of children from diverse societies is viewed not only through the lens of a cultural anthropologist, but also from the perspective of an evolutionary theorist. Throughout the book Lancy reminds us that children and childhood are products of a long evolutionary history. However, biology is not destiny, and culture operates on children’s evolved characteristics to produce adaptive outcomes, often unique to specific societal contexts.

### **Gerontocracy vs. Neontocracy**

The organizing theme of Lancy’s opus is the distinction between cultures that can be labeled as gerontocracies and those that can be labeled as neontocracies, which he introduces in the first chapter (“Where do Children Come From?”) and describes their features and history in Chapter 2 (“Valuing Children”). In a gerontocracy, characteristic of agrarian societies, adults (and ancestors) are the most valued members of society. Infants are recognized as a drain on resources and children are seen as owing parents for parents’ investment in them over the years. Infanticide of feeble infants is sanctioned, sometimes encouraged, if permitting an infant to survive would jeopardize the health of older children or the mother. Children may be put to work early, indentured to others to pay their parents’ debts, or even sold into slavery.

At the other extreme, in a neontocracy, characteristic of mainstream U.S. society, children are valued for their own sake. They are viewed as innocent, in need of protection, and must be nurtured, often at great expense to their parents. “In the neontocracy, children have authority – lording it over their valet parents” (p. 72). These are extremes, of course, and in

reality there is (and has been) a continuum of societal practices between these two cultural anchors. Lancy describes the historical transition from gerontocracy to modern neontocracy occurring over the last 10,000 years or so, as societal changes made children less useful as agricultural laborers. Gradually, as economic success required literacy and children's meager physical and intellectual abilities minimized their possible economic contribution to the family, children became less useful and more valued, resulting in the neontocracies of Europe, North America, and East Asia today. It is difficult for us *not* to see this transition as a good thing, but Lancy argues "that the neontocracy has, lately, gotten out of control" (p. 71), producing stressed children and adults, a theme he visits through the book, but especially in the final chapter, "Too Little Childhood? Too Much?"

The incremental transition from gerontocracy to neontocracy covers the course of human history, but a look at how prehistoric humans lived reveals that our forechildren may have grown up in a virtual paradise – the first neontocracy. Anthropologists and evolutionary psychologists and biologists believe that the earliest members of *Homo sapiens* lived as nomadic hunter-gatherers, much as modern-day foragers do. They lived in small bands, were more egalitarian than later sedentary horticulturalists and agriculturalists, had few possessions, and made little demands on their children. If modern hunter-gatherer societies can be used as models for how our ancestors lived, children were cherished. Once weaned, they spent most of their day playing with other children. There was no prescribed bedtime, no lessons to learn, and little or no pressure to contribute to the family. Such a paradise is a consequence of the forager lifestyle. Children lack the strength and stamina to be much help in hunting or gathering; mothers are in the active pursuit of food much of the day, so they carry and nurse their infants on demand; foragers adopt a "survivorship" reproductive strategy, investing much time and effort into few

children; and they have no alternative lifestyle to follow. According to Lancy, “Children will either learn what they need to – including important social skills – to feed themselves and find a mate, or starve. So there is no need to rein them in, guide them, or teach them” (p. 69).

In his 2010 book, *The Evolution of Childhood*, anthropologist Melvin Korner argued that hunter-gatherer childhood should be the model to understand contemporary children and their development. Hunter-gatherer children reflect the “natural” state of childhood and how children learn to become useful members of a society. This is a position generally adopted by evolutionary developmental psychologists, who argue that hunter-gatherer or foraging societies come closest to matching the environment of evolutionary adaptedness (Bjorklund & Pellegrini, 2002; Bowlby, 1980; Gray, 2013). Although it would be impossible to mistake hunter-gatherer childhood from that of children growing up in WEIRD cultures, the differences are often even starker between the childhoods found in contemporary neontocratic cultures and those of traditional agricultural societies.

Much of Lancy’s book details the lives of children from gerontocracy societies and how different they are from those of children in neontocracies in terms of family life (Chapter 3, “To Make a Child”; Chapter 4, “It Takes a Village”), work (Chapter 6, “The Chore Curriculum”), play (Chapter 6, “Of Marbles and Morals”), education (Chapter 5, “Making Sense”; Chapter 9, “Taming the Autonomous Learner”), and becoming accomplished members of one’s society (Chapter 8, “Living in Limbo”). What continually struck me as I read the descriptions of children’s lives from diverse cultures were the many routes there were to becoming a competent adult and the developmental plasticity required for this to happen.

### **Developmental Plasticity**

Scientists and educators from WEIRD societies are well aware that individual differences in childrearing practices and local environments can have substantial influences on subsequent adult mental health, intellectual, and economic development. Many of the most-studied individual-difference factors in developmental psychology are associated with early attachment and related parent-child interactions, young children's linguistic and cognitive environments, and economic and social stress (e.g., Sameroff et al., 1993; Thompson, 2006). In many ways, the experiences of children from resource-poor communities in WEIRD cultures are similar to those of children in agricultural gerontocracies. Yet, children in traditional societies grow up to be competent members of their cultures, despite what, for westerners, would be considered adverse experiences, attesting to the plasticity of human development. Let me provide a just few examples from Lancy (2015):

Yoruba mothers feed children barely visible scraps compared to portions they give themselves. Good food might spoil the child's moral character (p. 108).

Pashtu mothers rarely make eye contact with their infants when nursing unless there's a problem . . . This seeming indifference may be reinforced by custom whereby a mother is chastised by peers if she is overly fond of her child (p. 121).

The Zulu of South Africa use a more direct approach [to accelerate walking]; they place the child on an ant's nest to motivate it to stand and walk (p. 134).

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 (p. 135).

[From medieval times in Europe] parents sent their five- to seven-year-old children (who were, in their view, no longer actually children) to the homes of master-craftsmen or merchants as apprentices, where the first decade of service might well be "scut-work" rather than the acquisition of usable skills (p. 151).

Like the Xhosa, [Gapun] mothers actively pit their three-year-olds (girls as well as boys) against each other, holding them in proximity and shouting orders to strike out at the opponent. Children are also encouraged and praised for hitting dogs and chickens (p. 192).

Corporal punishment is, thus, often seen as a legitimate tool in shaping the child's behavior. The Rwala Bedu (Syria) utilize an arsenal of physical punishments ranging from spanking with a stick (small children) to slashing with a saber or dagger (older children) (p. 196).

One of the consequences of treating young children as senseless, incomplete, and amoral is that adults feel no qualms about their exposure to sexual activity (p. 199).

Qualities we [westerners] value, such as precocity, verbal fluency, independent and creative thought, personal expression, and ability to engage in repartee, would all be seen by [the lower Tapajós ] villagers as defects to be curtailed as quickly as possible (p. 200).

One of the more provocative proposals that Lancy makes is that under some harsh environmental conditions, because of children's developmental plasticity, they are able to contribute to their family's economy or to their own survival by performing often difficult and arduous tasks, although rarely as skillfully as adults, essentially serving as a *reserve labor force*. Lancy writes, "The argument I'm making is that children, from an early age, acquire a level of skill in childcare, domestic service, foraging, and the like that they do not fully capitalize on, and this is particularly true in some foraging societies, such as the Aka and !Kung" (p. 281). Children in more modern societies also sometimes display advanced survival skills, as revealed by street children eking out a living in cities in Africa and South America and by children abducted to serve as soldiers in Southeast Asia, the Middle East, and Africa.

Lancy's idea of children as a reserve labor force (and as possessing *reserve capacity*) is consistent with proposals from evolutionary developmental psychologists that plasticity during the early years of life has been the target of natural selection, as reflected in recent expressions of life history theory (e.g., Ellis et al., 2009; Ellis et al., 2012). Children have evolved to be sensitive to early life conditions as predictive of later life conditions, such that development is entrained in adaptive ways. Research with both human and nonhuman animals has shown that early harsh and unpredictable environments are associated with the adoption of fast life history strategies (high risk-taking,

reproducing often, investing little in individual offspring), whereas nonharsh and predictable early environments are associated with the adoption of slow life history strategies (low-risk taking, investing substantially in fewer offspring) (e.g., Belsky, Schlomer, & Ellis, 2012; Ellis et al., 2009; Ellis et al., 2012). Adoption of a fast life history strategy for children in contemporary cultures often leads to suboptimal outcomes, at least from a societal normative perspective (e.g., sexual promiscuity, early parenthood, engaging in high-risk and often illegal activities). Yet, children apparently have the plasticity both to adapt to contemporary hardship (i.e., serving as a reserve labor force) and to modify their development in adaptable (if socially undesirable) ways in anticipation of harsh and unpredictable environments (Ellis et al., 2012). Knowing children have the plasticity to adapt to harsh environments, however, cannot be justification for ignoring their plight.

### **Self-Education**

Lancy recognizes that humans are the most educable of species, with children possessing cognitive and communication systems evolved to acquire the complicated technical and social skills characteristics of all human cultures. Lancy, consistent with research findings and theorizing of evolutionary developmental psychologists (e.g., Bjorklund & Ellis, 2014; Tomasello, 2000), emphasizes that beginning early in life children are especially attentive to social others and learn important skills and information merely through observation. This is reflected in research showing that beginning around 3 years of age, children engage in *overimitation*, copying both necessary and irrelevant actions of a model (e.g., Lyons, Young, & Keil, 2007). Such overimitation may be especially effective when learning about artifacts (particularly tools), but may also be important in acquiring information that is critical to children's cultural group (Nielsen et al., 2014). According to the *normative account*, children identify social interactions they believe are important for living in richly symbolic environments (Froese & Leavens, 2014) and acquire those behaviors through exact imitation. Children seemingly believe that all

actions, including the irrelevant one, must have a greater purpose (Kenward, 2012) and that knowing how to perform these actions is important because it may “align oneself with one’s cultural in-group” (Nielsen, 2012, p. 171). Overimitation is not limited to children from WEIRD societies, but has also been observed in 2- to 6-year-old children from traditional cultures (Nielsen & Tomaselli, 2010; Nielsen et al., 2014).

However, unlike many developmental psychologists (e.g., Csibra & Gergely, 2011; Tomasello, 2000) and Western thought in general, Lancy rejects the idea that human children acquire much cultural information via teaching from adults. Teaching is the most cognitively sophisticated form of social learning, requiring that both the teacher and the learner take the perspective of the other (Tomasello, Kruger, & Ratner, 1993). Lancy does not question the ability of humans to learn through teaching and seems not to question the value of teaching in WEIRD societies; however, he argues that teaching is not the evolved adaptation that is the cognitive foundation of human cultural transmission, as others have (e.g., Csibra & Gergely, 2011). He makes this claim based on a careful examination of the ethnographic literature that reveals little evidence of direct teaching. Instead, children learn both social and technological skills indirectly, mostly through observation and in the context of play. Let me provide just a few excerpts from Lancy’s book illustrating this:

Throughout the ethnographic literature, formal schooling is virtually absent. Children are supposed to learn the culture through observation and imitation. Teaching is seen as unnecessary and a waste of an adult’s precious time (p. 404).

The onus for learning is entirely on children and they are rarely “pushed” (p. 199).

Parents disavow any desire to teach children these [foraging] skills, arguing that, in effect, when they’re old enough, they’ll figure it out themselves (p. 141).

Elaborate scaffolding is rarely seen [in nonWEIRD societies]. . . No one wants to waste time teaching novices who might well learn in time without instruction. Play provides an alternative to adult scaffolding (p. 261).

If parent–infant play is spotty, parent–toddler play is virtually non-existent, even in societies

where play with infants is observed. Among the !Kung, parents not only don't play with their children post-infancy, they reject the notion outright as potentially harmful to the child's development. They believe that children learn best without adult intervention (p. 248).

Lancy notes that the belief in the centrality of teaching in Western cultures is consistent with the idea that children receive cultural knowledge mainly from parents, teachers, and religious authorities. In contrast, Lancy argues that in traditional cultures information is not transmitted in a top-down fashion, but rather is acquired through observation and play with peers.

As a card-carrying member of a WEIRD culture, I admit to having believed that children have evolved social-cognitive abilities that, when raised in a species-typical environment, permit them to acquire the skills necessary to survive in a human group and that teaching is perhaps *the* form of social learning that, more than any other, permits the efficient and rapid transmission of information across generations. That position is no longer tenable if we assume that traditional (including hunter-gatherer) societies are species typical. This is perhaps the clearest case of how psychologists' WEIRD biases have led them to some erroneous (or at least over stated) conclusions.

Teaching, however, should not be dismissed as a cultural quirk, but may be better viewed as an evolved by-product of human children's highly developed social-learning abilities. When a culture's technical knowledge becomes too complex to be easily acquired through play and observation, children and adults possess the social-cognitive skills that permit teaching, and neontocratic societies have made good use of these skills. Teaching is rare among nonhuman animals, but is observed occasionally in other big-brained, social species with extended juvenile periods (e.g., chimpanzees, Boesch, 1991; Atlantic spotted dolphins, Bender, Herzing, & Bjorklund, 2009). Teaching, by definition, requires some cost to the teacher, and it is rare in nonhuman animals likely because most survival skills can be more efficiently acquired without

the expense associated with teaching. Lancy argues that it is rare in human cultures likely for the same reason: The costs of teaching are greater than the benefits teaching would afford when cultural knowledge and skills can be acquired via observation and play.

### **Too Little Childhood or Too Much?**

In his final three chapters, Lancy examines adolescence and how different cultures manage the transition from childhood to adulthood (“Living in Limbo”), formal schooling and the costs and benefits such schooling has for children from both traditional and WEIRD cultures (“Taming the Autonomous Learner”), and finally he asks “Is there too little childhood or too much?” Although Lancy has included comparisons with modern neotocracies throughout the book, he has more to say about how contemporary Americans, and others from WEIRD cultures, view and treat childhood in these latter three chapters.

With regard to schooling, the push to provide education for all children in all cultures seems, on the surface, difficult to disagree with. However, Lancy points out that many schools in traditional villages use practices more similar to a 19<sup>th</sup> century schoolhouse than to a modern classroom. Parents from traditional societies, who expect their children to acquire their culture autonomously – without being taught – take a similar attitude about school, and thus show no interest in their children’s education. In some cultures, parents send their children away to be schooled, and children return being able to read and write but with little likelihood of finding jobs and no knowledge of how to make a living the traditional way. Children from neotocracies, of course, do better in school, although there are still many failures. Many children resist schooling, fail to receive adequate support from their parents, and generally fail to adapt to the evolutionarily novel practices of modern schools. Might an understanding of the nature of childhood – one reflected by hunter-gatherer children – provide insights to how to better educate

children in any culture (see Gray, 2013)?

With respect to “too little” or “too much” childhood, Lancy sees an increasing gulf between wealthy and impoverished cultures. Too many children in the world are losing their childhoods, having to work, beg, or fight for a living, taking on responsibilities in excess of what might be expected given human natural history. As noted earlier, children’s ability to adapt to such adverse environments reflects their considerable plasticity, but the cost in terms of the well-being of the children is great. As Lancy states, “The plight of children doing an adult’s work or living rough in the city should be cause for an international outcry” (p. 393).

In contrast, children growing up in more affluent environs have it easy – perhaps too easy, Lancy worries. Children’s self-esteem is falsely bolstered, they are protected from information that they might find troubling (consider the hubbub about “trigger warnings” on college campuses), their play is overseen and often directed by adults, and they are pressured to excel in school, learning facts they may never apply to a real-world setting. Although many children obviously fare well in these environments, others don’t, reflected by the increase in psychopathology such as depression and anxiety and the correlated increase in psychotropic medication for children over the last five decades or so (see Gray, 2013).

I admit I have a dog in this fight. I have argued that many aspects of children’s cognitive immaturity are adaptive in their own right and that we should not attempt to speed children through a childhood that has evolved to provide benefits to children and development. I see contemporary American society as speeding children toward early maturity, ignoring the potential adaptive value that free play and greater autonomy from adults may provide, for example in greater discovery learning, social competence, and executive-function abilities (Bjorklund, 1997, 2007; Bjorklund & Beers, in press). I find much in Lancy’s book that confirms

my biases. Yet, Lancy also points out, counter to my biases, that children are able to shoulder burdens at early ages (recall his idea of children as a reserve labor force), calling into question the necessity of an extended period of immaturity in order to develop into a successful adult and highlighting the importance of developmental plasticity.

All in all, Lancy gives us a detailed account of the lives of children around the globe and how childhood has changed over historical time, as well as much to think about with regard to how we interpret modern developmental research. As such, this is a valuable book for anyone concerned with children, childhood, and development.

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