"the anthropology of childhood is here to stay": interview with david lancy

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abstract
This article discusses the consolidation of the field of Anthropology of Childhood through a dialogue with David Lancy, an emeritus professor of Anthropology at the University of Utah, and a key figure in the institutionalization of the field in the United States. Drawing from an interview conducted with Lancy on the occasion of the launch of the 3rd edition of his book *The Anthropology of Childhood*, we introduce a Portuguese-speaking audience to his main contributions. We explore key themes in Childhood Studies, such as the utilization of the concept of agency, babies and the cultural variability of age categories, and Anthropology's contribution to research on childhood, parenting practices and education. For Lancy, the anthropology of childhood gives visibility to alternative understandings of the psychology of child development, childhood and learning processes, with the aim of raising new questions and offering new perspectives. Based on a broad survey of ethnographic research, the author affirms the significant amount of records made by anthropologists about the lives of children in different cultures, emphasizing the distinctions between, on the one hand, the childhoods of original and traditional peoples and, on the other, Western and urban childhoods, which he suggests grouping, following a denomination increasingly common in the United States, as "WEIRD" societies, an acronym for "Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich and Democratic Societies." In this interview, Lancy argues that anthropological work on childhood among indigenous or traditional peoples, when well conducted, has the potential to foster greater respect and legitimacy for ways of thinking about childhood and education among these peoples.

keywords: anthropology of childhood; agency; parenting practices; education; indigenous peoples.

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"a antropologia da infância chegou para ficar": entrevista com david lancy

resumo

O texto discute a consolidação do campo da antropologia da infância a partir de um diálogo com David Lancy, professor emérito de antropologia na Universidade do Estado de Utah, Estados Unidos, e uma das figuras-chave da institucionalização do campo naquele país. A partir de uma entrevista com Lancy na ocasião do lançamento da terceira edição de seu livro *The Anthropology of Childhood*, apresentamos as principais contribuições deste autor a um público lusófono e discutimos temas chave para os estudos da infância, como os usos da noção de agência, bebês, a variabilidade cultural das categorias de idade, além da contribuição da antropologia para as pesquisas sobre infância, parentalidade e educação. Para Lancy, a antropologia da infância dá visibilidade a compreensões alternativas, em relação à psicologia do desenvolvimento infantil, sobre a infância e sobre processos de aprendizagem, trazendo novas questões e novas perspectivas. Com base num amplo levantamento de pesquisas etnográficas, o autor afirma a significativa quantidade de registros feitos por antropólogos sobre as vidas de crianças em diferentes culturas, enfatizando as distinções entre, de um lado, as infâncias de povos originários e tradicionais e, de um outro lado, infâncias ocidentais e urbanas, que ele sugere agrupar, seguindo uma denominação cada vez mais frequente nos Estados Unidos, como sociedades "WEIRD" [extraño], um acrônimo para "*Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich and Democratic Societies*". Nesta entrevista, Lancy ressalta que os trabalhos antropológicos sobre infância em povos originários ou povos tradicionais, quando bem conduzidos, possuem o potencial de produzir um efeito de grande respeito e legitimidade às formas de pensar sobre a infância e educação desses povos.

palavras-chave: antropologia da infância; agência; parentalidade; educação; povos originários.

"la antropología de la infancia llegó para quedarse": entrevista con david lancy

resumen

Este texto aborda la consolidación del campo de la Antropología de la Infancia a través de un diálogo con David Lancy, profesor emérito de Antropología en la Universidad del Estado de Utah, Estados Unidos, y una de las figuras clave en la institucionalización de este campo en dicho país. A partir de una entrevista realizada a Lancy con motivo del lanzamiento de la tercera edición de su libro *The Anthropology of Childhood*, presentamos las principales contribuciones de este autor a un público de habla portuguesa y discutimos temas clave para los Estudios de la Infancia, tales como el uso del concepto de agencia, bebés y la variabilidad cultural de las categorías de edad y la contribución de la Antropología a las investigaciones sobre infancia, parentalidad y educación.

Para Lancy, la antropología de la infancia da visibilidad a comprensiones alternativas, en relación con la psicología del desarrollo infantil, sobre la infancia y sobre los procesos de aprendizaje, trayendo nuevas preguntas y perspectivas. A partir de un amplio relevamiento de investigaciones etnográficas, el autor afirma la importante cantidad de registros hechos por antropólogos sobre las vidas de niñas y niños en diferentes culturas, enfatizando las distinciones entre, por un lado, las infancias de los pueblos originarios y tradicionales y, por el otro, las infancias occidentales y urbanas, que él sugiere agrupar, siguiendo una denominación cada vez más común en Estados Unidos, como sociedades "WEIRD", acrónimo de "Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich and Democratic Societies" [Sociedades Occidentales, Cultas, Industrializadas, Ricas y Democráticas]. En esta entrevista, Lancy destaca que el trabajo antropológico sobre la infancia entre los

pueblos originarios o tradicionales, cuando está bien realizado, tiene el potencial de producir un efecto de gran respeto y legitimidad por las formas de pensar sobre la infancia y la educación de estos pueblos.

palabras-clave: antropología de la infancia; agencia; parentalidad; educación; pueblos originarios.

"the anthropology of childhood is here to stay": interview with david lancy

introduction

This text discusses the consolidation of the field of Anthropology of Childhood through a dialog with David Lancy, Emeritus Professor of Anthropology at the University of Utah, and a key figure in the institutionalization of the field in the United States. Since the mid-1990s, Lancy has been conducting comparative anthropological research on children's lives in various societies. His book, *The Anthropology of Childhood: Cherubs, Chattel, Changelings*, first published in 2008, became a seminal work in the field due to its comprehensive bibliographic review that has been updated in each new edition (2nd edition in 2015, 3rd edition in 2022). It contains ethnographic descriptions of various aspects of children's lives in societies from every continent, as well as an analytical synthesis that seeks to highlight patterns and contrasts in models of education and parenting. A true treatise that spans nearly 600 pages!

On the occasion of the release of the 3rd edition of *The Anthropology of Childhood*, in August 2022, Chantal Medaets, an anthropologist at the State University of Campinas (Unicamp, Brazil), Gabriela Tebet, a pedagogue at the same university, and Flávia Ferreira Pires, an anthropologist at the Federal University of Paraíba (UFPB, Brazil), who have all conducted research with children from an anthropological perspective, conduct a virtual interview with David Lancy. While it was evening for David in Logan, Utah, it was late at night for us in João Pessoa, Campinas, and São Paulo as we wove together the threads of this dialogue.

Our intention was to make available a glimpse of Lancy's ideas to a Portuguese-speaking audience, which still lacks translations of his works. Ultimately, we are interested in contributing to Childhood Studies based on our specific expertise, whether theoretical, ethical, methodological, or (primarily) ethnographic. In this regard, gaining insight into the work of David Lancy, a prominent figure in the Anthropology of Childhood in the United States, seemed crucial. It is worth noting that Lancy has reviewed this text.

Navigating between anthropology and psychology, Lancy completed his doctoral dissertation under the guidance of Michael Cole, a key figure in the study of the influence of cultures on cognitive processes within psychology. His work sought to expand on the work of Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky[5]. Under Cole's supervision, Lancy conducted his initial field research among the Kpelle in Liberia, which marked for him a "definitive turn towards anthropology," as he describes in the interview. The book resulting from the ethnography conducted with the Kpelle, *Playing on the Mother Ground: Cultural Routines for Children's Development*, was published in 1996. Lancy then worked in Papua New Guinea before embarking on his ongoing research with a focus on the comparative approach to childhood in a variety of contexts.

In addition to academic books and articles, Lancy has also published books intended for a non-academic audience, such as *Raising Children: Surprising Insights from Other Cultures* (2017) and *Learning Without Lessons: Pedagogy in Indigenous Communities* (2024). Each time, as he tells us, his goal is to broaden the horizons of parents and educators by presenting ways of raising children and conceptualizing childhood from indigenous and traditional peoples across different regions of the world. Here we hear echoes of the legacy of Margaret Mead, who similarly was eager to contribute to the education of children and adolescents in her own country. What some may see as ethnocentrism, for us looks like political commitment to childhood and the well-being of children and adolescents.

It is worth noting that the term "indigenous", used by Lancy and widely disseminated internationally in English written literature, can be translated into Portuguese as "povos indígenas" or "povos originários"[6]. We opted to translate it as 'povos originários'. Most frequently, the word is used following the United Nations definition, which states that: "Indigenous Peoples are inheritors and practitioners of unique cultures and ways of relating to people and the environment. They have retained social, cultural, economic and political

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[5] For a presentation in Portuguese on Michael Cole's research, see Smolka et al., 2011

[6] The terms can be used as synonyms and both distinguish themselves, etymologically, from the term "índio," which not only carries a strongly pejorative connotation in Portuguese, but also refers to Christopher Columbus's legendary mistake in thinking he had reached the "Indias" (Indies, or West Indies in English) when he arrived in the American continent.

characteristics that are distinct from those of the dominant societies in which they live. Despite their cultural differences, Indigenous Peoples from around the world share common problems related to the protection of their rights as distinct peoples."[7] A discussion of the construction of this category in the realm of international organizations can be read in Bellier, Cloud and Lacroix (2017). Lancy argues that there is an interest in contrasting parenting and educational models of indigenous and traditional peoples with those of Western urban societies (WEIRD societies). This will be one of the points, among others, discussed in the interview.

interview

Chantal: So David, we would like to begin this interview with a question about your motivation in writing this book. We know, because you stated it at the beginning of the preface, that it is a response to Lawrence Hirschfeld's famous article, "Why Don't Anthropologists Like Children?" (Hirschfeld, 2002). And you say, "No, anthropologists do like children! We can find plenty of information on anthropological records about childhood." But besides this motivation to show the diversity of childhoods, which message did you want to convey through bringing together all this information in the *Anthropology of Childhood*?

David: Well, actually, my initial goals and ambitions were pretty modest. I really was just simply trying to respond to this article, which was published in 2002 in *American Anthropologist*. How could someone make a statement like that in print, in *American Anthropologist*, and kind of get away with it, meaning nobody would be there to criticize? So I thought, you know, I know quite a bit about the anthropology of childhood already. I mean, the article almost was a personal insult because I had studied children decades earlier, in fact, eventually published in my 1996 book *Playing on the Mother Ground*, which is a report of an ethnographic study I did in Liberia on children. And there were others also working on childhood. And then, in the writing process, I began to ask the question, "How typical are these children?" The age-old question: am I looking at behavior that's universal,

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[7] Definition available at:
https://www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/about-us.html. For a discussion and historical context in United Nations documents, refer to: https://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/documents/5session_factsheet1.pdf.

[that] you find across cultures, or am I looking at behavior and patterns that are shaped by a particular culture?

So the other motivation for me, in addition to just simply saying, no, you're wrong, look at all this good stuff, was to try to begin to address the question of what's natural and what's cultural. So my approach was inductive, meaning I tried to have as few preconceived notions as possible. I just simply tried to get all the references together, all the themes… I didn't limit myself to books that had "childhood" in the title or anything like that. Maybe there was only one page or one paragraph in a longer book about a culture which talked about the children. I mean, in a sense, yes, if you just take the entire ethnographic record, children are a fairly small part. They were also rarely the central focus of anthropological research, at least until the 1990s, approximately. That I grant to Hirschfeld. But when you think that there are thousands, literally thousands of separate ethnographic descriptions from different cultures out there, then the number that I was able to arrive at, in terms of references to children, was pretty substantial. Again, in the thousands of citations.

So as I began to work through this material, I had to organize it, to see what patterns there were. So the categories, up to a point, were obvious. There had to be a chapter on babies, there had to be a chapter on early childhood, a chapter on adolescence. But there was more to it than that. For instance, one of the big revelations, I think, for me and then others later on, was how much work was an important part of children's lives. That it was just absolutely taken for granted that children would pitch in and help out. The number of cultures of indigenous peoples where that wasn't true, where the kids just kind of played, is very low. There's only one really convincing case, namely the Kalahari bushmen that were studied in the 1950s and 1960s, and the main reason they weren't able to help, [that] they didn't participate very much in the gathering and hunting, is that it was too dangerous. It was just too dangerous. They couldn't go along with their parents as children because they would slow their parents down.

So one by one, I [...] found these themes, these patterns, and was able to sort of work them into theoretical positions. And ultimately by the time the third

edition arrived, my thinking was not just to show the world that there are anthropologists who've studied children, but to actually offer what they found as an alternative to prevailing theories in child development. In other words, I really feel that Anthropology can present an alternative view of childhood across a number of important aspects.

Chantal: We truly sense in the book this intention to engage with psychology, especially with developmental psychology, as well as your desire to offer an alternative path. We must remember that even today, as Barbara Rogoff points out, even today in Psychology, there is often a reference to a universal child: 'the' child does this or that, at such an age..., without taking into account cultural differences.

Gabriela: And precisely because of your dialogue with Psychology, we would like to hear about your trajectory. You have a Master's in psychology from the University of California, and a doctorate in international and development education from Pittsburgh, with a major field in Anthropology. So how did anthropology become part of your life? How did you begin to work on childhood from an anthropological perspective? And how did you come to carry out your initial field work in Liberia?

David: OK. As an undergraduate, I majored in psychology. Not initially. I was initially in chemical engineering, but that just didn't fit me at all. So I switched to psychology. I took an introductory psychology class, and I found it very interesting. And then over the course of my several years of college, I gradually focused on children, child development, child psychology. And I'd always been interested in children, always attracted to, fascinated by children since as early as I can remember. I went on to graduate school at the University of California, Irvine, remaining in the field of psychology. However, in my second quarter of residence there, my supervisor said to me, "You know, David, you've been working on this project where we're testing children for cognitive skills of various kinds." I was administering those tests in California. And he said, "How would you like to go to Liberia? It is the other site where we're doing this comparison." The idea was to

gather data and compare the two cultures. And that's what I did! I went there and stayed on the project for two years.

We were gathering all this data, and it frankly wasn't very interesting. Better to say, there were many problems. Because basically what emerged was that the test didn't seem to make much sense to the kids there, unless they had been to school.[8] Therefore, we were very careful in the analysis. Michael Cole had designed the project to test children who had not attended school, but for these children, the test seemed not to make sense. There was all this subsequent reflection on how these tests from the field of Psychology purported to measure child development universally but, in reality, were grounded in an underlying school-oriented logic.[9] Even though the school wasn't very good, I mean, the quality of education was pretty poor; still, we were making that comparison. Well, it was clear that after about six years of schooling, the kids started succeeding in doing the tests. They demonstrated a cognitive behavior that was successful, whereas the kids that hadn't been to school remained unsuccessful. And what did that actually say? It showed that the cognitive competencies supposedly being tested were not universal. It wasn't assessing skills indicative of universal development, but rather skills developed through a very specific form of socialization, which is the school. Thus, from the perspective of child development, the test had a bias, because, ultimately, it measured competencies driven by schooling.

And meanwhile, while I'm running all these tests, I'm living in the village and I'm watching kids 24-7 (laughing)! I mean, I'm in the presence of kids, of babies, of mothers. I was a participant observer without knowing I was a participant observer. So that was a formative experience. And I immediately did a right turn, so to speak, into Anthropology.

And the Vietnam War was going on at the same time and I didn't agree with all that, I didn't want to go to the war. So as a result, I had to do various things to earn the right to be excused from becoming a soldier. I had to drop out of

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[8] Results stemming from that moment in the research can be found, for example, in Cole, Gay, and Glick (1968).

[9] For more on this critique of the school bias in psychological tests, see, for example, Lave (1988).

graduate school. I had to take a job teaching in a hardship, impoverished community. And I did that for four years, meanwhile [continuing] my doctoral studies, my graduate studies, [part-time] at the University of Pittsburgh, where I studied mainly Anthropology. I'd only had one Anthropology class as an undergraduate, so I was studying Anthropology at the graduate level, finally. And then I went back and did my dissertation, which is 90% anthropology and only 10% child psychology.

Flávia: Thank you, David. Well, my question is more conceptual. It is about the concept of "agency," which has gained significant visibility in Childhood Studies.[10] So, based on the discussion in your article "Unmasking Children's Agency" (2012), we would like to hear more about it. And we would like to hear your thoughts on the idea of "agency" when it is used in the context of vulnerable and impoverished childhoods in the Global South..

David: Yes. To my way of thinking, I try to stay true to an anthropological perspective. I believe that the field of childhood studies is predominantly occupied by sociologists, and there is a concern to think about social work, the fight against inequalities, for example. Anthropology has a greater interest in cultural dynamics, cultural differences, and not necessarily a concern to reflect on how to transform a particular social situation, how to reverse inequalities, but rather to describe the logics of specific groups. I remain faithful to this because I do not intend to solve all the world's problems. I think if someone who is, let's say, in childhood studies or sociology or child psychology wants an anthropological perspective, they're expecting something different from the perspective they already have. In other words, complementary to what they have. So when childhood agency first emerged as a really important issue, particularly in childhood studies, [...]I spent considerable time thinking about what that means in terms of the worlds where I work, that is traditional village settings, indigenous

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[10] In the field of childhood studies, the concept of children's agency has been developed especially by William Corsaro (1997), Allison James and Alan Prout (1996), Leena Alanen (2001), Berry Mayall (2002), and Alison James (2009, 2011). According to James, debates on children's agency emphasize the role of children as social agents rather than mere recipients of adult teachings. The discourse on children's agency has "not only reached a reconceptualization of what childhood is but also the ways in which children can be understood as participants in society" (James, 2009, p. 34). For a critical perspective from Latin America, see Szulc (2019) and Kraftl, Balagopalan, and Tebet (2021).

children. And here are my first thoughts about that: I think there are really two kinds of agency; that is, I can take the word agency, and I immediately extract two very different meanings from it.

On the one hand, you have agency as freedom. I can easily use the term agency to describe children who are free to go anywhere in the village setting they want, to play with sharp knives; [things that] usually startle our sensibilities, like swinging on swings and plopping into the water. And they do all this without adult supervision. In our societies, children don't have that kind of agency. Very, very little. Because we're overprotective, we are concerned about them, we see the world as perilous, and we see all the risks involved. But in traditional settings, they have an enormous amount of freedom, and they use that freedom, generally speaking, to have a good time, to enjoy their childhood, but also to learn their culture. In other words, this is another theme in a lot of my writings: we don't see a lot of teaching going on in these contexts. How is that possible? How do children learn?

They learn because they participate. In these communities, it is very common for children to be present at all activities. There is little privacy or moments when they are kept away. Most of the time, they can listen, they can observe what is happening. It is common for them to be able to participate in activities at night as well; if there is a party, if there is a dance, if there is a story to tell, they are there. They have a lot of freedom, so it is "agency," in this sense, of freedom.

The second kind of agency - and I think that it's a very obvious one and closer to what you mean by agency - is authority, having rights, as you would put it, having desires, wishes, preferences that are respected and catered to. And of course in WEIRD society we give our children an enormous amount of that kind of agency. They're allowed to choose their own meals, their own meal times. We ask their opinion about what they want to do, what they want to wear. We take them shopping. We cater to their needs and wishes and so on. And we pay attention to what they say. We listen to their every word. We have conversations with them when they're still babies! We treat them with a great deal of authority,

their voice is authoritative. We believe they should give their opinion and decide on many things. Whereas again, opposite in the village setting, generally speaking, across the ethnographic record, children do not have that kind of agency. They have to obey and to earn [their agency]. People begin to pay attention to them, engage in conversation, be more involved in their lives, and show more respect for their opinions once they've reached a level where they are an accepted and completely contributing member of the community, their families, and their domestic group. That is, as it is said in anthropology, when they're seen as being useful, helpful, valuable. So, there are two very different types of agency.

Flávia: And stretching a bit on this point, we can see a generalization of the concept of agency. It is being used by almost all anthropologists, sociologists, and other researchers studying childhood in different countries. This demonstrates, in my view, how we are still very colonial, only accepting theories produced in the North and not really paying attention to what our data is revealing. Our data presents different standpoints. This also lays bare the politics of academia, the politics of science, and how we view the Global South's role as source of data rather than producing its own theory.

David: Certainly, I wholeheartedly agree. I mean, I try to do my little part, saying, "Hold on, let's take it easy, 'our' way is not always the best, 'our' way is not always superior." I like the confrontation, the opportunity to make a distinction with child psychology, with my colleagues in developmental psychology, for example. The goal of my work, and anthropological work on childhood in indigenous or traditional communities in general, when well conducted, is to produce an effect of great respect and legitimacy for the ways of thinking about childhood and education in these communities. I think we - that is, those of us who belong to Western, middle-class, urban societies - can learn a lot. Despite the differences among us, there is also a clear difference with the parenting practices of indigenous peoples or so-called traditional peoples, meaning, in the case of childhood, societies that mostly live in small groups in rural areas and, although they mostly have schools today, are societies where education traditionally did not take place through the school system. Instead, it involves co-participation in

activities. The works of Barbara Rogoff and other scholars also clearly demonstrate this, with the idea of "learning by pitching in" (Paradise; Rogoff, 2003) being very revealing. And in Brazil as well, in your own research. I might know Chantal's works better because of the article she published in a dossier I organized for *Ethos* magazine, but [this is also true of] Flávia's and Clarice Cohn's works[11].

Chantal: And just returning to the concept of agency, I wanted to add that there is also another aspect, which is its emergence. We know that there is a political facet, inseparable from the academic stance, explaining the emergence of the notion of "agency" in Childhood Studies. There is a desire to foster agency, to create a political, as well as an academic, space where children are heard. So, there is a political horizon that influences ways of acting in research.

But David, I wanted to ask about what you mentioned in passing at the end of your last response: the internal differences within Western urban societies. When we think, for example, about Annette Lareau's work (Lareau, 2003, 2007), which clearly demonstrates the variation in parenting styles according to the social class one belongs to within American society. So, you acknowledge these "internal differences," but your work is largely structured around the major distinction between, on the one hand, childhoods in indigenous and traditional communities, and on the other hand, Western and urban childhoods. And you refer to the acronym WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic societies). But there are many internal differences within this broad category…

Flávia: Yes, and adding to that, there are internal differences within "WEIRD" societies, but there are also so many differences among various indigenous or traditional peoples.

Chantal: Exactly. So, is there not a risk of oversimplifying and falling back into the so-called "great divide" between "them and us" that has been so criticized?

David: Yes, indeed, but well, the fact is that this acronym [WEIRD societies] became so well-known…, it is cited in virtually every work on the subject - at least all those in English. They've coined a powerful expression, they have thousands of citations, literally, thousands. Because it encapsulates something. But you're right,

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[11] He refers to Medaets, 2016, and Pires, 2011 (in Portuguese, see Medaets, 2020), and Cohn, 2000.

there's always a reductionist side to it, always. Lareau's work is splendid for this reason. It's crucial to investigate internal differences. Not to mention changes over time. Within Western societies, the shift in how children are viewed and treated, just in the last 50 years, is astonishing. It's enormous. I could spend another hour talking about it. But I think it's also important to highlight recurring patterns. The Western model of child-rearing, that of the guides we were talking about earlier, the mainstream in Psychology, it's so pervasive... And it's not as if among different indigenous and traditional peoples there were no common points. We're not talking about their entire way of life or their entire cosmology; we're talking about the concrete conditions of raising children. Of course, there are differences, but it's also clear that many things recur. We just have to do this comparative work to see these recurrences. And there's an interest in pointing that out. It allows us to advance, in a sense, in understanding childhoods (in the plural) and childhood (in the singular) as a phase of life. It's crucial to have detailed ethnographies of each group, showing the many differences and, as in yours, Chantal, questioning some points of Rogoff's model for explaining learning in indigenous childhoods by showing that in some places in the Amazon, her analysis doesn't work so well. But it's interesting to not start from scratch and to see these commonalities frequently found in ethnographic records among indigenous and traditional peoples: children's participation in work, the lack of separation in adults' lives, the aspect of learning through participation and not necessarily through being taught... So, each perspective has its own interest. That's what I think.

Gabriela: David, I would like to hear more about these coming-of-age categories, like "babies," "children," and "toddlers," and how different groups make these distinctions in different ways. In Brazil, in the Portuguese language, we have words to distinguish babies from children, but we don't have a word for toddlers, for example. So, we would like to hear from you about these categories and what criteria are used to create differentiation in each context.

David: Yes, that's an interesting question. In Western societies, time and age are the primary criteria. Categories are determined by age, months, and years. In ethnographies of childhood in traditional or indigenous societies, parents may not

even know the actual date of birth, the month, the year, or how many years the child is. And it's not because they couldn't know, but it's very common that other criteria are considered important. Each indigenous people, each context, has systems of categories for the life period, but this categorization is based not so much on age but more on competencies, on the development of skills.

Are they weaned? Are they mobile? Are they, can they run an errand reliably? So those, to me, it's like, what can the kid do? That's what determines the kind of transition point and say, OK, now the child is in the next older category. And it also comes down, I would say, in the indigenous community, there's much less concern for is the child progressing at a good rate, expected rate.

I mean, these transition points that we talked about in terms of the child being weaned, mobile, and so on. In WEIRD culture, those transitions are very closely monitored. And it's also important to mention that there is less concern, less obsession—because in our medicalized societies, this borders on obsession—with control over the progression of child development. Is the child progressing at a good pace, at the expected rate? Has the child met all the 'developmental milestones' for that stage? I mean, these transition points we talk about in terms of the child being weaned, learning to walk and being able to move around, and so on, are not generally followed as closely or with as much concern. In our societies, we call upon specialists, pediatricians, speech pathologists, and all sorts of experts if a child seems not to progress from category to category in the way we think it should. Whereas, this kind of concern rarely becomes severe in an indigenous community or traditional communities. There's a sort of laissez-faire [attitude]; the child develops at their own pace.

Gabriela: It's very interesting because it brings an anthropological perspective to think about age. And when you encounter populations where age is not a good way to refer to someone, you need to find other categories. But beyond this aspect of development, do you think we can say that these different phases correspond to different social statuses within the group?

David: Yes, definitely. And this also relates to the question of agency because we Westerners, in the WEIRD societies, grant agency, in terms of

authority, to children and even babies. In the communities of indigenous or traditional peoples, the opinions of children are less considered, but they have more freedom. Taking the kids' opinions into account is linked to a social status, if you will, a position within the group. So there is a very big difference between how we look at the world and how indigenous peoples do. Our societies, certainly, have changed a lot over time, but currently they have a way of granting authority to children that is quite unique in ethnographic records.

Chantal: David, our last question is about the influence of the Anthropology of childhood on, on one hand, Anthropology in general, and on the other hand, on other fields of research about childhood, especially in psychology and developmental psychology. As we discussed, this is the field you sought to engage with, along with many other anthropologists. We know there has been significant progress in this dialogue, but we would like to hear your perspective.

David: It's a challenging question for me because I could answer in either direction. That is, I could either say that I think there is a possibility of some real influence, or no, that it's not really having much of an impact. Let me explain and speak to the second one.

It is a fact that widespread parenting practices in Western societies are being exported worldwide. These practices are based on a popular version of psychology, that of child-rearing guides and baby care manuals, materials that draw on academic psychology produced in universities but often offer a simplified, if not oversimplified, version of these theories. It is evident that these ideas and materials are creeping into the Global South little by little.

By the same token, child psychology, WEIRD psychology, if you will, is a very dominant force in the social sciences. Just like Medicine and Pediatrics, this is nothing new. And some of the key concepts of child psychology, like "attachment theory,"[12] for example, are so deeply set in stone,, even though anthropologists have contributed to what I think is an overwhelming manifesto, which says there's

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[12] Bowlby developed his attachment theory based on systematic scientific observations of the parent-child relationship. He understands attachment as an interpersonal and interactive phenomenon, emphasizes the importance of both fathers and mothers for the child to develop a secure foundation, and highlights the role of attachment in personality development (Bowlby, 2024).

no substance to attachment theory, that it's just simply a cultural artifact and has no bearing on child development throughout the world, cross-culturally, and so on. Even so, there are literally thousands of papers published on "child attachment." There are probably hundreds published every year. There are probably over a hundred psychologists who consider themselves "scholars of attachment." So it's pretty tough to break through and have an impact when you have this very large group, when there is an entire field of childhood care professionals and researchers that relies on it. And they have a vested interest, the psychologists have a vested interest in sticking with a particular topic because that's how they get publications and grants and tenure, ultimately. So if you want to have any career in academia, and this is not only the case with this concept or just for psychologists, you don't just flit around from topic to topic, in a cascade. You must be more focused and stable. This is part of the academic game. So it's not easy to undermine a concept with so much history in a particular discipline. It has a network of legitimacy. Therefore, in this sense, I am pessimistic.

On the other hand, there is another angle from which we can look [at this]. You see, organizations like the Society for Research in Child Development,[13] with thousands of members, have truly embraced the idea of incorporating the anthropological perspective into their annual meetings, workshops, and journals over the last four or five years. They are being proactive in attempting to amplify the voices of Anthropology in studies on child development. Additionally, there's the creation of new interdisciplinary groups, such as the Society for Psychological Anthropology within the American Anthropological Association (AAA).[14] These institutionalizations have a considerable impact. It allows me to be more positive about the impact of our studies.

And regarding the other part of your question, about the impact of the anthropology of childhood on anthropology *tout court*, I see two areas of influence. One is childhood studies, which Flavia referred to. The first significant group of young scholars who rallied around [me] when I waved the flag for the anthropology of childhood, not only in the book [*The Anthropology of Childhood*,

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[13] https://www.srcd.org/
[14] https://spa.americananthro.org/

first published in 2008] but also through collaborative work with colleagues who established an internal group on childhood within the American Anthropological Association, the American Anthropological Association Special Interest Group in Children and Youth [established in 2007].[15] I mean, that has over 1,500 members, I think, and many of them would identify primarily as [specialists in] childhood studies.

So, I believe there was a convergence of disciplines around the theme of childhood, which also includes many psychologists, of course. This interdisciplinary movement entered into the structures of Anthropology, within its largest association. The second general area which I think has had a lot of influence on anthropological studies is the study of human evolution, which also engages in dialogue with archaeology, because many of their theories in evolutionary anthropology identify the child as the agent of cultural transmission. That is the theory; some of the central theories about cultural transmission, cultural evolution, and cultural change focus on children as the linchpin of these processes. So I am in dialogue with those people. I have them in mind. And you'll find references to them throughout the book, particularly to cultural transmission or to the concerns of those who identify as being very interested.

So I think the anthropology of childhood is here to stay. I think it's going to develop in a way very similar to the anthropological study of sex and gender, whose emergence, as you know, we can trace back in history. And I remember this wonderful film on the Trobriand Islands that was filmed with Annette Weiner, in the early 1990s. She presented a completely different picture of Trobriand culture than the one Malinowski (1978) had given us, because she was looking at it from a woman's perspective and paying attention to women. What they were up to, their lives, and how, in many ways, they were critical to understanding what the Trobriand culture was, and what Trobriand men were.

That had a strong influence on me. On so many of us from that generation. And I think the anthropology of childhood will follow a similar path. It comes out of many individual studies that are connected and articulated at some point,

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[15] https://acyig.americananthro.org/about/acyig-history/

gradually building a field with its own groups, meetings, and a history of debates that is specific but also influences other subgroups within the discipline. As I mentioned in the response to Hirschfield, when I started this movement, there were already many individual studies, but no one had brought them together and proposed a comparative perspective.

But when they were brought together, when people began to think as a field, people started reading Jean Briggs, Margaret Mead, and so on. So, I think you can say that now we have a foreseeable future in anthropology. We are players in the game. Maybe we are small players, but we are clearly one of the players in the field.

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