

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

DAVID F. LANCY, *The Anthropology of Childhood: Cherubs, Chattel, Changelings*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008, xii + 376 p., index.

David Lancy's book, *The Anthropology of Childhood*, is a synthesis of literature from ethnographic, historical, and other sources such as primate studies and archeology which deal with issues pertaining to children and childhood. In his synthesis, Lancy deliberately avoids esoteric theoretical formulations. Instead, he weaves together parallel anthropological perspectives on childhood to present a balanced, inclusive selection of anthropological research. Perspectives vary from those who argue that childhood is a time of culture, language, and skill acquisition (nurture) to those who argue that childhood is essentially a biological phenomenon (nature). In doing so, Lancy questions the ethnocentric lens through which researchers with Euro-American values tend to view children from other societies and historical eras. To differentiate among childhood experiences across cultures and time, Lancy introduces and utilizes two tools throughout his book: (1) classifying children into three distinct categories, and (2) comparing two distinct societal hierarchies. The book is seamlessly organized into chapters that also neatly tie into the economy as an underlying theme.

Lancy defines childhood as that "period when our offspring are too young to fend for themselves completely and require active nurturing" and explains how children are essentially viewed by their respective societies and cultures as (1) desired, precious and priceless cherubs (a relatively rare and recent view), (2) desired but commodified chattel, or (3) undesired, inconvenient and unwanted changelings. Further, through rich illustrative examples, Lancy explains how childhood, influenced primarily by the environment and the material circumstances in which it occurs, is not fixed but rather changes over time and space. One example Lancy provides is the relatively recent shift in the way children are defined in Western societies from that of chattel, in which parents expect an economic return for the effort they put into raising their children; to the current view of children as emotionally priceless yet economically worthless cherubs, where parents no longer expect an economic return from their children's work and instead may actually incur a loss (108).

Essentially, Lancy's cherubs are those children who live primarily in developed, modern, Western countries where fertility and infant mortality are limited; and whose childhood begins in infancy (and at times prior to birth) and extends into or beyond the college years. Cherubs are those children who are "invested with tremendous inherent worth;" whose wellbeing, needs and desires are valued over those of other family members; who are assumed to require intellectual stimulation from birth onward and are thus afforded the right and need to play and be intellectually stimulated (370-372). Cherubs are those children who more

than likely have “selfless mothers who lavish attention and instruction on their young well into adolescence” (371).

The opposite of cherubs are Lancy’s other two categories: changelings and chattel. Changelings are typically children who live in agrarian, traditional, developing countries where fertility and infant mortality are high and where some children are abandoned or disposed of if they suffer from a birth defect or they (especially girls) are seen as surplus. In such societies, childhood is relatively short. The child is welcomed by its kin only “as a bearer of its parents’ (and extended family’s) genes and as a contributor to the household economy” (chattel) once it passes through “the gauntlet of birth trauma, illness, and deliberate termination” (13).

To study the value of children, Lancy compares societies in terms of two distinct hierarchies. He refers to the hierarchy found in contemporary, Western societies as a neontocracy. Children are the first social concern in a neontocracy; followed by attention to institutions catering to children’s needs; then parents, grandparents, and pets in that order (11). In contrast, Lancy refers to the hierarchy in traditional, agrarian societies as a gerontocracy in which society is dominated first and foremost by attention paid to the ancestors; followed by elders, adults, adolescents, and lastly children (11). Through such comparisons, Lancy examines how a child’s worth in a society varies and is dependent on culture and economy. This encompasses the factors which come into play in deciding to bring a pregnancy to term as well as factors which come into play in deciding to raise a child.

In addition to exploring the biological, cultural, and economic basis of how childhood happens and how a child’s worth is determined, Lancy also examines how children are raised; what is expected of them and their parents (particularly mothers); when and how children make the transition into and out of childhood; how and why play happens in childhood; and how, when, and why children receive formal schooling and are expected to work.

Lancy concludes by offering his interpretation of the literature reviewed throughout the book – tying everything ultimately to the economy. His conclusion reads in part:

... The net result of our mindset is that the marketplace decides the fate of children. In poor countries, a food shortage means many potentially sound children will suffer malnutrition and neglect. Dollars that could be sent overseas to vaccinate, educate, and feed these children are, instead, spent at home on expensive technologies and caretakers to keep alive children whose quality of life is non-existent. While sick, premature babies born to the well-off will survive through “miracles” of modern medicine, the poor will lose their otherwise healthy children to preventable diseases... (375-376).

Replete with numerous references, illustrative examples, personal anecdotes and photographs, all detailing the interplay of biological and cultural forces that shape childhood, Lancy’s book accomplishes two goals. First, it offers a “correction to the ethnocentric lens that sees children only as precious, innocent,

and preternaturally cute cherubs.... [Making] the case for alternative lenses whereby children may be viewed as unwanted, inconvenient changelings or as desired but pragmatically commodified chattel” (2-3). Second, the volume highlights the importance of considering children’s relative value through the hierarchy within which they live in order that it may lead to government interventions or changes aimed at increasing their value and hence their quality of life. Lancy accomplishes these goals by inductively drawing out his themes from select literature – noting patterns, identifying the underlying forces that shape them and contrasting dominant, contemporary views of childhood with the wider, older views of childhood to explain how and why changes in childhoods may occur.

Lancy’s intended readership, namely anthropologists of various theoretical frameworks and “teachers, fieldworkers, and policymakers who are laboring to improve the lives of children not fortunate enough to have been born into a privileged society,” will find this book useful. I believe it is also an excellent teaching and reference resource for post-secondary students of any discipline focusing on issues relating to childhood.

Although Lancy himself aims to synthesize various streams of anthropological work on childhood – in hopes that it will serve as a catalyst to promote greater interaction among researchers and possibly reconcile the nature versus nurture debate within anthropology – his book can serve as a multi-disciplinary introduction. I do wonder, however, if its reception across various disciplines will be affected by the degree to which the author depends on anthropology. Other disciplines that may benefit from the book are sociology, law, education, medicine, history, archeology, philosophy, women’s studies, and film studies, to name a few. I found *The Anthropology of Childhood* a pleasure to read, balanced, easy to follow, informative and engaging. I would recommend it to anyone interested in the topic of childhood.

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