

Classic and Emerging Themes in the Anthropology of Children and Youth

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Although anthropologists have been studying children and youth around the world for over one hundred years, within the last decade, many have been working especially hard to conduct research and to communicate results with one another across the four fields of anthropology. As such, it is often necessary to update anthropologists across the discipline on some key moments and texts in the field. What follows is an overview of the increasingly vibrant intellectual project that is the Anthropology of Children and Youth. I outline some of the important roots of this project, highlight current themes in the near history of the field, and offer brief examples of anthropological analyses of children and youth that are currently informing anthropological theory and method more broadly. Such a survey necessarily relies on Elisa Sobo's recent article, "Anthropological Contributions and Challenges to the Study of Children and Childhoods" (2015), which is the most up-to-date review of the field.

The Importance of Studying Children and Youth in Anthropology

The contemporary anthropological study of children and youth has a rich history, with roots in 19th and 20th century comparative ethnographic research on child care strategies; behavioral development; and definitions and expressions of childhood,

motherhood, and parenting around the world. As Heather Montgomery (2009) notes, children held a paramount position in early anthropology. Before the rise of fieldwork, they were "the only observable others" (in Sobo 2015, 3). Once fieldwork became the norm, children were practical helpers in the field, often working as assistants and providing information that wary adults were not so willing to share. But, of course, they also remained subject to study. For example, Boas and his colleagues (1912) worked with children and parents to gather anthropometric data to disprove the theory that there were stable racial types. Soon after, Margaret Mead (1932) challenged G. Stanley Hall's formulation of male adolescence as a time of internal turbulence. Ruth Benedict (1938) argued that when expectations for children and adults are discontinuous, turbulence becomes greater for youth.

Boas, Benedict, and Mead's contributions are mentioned because their work created a foundation for later anthropological studies in which it became central to study children and youth anthropologically, *in situ*, or within specific environments, as opposed to within laboratories or contrived scenarios, as child developmentalists were doing. In addition, as Levine and New (2008) have demonstrated, there are problems with the

ways in which developmental psychology in particular conceptualized childhood, basing generalizations mostly on the study of Western children despite the fact that 90 percent of all children live in Asia, Latin America, the Pacific, and Africa.

The Near History of the Anthropology of Children and Youth

Since the 1960s, we have seen the legacies of the important contributions of some of our other anthropological ancestors such as John and Beatrice Whiting, who conducted The Six Cultures Study. These anthropologists were particularly focused on comparative field studies of infant care, the social and cultural ecology of children's activities, and language socialization (Whiting et al. 1966; Whiting and Whiting 1975). Around the same time, Mary Ellen Goodman ([1952]1964, 1970), influenced by Bronislaw Malinowski, introduced the notion of the "child's eye view" in ethnography, marking one of the first anthropological efforts to treat children and youth as ethnographic subjects with their own worldviews rather than childhood or psychology as the object within the discipline. Goodman's assertion that children and youth are not just passive receivers of cultural transmission, but also active producers of knowledge and culture profoundly influenced the Sociology of Childhood movement in the United Kingdom during the 1990s, in which colleagues such as Berry Mayall (2002) demanded child-centered ethnography and Allison James, Alan Prout, and Chris Jenks (1998) turned our attention to theorizing children and youth much in the ways that

feminist anthropology or critical race studies ask us to start with gendered or racialized subjectivities in our theory and method, respectively. Laura Nader (1980) also influenced this movement by challenging anthropologists to understand childhoods as products of political environments specifically by asking us to make vertical linkages between nodes of power and the ways in which children and youth are permitted—or limited—to live, work, play, and grow up.

Themes in the Anthropology of Children and Youth: Looking Ahead

In 2007, in what has now proven to be a very influential article titled, "Challenges and Opportunities in the Anthropology of Childhoods," Myra Bluebond-Langner and Jill Korbin called for several developments in the field, including: 1) updates and innovations in cross-cultural studies of the definition and expression of children, youth, and childhood; 2) an expansion of robust research, theory, and method that explores the child as a vulnerable and/or agentic subject; and 3) better communication of the successes and challenges of the real-life application of anthropological research on children and youth. One might consider this article the first rally of anthropologists to coordinate intellectual and practical efforts to advocate for the anthropological study of children and youth. In tandem with, and/or as a result of this call and other efforts to underline the importance of the anthropological study of children and youth by Robert Levine (2007), David Lancy (2008), Heather Montgomery (2009), and others, anthropologists of children and

youth around the world have been making unprecedented efforts in the last decade to conduct, publicize, and share efforts across the four fields of anthropology.

Due to these efforts, studying children and youth within anthropology has been professionalized to the extent that it is now recognized within the American Anthropological Association (AAA). In 2008, due to the hard work of colleagues such as Myra Bluebond-Langner, Kristen Cheney, Jill Korbin, Helen Schwartzmann, Susan Shepler, and Thomas Weisner, the Anthropology of Children and Youth Interest Group (ACYIG) was formed. What started as a group of about twenty-five colleagues in a conference room at the 2008 AAA meeting in San Francisco has now grown to over 1,200 members across the four fields. The ACYIG has held annual conferences since 2008, partnering with a wide variety of organizations such as the Society for Cross Cultural Research and the Society for Psychological Anthropology. And the ACYIG held its first solo conference in 2015 in Long Beach, California, with over 125 attendees from over ten countries and a dozen disciplines. It is important to underline that the ACYIG is deeply committed to promoting the anthropological study of children and youth not as a specific *subfield* per se, but as a robust and innovative strategy that anthropologists, archaeologists, linguists, and biological anthropologists might consider employing to provide a historical, contemporary, and *longue durée* perspective on the human condition. To learn more, please visit the ACYIG website at: <http://acyig.americananthro.org/>

Conclusion: Contemporary Themes and Projects in the Anthropology of Children and Youth

Contemporary themes and projects in the anthropology of children and youth are informed by all of the work and colleagues mentioned so far. The following are just some of the most recent emerging themes that may be of particular interest to anthropologists and practitioners throughout the discipline.

Theories of Interdependence

One current theme among those who study children and youth is advancing theories of interdependence within cultures. In the past twenty years, many ethnographies have examined the effects of the Declaration of the Rights of the Child on children around the world. These studies highlight both the benefits and the disadvantages of tethering children to an Enlightenment-inspired understanding of human rights through their categorization as special “vulnerable” subjects in law and politics. Anthropologists such as Heather Montgomery (2010), Jo Boyden (2003), Kristen Cheney (2010) and others working with African cultures and communities provide excellent examples of this work. They each identify ways in which children and youth exemplify the “vulnerable” legal subject in the face of globalization; however, they also demonstrate that children and youth contribute to economic and cultural production pathways in ways that challenge notions of the vulnerable child. Such studies have moved anthropologists from considering social relations between the

“powerful” and the “powerless,” to more considered formulations of *interdependence* within communities, of which children, youth, and other typically silenced participants are a part.

Theories of Age as an Ontological Category

An additional theme in the study of children and youth is re-theorizing and demonstrating the cultural constitution of *age*. Since at least the 1980s, anthropologists have been asking the question, “What constitutes a child?”, especially within the context of dozens of ethnographies of child labor that clearly demonstrate how children perform economic and political roles in societies comparable to those of adults. Currently, such anthropologists as David Rosen (2007) and Susan Shepler (2014) advance these questions via ethnographies on child soldiers that demonstrate that children also perform important moral and philosophical roles in societies. Other colleagues, such as Elise Berman (2014), demonstrate that, as many early anthropologists of kinship noted, there are complicated processes by which children and adults across cultures negotiate and rely on shifting constructions of age to facilitate ecological and relational necessity. Western fixed notions of “the child” or “an adult” should therefore be problematized when conducting anthropological work more broadly. Similarly, colleagues such as Patrick Alexander (2014) interrogate the very experience of “being” any particular age, asking whether and how one experiences multiplicities of time and space simultaneously (a quantum theory of age).

Theories of Becoming

A third and related emerging theme has pivoted on notions of fixity and fluidity across the life span. One of the underlying tenets of the anthropological study of children and youth challenges the notion of children as “semi-adults” or “semi-developed humans.” Ethnographies on transnational childhoods (those of migrating children, unaccompanied youth, transnational adoptees, etc.) often reveal sophisticated logics by which children and youth navigate and make sense of their own circulation and/or movement. Anthropologists such as Rachael Stryker and Barbara Yngvesson (2013) have theorized childhood, youth, adulthood, and aging as processes of “becoming,” in which one experiences simultaneous states of fixity and fluidity throughout the lifespan. For example, circulated children feel that they exist in two places at once, fixing them to locations; yet they also experience relational splits, loyalties, and experiences of individuals, places, and communities. Theories of experiencing fixity and fluidity simultaneously can obviously be applied to other transnational subjects whom anthropologists study.

As Sobo (2015) has stated, “The Anthropology of Children and Youth’s recent growth spurt . . . [has] argued for a more considered, culturally informed understanding of childhood in general, and child development, learning, and socialization in particular” (23). Contemporary research on children and youth also now looks more closely at how the very act of identifying, categorizing, marginalizing, and including children and

youth in culture underwrites theoretical work that is of interest to anthropologists across the four fields. In many ways, one can still see the through-line that children and youth provide in anthropological disciplines—as metaphor, as symbol, as conduit to understanding the past, present, and future of the human species. But children and youth (and the study of their experiences) also offer opportunities to undo and rethink our own assumptions about culture, knowledge, dependency, power, agency, vulnerability, fixity, and fluidity. Today, colleagues are making tremendous strides to communicate and demonstrate this, and a future in which anthropology becomes more accessible, rigorous, and relevant should include even more studies of children and youth to challenge and advance our theories, methods, and teaching.

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