Introduction

The study of child development has been largely confined to children in North America, Europe and other Western countries, who comprise less than 10 percent of all children in the world. The overwhelming majority of children grow up in Asia, Africa, Latin America, and the Pacific under conditions differing drastically from those familiar to Westerners, raising questions that developmental research has begun to address: What is childhood like among the peoples of the world? Do child-rearing practices, children’s activities, and the relationships of children with their parents and siblings vary from one population to another? If so, are the differences significant to their development and our understanding of human nature? Anthropology and cross-cultural research in developmental psychology seek to answer these questions by examining evidence from many human communities, some of which is presented in this book of readings.

Field studies of childhood by anthropologists began in the 1920s, though earlier reports by travelers, missionaries, and colonial administrators had indicated that children were raised under varying conditions across the world. During the 20th century scholars carried out research on every continent and in regions ranging from the Arctic to the Pacific, from sub-Saharan Africa, Asia, and Western Europe to North and South America. Their published works describe the everyday lives of children where there are no schools, where children work and bear serious responsibilities, and where standards of conduct and maturity—as well as diet, language, and emotional expression—diverge widely from those current in Western societies. Anthropologists and child development researchers from psychology, biology, and medicine have described and interpreted childhood experience among hunting-gathering peoples as diverse as the !Kung San of Botswana and the Inuit of Canada, among agricultural peoples as diverse as Polynesians, East Africans, and Mayans, and among urban peoples as diverse as contemporary Japanese, Italians, and Americans. Though the resulting knowledge is far from comprehensive, its relevance—to questions concerning heredity and environment, the acquisition of
language, cultural meanings and cultural identity, and the learning and development of children—commands the attention of scientists, policy makers, and practitioners alike. This book is designed to introduce readers to human childhood in its wide-ranging cultural diversity and to invite them to consider alternative perspectives on the nature of children—their needs, their potentials, and the processes of their development.

From its beginning, cross-cultural research on childhood has challenged the way we think about children by discovering conditions and outcomes not anticipated by child-rearing “experts” from Europe and North America. Margaret Mead (Chapter 2) found that Samoan children were permitted to change their own names and leave their parents to move in with other relatives. Malinowski (Chapter 3) observed children in the Trobriand Islands playing in unsupervised groups and hitting their fathers with impunity. Later anthropologists found children bound to cradleboards as infants, being breast fed into the third year of life, and permitted to pick up machetes as toddlers. Children have been observed being “overindulged” or “harshly disciplined,” teased “mercilessly,” granted much more—or much less—time to play than their equivalents at home—at least as judged by Anglo-American standards. Japanese mothers have been observed trying to influence their toddlers in a delicately non-confrontational way (Chapter 14), while Chinese mothers in Taiwan deliberately provoke confrontations with theirs (Chapter 17)—styles at variance with each other and with Anglo-American norms. What are the meanings of these practices in their indigenous contexts, their implications for parents and educators in the West and, more broadly, for a scientific understanding of childhood in the human species?

Anthropologists and other developmental field workers have attempted to answer these questions through detailed portraits and analyses of the conditions under which children learn and the activities in which they participate in the course of growing up. They have sought to make childhood in different settings comprehensible across the boundaries of language and culture, as products of differing ecological predicaments, social and cultural practices, and symbolic meanings. Some of these portraits, and their contributions to the reframing of issues and insights in child development, are represented in this book.

**Studying Childhood in Diverse Cultures**

In examining the varying environments in which children grow up, anthropologists have been concerned with (1) the local contexts and cultural meanings that organize the lives of parents and children in particular settings; (2) the social relationships through which infants and children survive, develop and learn; (3) the everyday activities that promote physical growth, language development, and childhood learning in a particular setting; (4) the outcomes of health, competence, and attainment of culturally specific ideals of behavior; and (5) the processes through which environmental conditions interact with the child's emerging capacities to produce particular outcomes, normal and pathological. Taken as a whole, the cross-cultural studies conducted so far have enabled us to understand childhood environments
and experience as diversified across the human species. Any cross-cultural framework for approaching the study of childhood must now be based on the following findings:

- Every human society studied recognizes a distinction between children and adults and the age-linked emergence of children’s abilities to learn, work, and participate in community activities as they grow and develop. The cultural conceptions of childhood prevailing in many societies include stages of maturity and rituals that mark and manage the transitions from one to another. At the same time, societies vary considerably in their folk theories (or “ethnotheories”) of maturation, development, and environmental influence and in the specific terms and markers they use to conceptualize children’s changing capacities for assuming social roles and higher statuses.

- It was not until late in the 20th century that a majority of children in the world attended schools. Most spent their childhoods participating in economic tasks and other domestic activities—including the care of infants—at home; many were involved in multi-aged children’s groups; and some engaged in play as well as work of various types. These activities continued to some extent even after the introduction of Western schooling.

- Childhood environments vary across human societies on many dimensions—material (diet and residential patterns), social (interaction patterns and relationships), and cultural (symbol systems such as speech, moral discourse, narrative, and scripts for activities). The cultural dimensions provide the meanings through which the material and social dimensions are experienced by the individual, and they may be formulated as culturally constituted developmental pathways toward maturity for children in a particular community.

- The ideas and actions of parents everywhere are strongly influenced by culture-specific norms and practices at every phase of the reproductive process, from the formation of conjugal unions, through pregnancy and childbirth, to infant care and child rearing. Norms of parenting reflect and help to sustain the moral standards of a community. Parents often regard deviations or alternatives as socially unacceptable, immoral, or even disgusting, yet they also reinterpret the norms received from earlier generations in terms adjusted to current local contexts.

- Children are not passive receivers of cultural practices. Ethnographic accounts have revealed children to be active participants in the social interactions and cultural learning of their early years. They acquire the conventions of communication and norms of behavior that give them entrée to their local social world, but they use and modify them for their own purposes.

These are some of the basic assumptions with which cross-cultural researchers now approach childhood in any culture. The study of childhood and child development is interdisciplinary, and new understandings have emerged from a variety of disciplines. Development during childhood—that is, the growth of children with age in bodily size, neural connections and the differentiation and organization of their mental life—is fundamental to research on childhood in anthropology and other disciplines.
Development as a Basic Frame for Understanding Childhood

Comparative studies of children during the last quarter of the 20th century were influenced by the discovery of these age-related aspects of childhood:

- Infants (children during the first 12 or 18 months after birth) have greater capabilities for perception, memory, communication, and social engagement than was recognized before 1960. At the same time, the first year of life is the period of greatest risk to survival in the human lifespan. These findings raised the question of how parental practices in different human populations respond to the opportunities of infant ability and the risks of infant vulnerability. Part II of this book shows cultural variations in infant care that help answer this question.

- Early childhood, particularly from about 18 to 36 months of age, is the major period for first language acquisition, and children at this age inevitably learn culture-specific meanings embedded in communicative interactions. This opened the door to field observations of children acquiring their native cultures during the first five years after birth, as exemplified in the readings of Part III.

- Middle childhood, particularly the years from 5 to 7, involves a cognitive shift enabling the child to assume responsibilities—in roles defined by work, caregiving, or learning—at home or in school. Observations showed that the 5–7 period often marks the onset for responsible activities over the rest of childhood. The readings of Part IV present cross-cultural comparisons and ethnographic portraits of older children participating in responsible activities, often differentiated by gender.

Variations in Childhood: What Do They Mean?

Cross-cultural variations in childhood conditions and developmental pathways raise a number of questions, for example, about the effects of early experience and about what infants and the children need for their “normal” or healthy development. Portraits of childhood experience different from our own children’s also point to new solutions to contemporary problems of development and social policy, and this possibility challenges the field of child development to expand its horizons for policy analysis.

The research on childhood represented in this reader was based on the premise that the anthropologist’s task is to describe the everyday lives of typical or normal children in the institutionalized socioeconomic and cultural contexts of a particular community for potential comparison with the lives of typical or normal children in contemporaneous America and Europe. These descriptions of alternative ways of rearing children—ways that differ drastically from those familiar to Americans—demonstrate that humans are not bound by biology to a single set of standards. Rather, these studies demonstrate that it is possible to raise “normal” children, whose behavior and skills are acceptable and valued in their local contexts, according to a variety of standards.

The demonstration of diversity across human populations in the normative developmental pathways for children has been the major project for the anthropology
of childhood and the comparative study of child development, laying the groundwork for all other approaches. During the past 80 years, field workers have aimed to provide a contextualized understanding of the typical or normal child’s everyday life from birth to adolescence, in aspects ranging from sleeping and feeding to social interaction and symbolic play, in communities around the world. Their comparative perspective reflects a critical reaction to proposals of universal standards for child rearing based on the presumption of one “normal” pathway grounded in the human genome. The more the professional experts on child rearing propagated universal concepts of the normal child, the clearer it became to anthropologists that the concepts were fashioned from local (that is, Euroamerican or Western) moral standards combined with biological speculation. To counter this ethnocentric perspective, they conducted field work abroad and provided evidence for a “de-centered”, multicultural understanding of childhood and child development.

There is more to the comparative study of childhood, however, than the critique of culture-bound developmental theories. The genetic potentialities of each child are selectively transformed into particular bodily and behavioral characteristics through the interaction of the growing child with population-specific environmental features ranging from diet to cultural symbols. Studying those features and that interaction is as necessary as knowing the parameters of the human genome that set the stage for child development. Thus cross-cultural research on child environments is indispensable to a scientific understanding of child development (ontogeny) in the same way that the ecological approach of Charles Darwin was required to understand the evolution of species (phylogeny). Anthropologists and other cross-cultural explorers of childhood across the world are providing for child development research the natural history of diverse conditions and outcomes that Darwin’s wide-ranging explorations provided for 19th-century biology.

The findings of our natural history or cultural ecology of childhood, as represented in this reader, provide a basis for reformulating theories of child development in terms applicable to the entire species, addressing long-standing issues concerning heredity and environment and questions of how and when environments influence the development of children. Furthermore, the cross-cultural evidence on infancy and early childhood includes not only the different conditions under which children are raised but also the early behavior of children, indicating the differing paths their development is taking. Just as three-year-old children are remarkably competent speakers of their native language, they can be strikingly proficient in particular social and practical skills prevalent in their local communities—so much so that they seem “precocious” compared to their agemates in other cultural settings. As they grow older, participation in culturally organized work, play, study, and relational networks continues to shape their behavior and psychological patterns in culture-specific ways.

We need far more evidence on the impact of early conditions on the behavior and psychological development of children in different cultures, but it is becoming increasingly clear—through studies like the ones in this reader—that cross-cultural research holds a key to the deeper understanding of childhood in the human species.
Outline of the Reader

This reader is divided into four parts, beginning with classic works from the anthropology of the first half of the 20th century in Part I. Parts II, III, and IV correspond to particular developmental periods and issues, beginning with infancy and concluding with school-age children. Most chapters are selections from longer publications.

Part I, “Discovering Diversity in Childhood: Early Works,” samples the work of the earliest anthropologists of childhood on both sides of the Atlantic. It begins with Franz Boas, a founding figure of American academic anthropology, who emphasized the concept of plasticity in the child’s biopsychological development (Chapter 1) on which the observations and interpretations of his students Margaret Mead (Chapter 2) and Ruth Benedict (Chapter 5) were based. From Britain, there are the early observations of Bronislaw Malinowski (Chapter 3), founder of modern ethnographic fieldwork, as well as those of Meyer Fortes (Chapter 4), a pioneering ethnographer of childhood in West Africa. These selections illustrate the progress in describing and analyzing childhood made by anthropologists before 1940.

Parts II, III, and IV include selections from the second half of the 20th century and are ordered in the chronological sequence of the child’s life, from infancy to early childhood and then middle and later childhood. Field research on these phases of childhood was stimulated by the advances in child development knowledge mentioned above, but the ethnographic studies examine worldwide variations for a deeper understanding of childhood.

Part II, “Infant Care: Cultural Variation in Parental Goals and Practices,” begins with a comparative framework for the study of infant care based on our own research among the Gusii, agriculturalists of Kenya (Chapter 6, LeVine et al.). This is followed by examples drawn from studies of African hunter-gatherers: the !Kung San of the Kalahari Desert by Melvin J. Konner (Chapter 7), the Efe of the Ituri rain forest by Edward Z. Tronick et al. (Chapter 8), and the Aka of the Central African Republic by Barry S. Hewlett (Chapter 9). In Chapter 10, James S. Chisholm examines infant care among the Navajo people of New Mexico, with a focus on the use of cradleboards. The next three chapters are focused on variations among Western cultures: England and the Netherlands (Chapter 11, Catherine Snow et al.), Germany (Chapter 12, LeVine and Norman), and Israel (Chapter 13, Melford E. Spiro with Audrey Spiro). This part as a whole shows the varied questions infant researchers have brought to varied cultural settings and the kinds of answers, often surprising, that the ethnographic data provide.

Part III, “Early Childhood: Language Acquisition, Socialization, and Enculturation,” explores a period, roughly from 18 months to 6 years, in which children are rapidly learning a language, communicative conventions and moral rules, and acquiring a gender identity, in the contexts of relationships and activities with parents, siblings, and peers, at home and in other settings like nursery schools. Chapter 14 presents a linguistic study focused on how Japanese children learn the “communicative style” of their culture in verbal interaction with their mothers. The following chapters cover a variety of topics in diverse cultural settings: authority and question-asking among the Kipsigis of Kenya (Chapter 15, Harkness and Super), autonomy and aggression among the Utku Inuit (Chapter 16, Briggs), story-telling,
misconduct, and shame in Taiwan and the U.S. (Chapter 17, Miller et al.), and play and friendship in Italy (Chapter 18, New; Chapter 19, Corsaro and Rizzo). Each study adds to our understanding of morally significant learning, interaction, and activity during the years between infancy and schooling.

Part IV, “Middle and Later Childhood: Work, Play, Participation, and Learning,” covers the period when children attend elementary school in our own society and examines in some detail the activities and responsibilities of primary school-aged children in societies where some or all children do not go to school. In Chapter 20, Rogoff et al. examine the responsible tasks assigned to children around from the age of five in non-school communities throughout the world, and in Chapter 21, Weisner and Gallimore take a cross-cultural look at sibling caretaking. Whiting and Whiting, in Chapter 22, present findings from an observational study of children’s behavior in six cultures; and in the last two chapters, Gaskins (Chapter 23) and Wenger (Chapter 24) provide portraits of how children’s activities are distributed by age and sex in rural communities of Mexico and Kenya, respectively. Taken together, the chapters of this section afford an unusual look at childhood work, play, and learning in different cultures before the spread of mass schooling, raising questions of what has been lost as well as gained when children attend school.

NOTE

1 During the last 25 years anthropologists have conducted specialized studies of children focused on school settings, immigration, child abuse, illness and disability, structural violence and globalization. Several of these bodies of literature deserve their own readers and could not be adequately represented in this volume.