



Childhood

CATHERINE ALLERTON, *London School of Economics and Political Science*

Children, as the youngest members of our species, exist in all human societies across space and time. But societies differ widely in their understandings of childhood as a distinctive stage of the human life cycle. This entry describes anthropological work on childhood as a varying cultural construction, from early comparative studies of childcare and development, through work on the socialization of young children, to more recent 'child-focused' research that takes children's perspectives on their role and position seriously. Anthropological research casts a critical light on institutional attempts to formulate universal understandings of childhood, whether these are found in developmental psychology, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, or the spread of formal schooling as an essential aspect of modern childhoods. Children, through their participation and observation in social worlds, are always understanding more than they are told by adults, often applying cultural concepts or different languages in innovative ways. This frequently leads children to destabilise or reject wider representations of childhood that reflect adult prejudices, or wider fears about the 'disappearance' of childhood or a loss of 'innocence'. Paradoxically, adult attempts to protect children, whether from work or from societal harms, often say more about the politics of representations of childhood, than they do about children's actual experiences.

Introduction: children and 'childhood'

Children, as the youngest members of our species, exist in all human societies across space and time, and descriptions of children's activities, talk, [games](#), and [work](#) appear in many different anthropological texts.¹ But human societies differ widely in their answers to the questions: 'who counts as a child?', 'what kinds of care and instruction do children need?' and 'what knowledge do children have of their worlds?' The study of these and other questions is part of the cross-cultural comparison of 'childhood' as a socio-historical construction that varies widely both across and within different societies.

Anthropological research has demonstrated that there is no single, universal understanding of childhood as a stage of the human life cycle (Montgomery 2009; Lancy 2015). As a result, anthropologists have often cast a critical light on scientific and institutional attempts to make universal pronouncements about children, or to prioritise particular understandings of a 'normal' childhood. This includes adopting a critical perspective on developmental psychology as 'the' science of childhood.² Most psychological experiments have been conducted with children in what David Lancy (2018) calls 'WEIRD' (western, educated, industrialised, rich and [democratic](#)) societies. And yet, from the perspective of non-WEIRD societies, such understandings of 'normal' childhood are distinctly anomalous. For example, the American psychologist and educator, Stanley G. Hall (1904) defined adolescence as a turbulent and transitional period of 'storm

and stress', arguing that the physical changes experienced at puberty had a tumultuous impact on young people's emotional life. By contrast, in *Coming of age in Samoa*, Margaret Mead disputed this universal picture of adolescent disturbance, asking whether such difficulties were 'due to being adolescent or to being adolescent in America?' (1928: 5). Mead's book painted a picture of Samoan adolescent girls whose lives were full of leisure, and who did not experience conflicts around their sexuality. Her conclusion was that the 'storm and stress' of American adolescence had cultural rather than biological causes, telling us more about the anxieties of American society than about children's universal experiences. Indeed, later anthropologists have argued that the study of children is crucial to understanding key cultural [values](#) and conflicts (Hardman 2001 [1973]; Gilliam & Gulløv 2019).

A key, early influence on anthropological approaches to childhood was Philippe Ariès's *Centuries of childhood* (1962), in which he argued that European children in the Middle Ages were seen and treated as little adults, lacking separate clothing, games, or spaces. Ariès thought that the very notion of 'childhood' as a distinct phase of life did not exist for most of European history. Although Ariès's arguments, in particular his analysis of representations of children in pictorial art, have been criticised,ⁱⁱⁱ his central contention - that concepts of 'childhood' varied and that European children's worlds had not always been so separate from those of adults - had a huge influence on the development of 'childhood studies'. This is a multi-disciplinary field, in which anthropologists have engaged with sociologists, geographers, historians, and others arguing for a new paradigm for the study of childhood as a social construction.^{iv}

Not only do constructions of childhood vary across space and time, but childhood also intersects with other variables, such as social class, gender, and [ethnicity](#). It has been argued that economic and social realities influence ways of treating children, leading, for example, in urban Brazil to 'two distinct forms of childhood' (Goldstein 1998: 395). Rich children are pampered and spoiled by their parents and by the domestic workers employed to care for them. By contrast, the very children of those workers are hastened into adulthood, working inside the [home](#) from the age of 5 or 6, and sent out to do waged work by the age of 9 or 10.^v Childhood - in the sense of a carefree time of freedom and lack of economic responsibility - is a 'privilege of the rich' in this context (1998: 393). In America, too, social class shapes attitudes towards childrearing and understandings of children's natures. The lives of preschool children in New York City have been shown to be marked by a 'hard individualism' of working-class communities and a 'soft individualism' of the upper-middle-class (Kusserow 2004). Whilst 'hard' individualism directs children towards tough [resilience](#), self-sufficiency and independence, 'soft' individualism emphasises the importance of protecting and nurturing the child as a unique little person. Here, the conception of childhood held by upper-middle-class parents leads them to dismiss the relevance of social class, since they are led to emphasise the uniqueness and naturalness of their young children's selves.

Socialization: becoming a cultural person

The 'Culture and Personality' school of American cultural anthropology, with which Mead is associated, was interested in how culturally-specific child-rearing practices shaped the emotions and personality of children as cultural beings. Indeed, Mead herself saw the different peoples of the world as a kind of laboratory of child development, in which each culture presented a different set of experimental conditions for the treatment of children. In a short film, *Bathing babies in three cultures* (1951), made with Gregory Bateson, Mead showed how something as apparently straightforward as bathing a baby could be approached very differently, the method corresponding not only to the environment but also to a culturally-specific training of the young child's emotions. Cora Du Bois, another member of this school, conducted fieldwork in the late 1930s on the Indonesian island of Alor, describing the impact of caregiving and disciplinary techniques. Relatively unusually for her time, she also analysed children's drawings, and conducted Rorschach psychological tests. Du Bois argued that childhood experiences were central to the development of the 'modal personality', or common personality type, of a particular culture. However, she also acknowledged the significance of innate, individual differences in shaping adult character (1944: 3-4).

The Culture and Personality school's interest in child development evolved into a number of cross-cultural studies of child-rearing, most notably the 'Six cultures' study. This ambitious project utilised a common methodology to compare 'different patterns of child rearing and subsequent differences in personality' (Whiting 1963: 1) in six field sites in Kenya, Mexico, the Philippines, Japan, India, and the US. Its [ethnographic](#) results were rich, with systematic attention to children's treatment and routines, but with little attempt to make a general argument, given the significant differences between the cultures under study. Robert LeVine, an original member of the Six cultures team, continued its tradition of in-depth, observational research, examining childcare among the Gusii of Kenya from the 1950s to the 1970s. He argued that Gusii practices which diverged from those considered optimal in the US - such as not asking questions of young children, or not allowing them to initiate conversation with their elders - made sense within a local model of childhood and [care](#) (LeVine *et al.* 1994).

Early British anthropology was less concerned than American anthropology with psychological development, and more interested in socialization as the broad process through which immature beings became mature, competent members of a society. A generation of anthropologists trained by Bronislaw Malinowski included descriptions of children's lives as a standard element of their ethnographic monographs. In *We, the Tikopia*, Raymond Firth discusses children's care by and relationships with family members, the 'independent little bands' of children that work and play together, and children's role in helping households run smoothly', given their obedience to adult instruction (1936: 145-150). In *Chisungu*, Audrey Richards (1956) analysed a series of ritual acts and physical challenges for Bemba girls, one of a number of studies of initiation rituals and their role in the socialization of children. This work showed how the 'end' of childhood, and the attainment of adulthood, was not necessarily a natural event, but had to be

achieved through ritual means. Studies of children's position and role within the family also drew attention to the impacts of birth order (Firth 1956, Fortes 1974) and fostering arrangements (Goody & Goody 1967) on children's treatment.

In linguistic anthropology, a number of anthropologists have focused on 'language socialization', the ways in which children are socialised to use language in different societies, and the ways that this shapes children's development. Elinor Ochs and Bambi Schieffelin (1984) outline and compare three different 'developmental stories' with respect to infants' language socialization. The first of these, the 'Anglo-American white middle-class developmental story' (the 'story' taken as standard in much psychological literature), involves an approach to infants as fully communicative partners. This cultural context encourages face-to-face interactions and mutual gazing between infants and caregivers, simplification of speech by adults ('baby talk'), and the rich interpretation of infant vocalizations. By contrast, the second such 'story', found amongst the Kaluli of Papua New Guinea, emphasises the 'softness' and lack of understanding of infants. Here, infant utterances are not interpreted, and babies are not spoken to in 'baby talk'.⁶⁴ Instead, Kaluli caregivers turn their babies outward towards the social group, and speak 'for' their infant, often in a high-pitched, nasalized [voice](#). Finally, according to the 'Samoan developmental story', young infants are also not conversational partners; neither babbling nor baby-talk are encouraged, and children must instead be socialised to show 'respect' by always considering the perspective of higher-ranking persons. Based on these stories (and their attendant constructions of early childhood), Schieffelin and Ochs argue that societies can be divided into two main types: those (such as white Anglo-American society) that adapt situations to the child, and societies (such as Kaluli and Samoa) that try to adapt the child to situations.

Amongst the Beng of rural Côte D'Ivoire, infants are thought to be reincarnated ancestors emerging from an 'afterlife' called *wrugbe* (Gottlieb 2004). This spiritual journey is a long and difficult one, and therefore infants and young children are thought to have a fragile hold on life. Gottlieb considers Beng infants' social lives to be strikingly active when compared with babies in her native US. Though her research moves beyond earlier concerns with culturally-specific personality development, Gottlieb nevertheless sees the Beng emphasis on infant sociability as shaping children's emotional responses in distinctive ways. In particular, and as a result of extensive alloparenting (care by those other than parents), Beng babies do not have exclusive or intensive attachments to their mother, something that might be seen as part of 'healthy' development in Western settings. Similarly, in *Inuit morality play* (1998), an ethnography of a three-year-old girl, Jean Briggs approaches young children's actions and experiences as part of a complex social world shared with various adults. Briggs argues that Inuit adults encourage children to think deeply about moral issues by presenting them with emotionally powerful problems in an exaggerated and personally relevant style. This takes several forms, most notably the asking (by neighbours and kin) of dangerous questions - 'Will you come and live with me?' 'Shall I be your new mother?' 'Shall I kill your father?' - often in a

sustained 'interrogation'. Through these complex, playful dramas, Inuit adults test children, experiment with their developing emotions, and help them learn to control their behaviour in specific ways.

Knowledge and learning

Anthropological research with children has always been interested in 'education' in its broadest sense. Childhood, from this perspective, is interesting because it is the crucial period during which cultural knowledge is re-constituted, and possibly negotiated, by children. Although adults sometimes explicitly instruct children in particular ideas or practices, much of this learning takes place in an unconscious, embodied way. Raymond Firth saw 'education' in Tikopia as practical and non-disciplinary, 'hinging upon the participation of the child in all ordinary activities from early years' (1936: 147). Similarly, in *Social and psychological aspects of education in Taleland* (1938), Meyer Fortes emphasised how Tallensi children, unlike many British children of his time, did not exist in a differentiated 'children's sphere'. Rather, they shared the same activities and knowledge as adults, allowing them full participation in economic, ritual, and religious life. Fortes's text gives a rich account of children's everyday education as they take part in agricultural tasks, look after livestock, join ceremonies and [dances](#), and joke with grandparents. He argued that children in this rural society rarely asked 'why' questions, since so much of their learning took place in real situations where they directly observed and practised skills.

Earlier work within the socialization frame tended to focus on childrearing by adults as a way in which (relatively passive) children were moulded. By contrast, more explicitly 'child-focused' ethnographies approach children not simply as adults-in-the-making but as social agents in the present. Such work gives more space to what children say and know, and the ways in which this might be different to what they are told by adults. In *The private worlds of dying children* (1978), Myra Bluebond-Langner describes how, as their illness progresses, leukemic children come to learn about the world of the hospital in which they are treated, about their parents' desires, and about their own grim prognoses. Bluebond-Langner argues that American childhood is commonly understood as 'a period of formation, of becoming' in which children are 'molded for their futures' (1978: 210). This concept explains the reluctance of both medical personnel and children's parents to talk explicitly to the children about their condition and treatment. Although these children still manage, through close observation, to gather accurate information about disease and [death](#), they must practise what Bluebond-Langner calls 'the rules of mutual pretense' in order not to disrupt the 'illusion of their normalcy' (1978: 213). In pretending not to know that they are dying, the children demonstrate their social competence, upholding the future-oriented concept of childhood, and protecting both their parents and their doctors.

Other studies have also explored this disjunction between (limited) adult instruction and (extensive) child knowledge. Peggy Froerer (2011) argues that, in a tribal village in rural Chhattisgarh, central India, children are never systematically taught [moral](#) lessons in right and wrong. Nevertheless, as peripheral

participants at adult-centred rituals, children pick up moral understandings, which they then utilise in response to illness. In the village, illnesses may be considered 'simple' and morally neutral, or may be considered to be 'supernatural' punishments for moral infractions. Adults state very explicitly that they do not consider children capable of causing "supernatural" illness, whether in themselves or others, since prior to marriage they are not thought to have acquired full knowledge (Froerer 2011: 376). However, children have a different understanding of their knowledge and capabilities and consider themselves to be responsible for illnesses caused by ritual or other misdeeds. This example shows how children do not simply reproduce or replicate the ideas of adult social actors (who are often dismissive of children's explanations), but have their own perspective on moral responsibility, actively applying adult understandings to their own behaviours. More broadly, some anthropologists argue that it is only by studying how children come to make sense of particular concepts, such as hierarchy or [ethnicity](#), that adult knowledge can be properly understood (Toren 1993, Astuti 2001).

Children's abilities to only partially accept the messages of adults regarding child competencies are also demonstrated in work on language use. On the Caribbean island of Dominica, a complex, multilingual situation exists, where English (the official language of government and school) appears to be squeezing out the local Afro-French creole, Patwa (Paugh 2012). Adults, who want their children to master English, forbid them to speak Patwa, even as adults use Patwa in their own interactions, or even sometimes to instruct children. Nevertheless, ethnographic attention to micro-level, playful interactions between siblings and peers in 'child-controlled settings', shows how Patwa remains an important language for children. Whilst it may be forbidden to them, the fact that children hear Patwa used by adults in 'affect-laden socializing activities' means that children use the language in specific ways amongst themselves, most notably to 'intensify their speech and control others' (Paugh 2012: 19). This work is informed by the tradition of language socialization described above, but shows the significance of children's talk within a multi-lingual context where language use carries complex socio-political messages.

Formal schooling and new models of childhood

The spread of formal schooling around the world has brought with it new models of the place and work of childhood. Significantly, one consequence of the spread of formal schooling noted in much anthropological work is a disconnect between the knowledge and skills valued in school, and locally-valued, culturally-specific skills and knowledge. For example, the introduction of formal schooling amongst the Huaorani of the Ecuadorian Amazon has led to a striking contrast between the spaces of schooling and the social environments in which children are raised (Rival 1996). Attending school gives these children few transferable skills, whilst spending time away from the forest and longhouse deskills them in the knowledge essential to Huaorani cultural and economic life. This gap, or disconnect, between school and children's [home](#) environments was central to Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron's (1977) study of

French schooling and inequality. They see the French educational system as [reproducing](#) wider social hierarchies by valuing the cultural capital (forms of speech, manners, and ways of behaving learnt unconsciously in a home environment) of children from upper-middle-class backgrounds and devaluing the cultural capital of lower-class children. Schools, they argue, make middle-class children's cultural capital (a product of their class upbringing) appear 'natural', thus legitimising the reproduction of class privilege. This imposes a kind of symbolic violence (non-physical repression) on non-elite children, who develop a sense of their 'social limits' and begin to self-censor in the company of the elite. In [ethnographies](#) of schooling, such unofficial [values](#) and judgements are often referred to as the 'hidden curriculum'.

Bourdieu and Passeron's theory of the connections between schooling and social inequality has come to be known as 'reproduction theory', since they focus on the role of formal schooling in reproducing wider structures of inequality. However, this work often fails to consider the perspectives of the very children being marginalised in school. By contrast, Paul Willis (1977) gives more space to the ways in which working-class youth creatively struggle against the inequities of the schooling system. *Learning to labour* is an ethnographic study of a school in an industrial, urban setting in the English Midlands. The primary focus is 'the lads', a group of twelve boys who Willis describes as members of an 'oppositional culture' in the school. In contrast to Passeron and Bourdieu, Willis shows how the lads were not simply socialised by the institution to self-censor or to accept their subordinate position. Instead, he describes how they constantly disrupted school routines, fidgeting and tutting in class, following a 'foot-dragging walk' down corridors, and frequently erupting into 'derisive or insane laughter' at the expense of the school's conformist pupils (1977: 13). These boys talk back to the middle-class ideologies of school, and celebrate their own working-class [masculinity](#). Ironically, though, in choosing 'having a laff' (1997: 29) over conformity to the educational process, 'the lads' ultimately seal their own fate, leaving school without qualifications and reproducing their class position.

If this, and later, research (see especially Evans 2006) emphasises the role of class structures in shaping children's experiences of formal schooling, other works have analysed the significance of racial and gendered aspects of identity to exclusion (see Canessa 2004). They explore, for example, how the 'hidden curriculum' of a Californian elementary school marginalises and isolates African-American boys, denigrating their style and body language, judging their familial forms of English as inferior, and ultimately constructing them as 'bad boys' (Ferguson 2000). Another ethnography of a Californian school analyses the construction and policing of high school masculinity through the 'fag discourse' used to attack students who (either temporarily or permanently) appear to be homosexual (Pascoe 2007). Significantly, upholding (heterosexual) masculinity is important not only to teenage students but also to the school itself, as an institution invested in rituals (school rallies, prom, yearbook photos, popularity contests) that affirm heteronormative gender roles.

In addition to highlighting the 'hidden curriculum' of the implicit or unintended lessons, values, and

perspectives transmitted in schools, critical anthropological work on formal schooling has also explored its other impacts. One key issue is the extent to which school systems have 'stolen' childhood from children, turning their lives into a stressful, endless ordeal. Thus South Korean children have been described as facing an 'examination war', with nearly every minute of their lives organised around school or the extra classes (up to five hours a day) deemed necessary to ensure their 'success' (Cho 1995). Students are 'trapped in a system that calls for intense inhuman competition and rote learning' (1995: 154), with resultant impacts on mental and physical health. Similarly, Norma Field (1995) paints a portrait of Japanese education as 'endless labor', with the ordinary school day followed by 'cram school' in the evening. Whereas Ariès drew attention to the lack of a set-apart concept of childhood in early European history, Field highlights the 'disappearance of childhood' taking place in 'an orderly, prosperous society' (1995: 60). A further, somewhat different, critique is that formal schooling has created aspirations and expectations that, for many children, in developing contexts, are impossible to fulfil. In response, some governments have tried to create more practical school curricula for children. For example, in the late 1990s, the Ugandan government introduced a more 'rural' or 'vocational' curriculum that promoted local [farming](#) and aimed to equip children with the relevant skills for agricultural livelihoods (Meinert 1995). However, this was not well received by rural children themselves, who had hoped that going to school would enable them to pursue an urban social status. In the words of one sixteen-year-old, 'Life in town is sweeter.... If you get stranded here in the village, you will work very hard, but life is just bitter' (Meinert 1995: 183).

Anthropology, then, has often taken a critical perspective on formal schooling, questioning its separation from local knowledge, showing how it reproduces existing social hierarchies, and drawing attention to its frequently negative impacts on childhood experience. However, the picture drawn is not entirely negative. In rural Taiwan, and despite the disconnections between school and everyday family life, the importance of schooling is emphasised in part because schoolteachers are held up by parents as models for children to emulate (Stafford 1995). Similarly, Ethiopian schoolchildren see their teachers as inspiring figures and are strongly motivated to please them (Marshall 2016). This example is interesting for showing how the promise of better jobs and higher status in the future are not the only reasons why children might wish to attend school. In this Ethiopian case, children are motivated by the desire to be loved, valued for their hard work, and 'respected'.

Problematising child rights

Today, the work of many international development agencies and child-focused NGOs is informed by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). The CRC puts forward a particular model of childhood as a time deserving of 'special care and assistance'. Much contemporary, critical anthropological work on childhood has been concerned with exploring the implications of this universal construction of

children's individual rights, particularly in developing contexts.

Two key principles of the CRC are that, firstly, the 'best interests' of children should be the primary consideration in all actions concerning them (Article 3) and, secondly, a child's views should be sought in matters affecting the child (Article 12). However, these principles are not straightforward. For example, in NGO programmes for orphans in Uganda, it is usually adults who make decisions about children's 'best interests'; child orphans themselves are rarely meaningfully consulted (Cheney 2017: 52-3). In Thailand, child prostitutes have become figures of concern to the international community and yet, as Heather Montgomery explores (2001a), children's own [voices](#) and perspectives on this difficult issue are rarely heard. Montgomery conducted fieldwork in a squatter community where child prostitution had become central to maintaining [precarious](#) household incomes. Contrary to the stereotypes of activists, children in this community do not necessarily see themselves as passive victims, but emphasise that they are working to uphold a moral obligation to their parents. For Montgomery, the problem with the CRC is that it does not give clear guidance on how to prioritise or balance achieving different child rights. In order to uphold children's 'best interests', she asks, whose voices should be prioritised? And how can we balance children's right to be free of sexual exploitation with their right to family life, or to have their voices listened to? (2001b: 95)

The contradictions of child-rights-framed aid programmes have also been investigated in Vietnam (Burr 2006). One NGO-supported project in Hanoi aimed to remove children from the streets and help them return to countryside [homes](#). However, although the program was apparently informed by the CRC, it put adult wishes before those of children, and was entirely ineffective. No provision was made to help rural families cope with the extra costs of supporting a dependent person, and so a significant percentage of the relocated children soon returned to their life in the city. The study outlines a clash between children's own desires to [work](#) and the beliefs of (privileged) NGO workers that they should not. As many ethnographers have shown (Aptekar 1991, Glauser 1997, Hecht 1998), adult perceptions of such children as 'out of place' on the street are often behind misguided attempts to 'help' them.

Debates around 'child labour' (work that exploits or harms children) are also highlighted by Melanie Jacquemin (2006), who describes a child-rights-framed NGO project supporting 'Young Female Domestic' in the city of Abidjan, Côte D'Ivoire. This project concerned paid domestic work carried out by girls under the age of fifteen. However, by focusing only on a minority of girls known as 'little waged maids', the project neglected a larger category of child workers known locally as 'little nieces'. These girls are considered foster children and often work long hours in the homes of extended family members for no pay. Indeed, Jacquemin argues that the distinction between being a family member and an employee is kept 'purposefully blurred' in these situations in order to 'obscure but maximize exploitation' (2004: 485). By focusing only on 'child labour' as a problem for *paid* workers, the project in Abidjan inadvertently contributed to local understandings (shared by the girls themselves) that what 'little nieces' do is not

work.

Not only does Jacquemin's research demonstrate the potentially negative impacts of heavy-handed rights-based attempts to 'abolish' child labour, it also chimes with other research on the gendered complexities of children's work. In *Children's lifeworlds* (1994), Olga Nieuwenhuys makes a case for taking children's perspectives on their work seriously. Although adults in a Keralan village did not see girls' domestic tasks as 'work', Nieuwenhuys discovers that the girls themselves *did*. She argues that discourses on child labour make light of the huge differences between the work of male and female children, where the work of the latter is productively essential but ideologically undervalued. More widely, Nieuwenhuys has problematised what she describes as the 'dissociation of childhood from the performance of valued work' (1996: 237), arguing that rights-based attempts to ban 'child labour' have the paradoxical impact of reinforcing children's vulnerability to exploitation.

Despite attempts to globalise 'child rights', cultural context is key to understanding children's particular vulnerability or [resilience](#). Susan Shepler (2014) focuses on the demobilization (releasing from various armed forces) of former child soldiers in Sierra Leone, following the 2002 end of the country's decade-long civil war. Shepler argues that Sierra Leoneans have their own 'culturally specific reactions to child soldiering' that are not reflected in global child rights discourse (2014: 16). What is most disturbing to them is not the so-called 'lost innocence' of child soldiers, but the disruption of village-based intergenerational relations. Shepler pays detailed attention to youth who bypassed the rights-based programmes designed to help them, and instead 'spontaneously' reintegrated. Ironically, although such youth do not have access to the benefits that NGOs provide, they are better able to blend back into their communities than children who are 'formally' reintegrated, whose 'child soldier' identity is often unintentionally hardened.¹⁴

The politics of childhood

Debates around children's rights and the imposition of particular expectations of children's needs make clear that childhood is often a politically contested concept. Liisa Malkki analyses the profoundly depoliticised ways in which children's images are utilised in 'transnational representational spheres' (2010: 58). For example, the figure of the child often serves to represent a 'basic human goodness and innocence' (2010: 60; see also Fassin 2013). However, the problem with this representation, and others, is that when children do not fit into these images, they are viewed as a 'category mistake'. That is, they are not seen as 'real' children. This aspect of Malkki's analysis helps explain a number of examples where young people's status as children is not recognised. For example, in Zimbabwe, Brazil, and Haiti, street children have been criminalised and dehumanised as dangerous 'others', leaving them vulnerable to round-ups, and violent attacks, by the police (Bourdillon 1994, Scheper-Hughes & Hoffman 1998, Kovats-Bernat 2006). In

the UK, immigration officials may disqualify those seeking political asylum from the category of ‘children’ because ‘real’ children are assumed to be apolitical (Crawley 2009: 99). In Sabah, East Malaysia, the Malaysian-born children of migrant workers are seen by the wider society as ‘impossible children’ since they have been born to people who are meant to be temporary, and whose families are meant to reside elsewhere (Allerton 2018).

Since the publication of Mead’s *Coming of age in Samoa*, several anthropologists have utilised the ‘coming of age’ genre to explore how children negotiate new expectations and experiences in rapidly changing social conditions (Markowitz 2000, Fong 2004). This work demonstrates the micro-political and emotional impact on children of inter-generational change. For example, in traditional Canadian Inuit society, ‘adolescence’, as it is commonly understood, did not exist. Instead, through constant intergenerational contact, children reached social and economic maturity at a relatively young age (Condon 1990). As the previously nomadic Inuit have become concentrated in settlements, and with the introduction of formal schooling and television, adolescence has gradually emerged as a new category of childhood experience. In the settlement, older children are less reliant on their families, and able to spend more time with groups of peers. However, the pressures of new social and economic expectations, combined with the loss of cultural and linguistic traditions, have led to an increase in drinking, violence, and youth suicide (Condon 1990: 276; see also Stevenson 2009).

[Ethnographies](#) of transnational migration and kinship have also described the impact on children’s lives of social and economic change. In *Children of global migration* (2005), Rhacel Salazar Parreñas examines the lives of children ‘left behind’ in the Philippines by migrant parents. Amongst children of migrant mothers, a discourse of ‘abandonment’ was particularly prominent, and children expressed emotions of longing, grief, and anger about their situation. Parreñas argues that the ‘gender paradox of globalization’, in which women are pushed to work outside the home even whilst they are still held to the ideal standard of a nurturing and physically intimate mother, has mostly negative psychological consequences for children. By contrast, in her study of Ghanaian transnational families, Cati Coe (2014) describes how the West African region has a long history of ‘fostering’ in which children ‘circulate’ between different households. Here, migration is an ever-present possibility in children’s lives. Nevertheless, even in this context, there is still a marked contrast between the views of adults and children. Whilst parents tend to be relatively upbeat in their representations of migration, children’s emotional responses to their living arrangements in Ghana reveal feelings of a lack of control over their situation.

However, despite the often-negative impacts on children of social change, and of new expectations of childhood, [care](#), and kinship, children often respond positively to social transformations. In a Palestinian refugee camp in Jordan, children are compelled to engage with different projects of (Palestinian and Jordanian) nationalism, as well as the transnational [Islamist](#) movement (Hart 2002). However, they do so creatively, reshaping and resisting different influences and sentiments where possible. For example, one

12-year-old girl, Muna, identifies strongly as 'Palestinian', and is concerned about religion, but also supports a Jordanian football club and enjoys aspects of Western TV and pop music. Muna's response to multiple cultural and religious influences is illustrative of children's ability to imagine themselves as belonging to more than one community, and to respond in dynamic ways to political discourses.

Conclusion

Anthropological research has shown how childhood varies across space and time, how it involves different expectations of young people of different ages, how it intersects with other variables such as social class, and how it shapes children's everyday experiences. Although many earlier anthropological studies were interested in childhood for what it revealed about the cultural formation of personality, or the socialization of young people into social roles, later work has moved away from a narrow focus on children as simply adults-in-the-making. Ethnographies that take children's own knowledge seriously have explored children's own cultural perspectives, and their ability to creatively respond to linguistic, social, and economic change. Even as arguments are made about the 'disappearance' of childhood in contexts of contemporary formal schooling, economic exploitation, or armed conflict, children often demonstrate considerable [resilience](#).

One powerful finding of child-focused ethnography, as seen in Bluebond-Langner's research with terminally ill children, is that children are often very aware of the realities from which adults may try to shield them. This is why understanding concepts of childhood is a central task in appreciating the realities of children's lives. As Donna Lanclos notes in her study of play in Belfast, children 'do not passively accept the definitions of "child" that are imposed from without' (2003: 48). In their language use, their jokes, or their interpretation of illness, they may subtly resist adult perspectives on childhood. This [resistance](#) is nicely illustrated by Danish toddlers who are bussed out of the city to attend 'nature kindergartens' (Gulløv 2003). Whilst their parents see these natural spaces as the proper place of childhood, some of the children complain about the cold and lack of toys. Anthropological research shows how, even when we think we are acting in children's best interests, we may be imposing our own understandings of childhood on them.

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Note on contributor

Catherine Allerton teaches anthropology at the London School of Economics. She is a specialist in island Southeast Asia, with research interests in children and childhoods, migration, kinship, place, and landscape. She has conducted fieldwork in rural Flores, Eastern Indonesia, and in Kota Kinabalu, the capital city of Sabah, East Malaysia.

Dr Catherine Allerton, Department of Anthropology, London School of Economics, Houghton St, London WC2A 2AE, United Kingdom. c.l.allerton@lse.ac.uk

[1] This article draws in part on material published in 'Guide to further reading' (2016) in *Children: ethnographic encounters* (ed.) C. Allerton, London: Bloomsbury Academic.

[2] For a critical feminist approach to mainstream theories of child development that draws particular attention to their impact on everyday family lives, see Burman (1994).

[3] For example, Nicholas Orme, in *Medieval children* (2001), refutes the idea of the nonexistence of 'childhood' as a distinct phase of life in the Middle Ages, drawing on evidence of parents who grieved intensely for sick or dead children.

[4] The central text in outlining this paradigm is *Constructing and reconstructing childhood* (1990) by Allison James and Alan Prout, which emphasises the importance of studying children's social relationships and knowledge in and of themselves.

[5] Nancy Scheper-Hughes (1993) has also shown the impact of state neglect and poverty on the ability of Brazilian mothers to care for their infants.

[6] This strongly contradicts the arguments of those, such as Colwyn Trevarthen (1988), who argue that the use of simplified 'baby talk' is a universal, innate response to infants.

[7] Research with 'child soldiers' has also questioned the application of the (adult) psychiatric condition of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) as a way to understand their responses and wellbeing (Boyden & de Berry 2004: xiii).