

Anthropology Newsletter

1996-97 AN Theme: The Known, Unknown and Unknowable in Anthropology

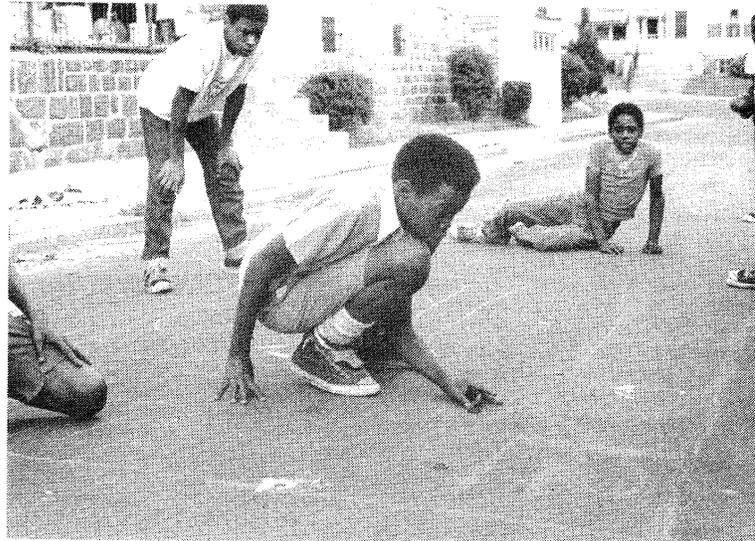
Children's Linguistic and Social Worlds

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Calling for the study of language as "a mode of social action," Malinowski directed explicit attention to the importance of children's groups:

In many communities we find that the child passes through a period of almost complete detachment from home, running around, playing about, and engaging in early activities with his playmates and contemporaries. In such activities strict teaching in tribal law is enforced more directly and poignantly than in the parental home. ["The Problem of Meaning in Primitive Languages" (1923), *The Meaning of Meaning*, C K Ogden and I A Richards, eds, 1973, p 283]

Despite Malinowski's early plea for documentation of children's lifeworlds, few anthropologists have taken as their mission the study of the linguistic, cultural and social life of children: children as subjects, actors and creators of culture. Far more anthropological emphasis has been placed on children's interaction with adults than with other children, partly because socialization is treated as a fundamentally *psychological*, rather than social, process. Children are believed to gradually *internalize* adult values and to be in need of "integration into the social world." The child is defined by what she is subsequently *going to be* rather



"Dead blocks." Children's games are passed on by children to other children outside of adult awareness. (Photo by M H Goodwin)

than what she presently is. Because traditional social science views the child's world as a defective version of the more important adult world into which she will eventually be socialized, studies of children's life-worlds have been neglected. Remarkably at a time when the call for moving women and other minorities to the center of social thought is a commonplace among feminists, children have been left at the margins and treated as invisible.

British anthropologists neglected the study of children's worlds (apart from the study of age-sets and initiation ceremonies) because they associated the study of children with psychological paradigms, which they considered reductionist. In contrast during the 1970s in the US, edited volumes such as *Socialization as Cultural Communication* (1976) and *From Child to Adult* (1970), the Case Studies in Education and Culture series (with 16 ethnographies!)

and the work of the Whittings featured children and adolescence as important domains of anthropological inquiry.

I approach the AN theme on limits to knowledge in anthropology by focusing on what is known and unknown about children's linguistic and social worlds.

The Known: Diversity across Cultures

One subfield that has devoted insightful analytic attention to children is linguistic anthropology. Language is a defining feature of the human species. Radically different theories have been proposed for how language is acquired. Researchers working within linguistic and psychological frameworks focus most of their research on children's innate knowledge of language structures, an approach that divorces the child from cultural settings and frameworks for interaction. In contrast, during the past 20 years linguistic anthropologists have developed a major perspective and focus for the study of language acquisition. E Ochs and B B Schieffelin ("Language



"Chinese jump rope." Although we have rich collections of the verbal art of children and the games they share among one another, we don't know much about how children interact in the midst of actual play nor how they subvert the rules for their own strategic interests. (Photo by M H Goodwin)

Socialization: Three Developmental Stories," *Culture Theory: Essays on Mind, Self, and Emotion*, R A Shweder and R A LeVine, eds, 1984) deal with diverse ways children acquire language within the endogenous scenes that compose the life-world of a society and simultaneously become competent social actors using language appropriately. Language and the social self mutually create one another. Recognizing the human brain is essential to language, this -perspective brings together aspects of the child's social, cultural and linguistic worlds, realms treated as separate domains of inquiry outside anthropology. Children's use and understanding of grammar is tied to basic practices of interaction within culturally specific settings as well as culturally specific understandings about how to think, feel, know and act in concert with others.

Cross-cultural studies show that children's grammatical or communicative competence does of necessarily depend on the way Euro-American middle-class mothers organize their communication with infants and children through simplified conversation (using short sentences; slowing their pace and exaggerating intonation contours) in intense dyadic exchanges. Among societies such as Western Samoans, the Kaluli of Papua New Guinea, K'iche Mayan, rural and urban Javanese and African American working-class families, children develop linguistic competence without having talk directed explicitly to them. Many societies do not consider infants and very young children intentional beings and do not initially treat them as viable conversational partners. Colwyn Trevarthan's studies demonstrate how infants in middle-class British society can socialize their parents through their vocalizations, looks and gestures. Such patterns, however, do not constitute a cultural universal. Among the Walpiri and Inuit, for example, children's vocalizations

are not treated as communicative. Although interpretation of children's babbling through expansions and clarifications by caretakers occurs routinely in middle-class Japan and Euro-American middle-class society, this is not the case in societies such as the Kaluli or Western Samoa, where it is believed that one party cannot know another's intentions. Unlike linguists and psychologists, linguistic anthropologists treat the acquisition of language as embedded within a social matrix. Recognizing that a child's language acquisition is shaped by a particularly human biological endowment and universal features of talk-in-interaction, linguistic anthropologists study the culturally situated scenes of social practice that produce competent Language users and social actors.

The Unknown: Children's Language Socialization

Although psychologists have theorized that child-child interaction provides the most appropriate setting to investigate the fullest elaboration of social processes among children, children's interaction with other children has not been a focus in child language studies. Cross-culturally 4-to-9-year-old children participate widely in nurturant, caretaking interactions. Despite the fact that sibling caretaking characterizes many societies worldwide, we know very little about the interaction because the focus has been on adult caretaker/child roles.

Psychologists and psycholinguists believe that the preschool period is the most important transitional period for various aspects of cognitive development. Thus children over the age of 4 are usually ignored. Anthropological research on children above this age has focused on the school, documenting language practices in the classroom, class and ethnic conflicts: and addressing how schools make it possible for

children to fail. Moving beyond the classroom we have virtually no ethnographic studies of peer interaction in the neighborhood or on the playground. Where children's peer groups or their language practices have been studied, the focus has usually been on urban, Western males, often in groups treated as deviant, and marginal, such as gangs: With respect to the study of African American Vernacular English, a focus on unemployed males' street talk as the authentic language variety for African Americans has reified a dangerously inaccurate stereotype: "young men, with nothing to do, doing nothing, talking trash, going nowhere," effectively marginalizing other African American groups, and especially females (M Morgan, "No Woman No Cry: The Linguistic Representation of African American Women," *Cultural Performances: Proceedings of the Third Berkeley Women and Language Conference*, M Bucholtz et al, eds, 1995, p 527).

Thanks to careful work of the Opies and numerous folklorists, we have collections of the verbal art of children their jump rope and "counting out" rhymes, hand-clap songs, jokes, riddles and chants--and their games. These folklore traditions are passed by children to other children, usually outside adult awareness. Unfortunately we know very little about how children interact in the midst of actual play



Marjorie Harness Goodwin (Photo by Alisandra Mora)

activities, subverting the rules for their own- strategic interests. This is a very serious gap. Perpetuating Piaget's argument that the "legal sense" is less developed in girls' games than that of boys, social scientists characterize girls' games as cooperative, passive and lacking in complex social structure. In my own studies of girls playing games such as hopscotch and jump rope, however, I find moves are fiercely challenged as violations. Games provide a locus for intense political debate and orientation to the complexity of rule use. Such embodied practices constitute a locus for acquisition of stances and argumentative moves that make political actors.

At Work and Play

research during the 1970s on women's language proliferated stereotypes, positing deficit views: of female interaction patterns and supporting the notion that the "essential nature" of females is apolitical. Research I have done over the past 20 years with Preadolescent African American and Latina girls contradicts such a position. First, rather than having a single essential nature, females speak, with many different voices. Here anthropology has a distinct contribution to make by investigating ethnographically the diverse settings, where girls and women live their lives. Models of female interaction based on an "innately pacifist" cooperative female personality fall apart when the full spectrum of girls' language practices is observed. Girls' language choices build different social organizations, adapted in detail to the social situations that constitute their life-world. Second, females are capable of intricate and powerful forms of political activity. Indeed among the African American children with whom I have worked, the girls' he-said-she-said dispute processes were far more elaborate, complex, consequential and enduring than anything I have found among the boys.

Although we have begun to investigate children's interaction during play, we know far less about interaction during their work activities. We know that children's work is significant in many countries for family survival and a nation's economy. A 1996 UNICEF report estimates that there are 250 million child workers, between 5 and 14, with the majority of 10-to-14-year-old children working 6 days a week for at least 9 hours a day. Cross-culturally children between 5 and 7 are expected to assist with caretaking and domestic tasks. How children organize their interaction in the midst of work activities such as running errands, trading for their mothers or collecting and processing food has not been investigated.

Power of the Peers

Sociolinguists have argued since the 1970s that children's peer groups provide far more powerful influences on their language structure than parents; although we know little about the development of children's language variation patterns, we do know that adolescents lead all other age groups in sound change and use of vernacular. Youths are innovators in many forms of experimentation with identity in today's multiethnic, multicultural cities. Adolescents, through their selection of semiotic resources such as hair style, clothing, dance style, movement pattern, music, gestures, eyeliner and lipstick color, space use, demeanor and language varieties affirm, contest and play with ethnic roles and class affiliation during leisure time.

Youths have also had an important political voice in society: during literacy campaigns in revolutionary Cuba and Nicaragua, in dramatic public demonstrations demanding equal education and the right to organize in South Africa in the mid-1970s and 1980s, as part of the First National Street Children's Congress in Brasilia (1986), where children demanded an end to institutional and police violence and

full citizenship, and in 12-year-old children's rights activist Iqbal Masih's bold public exposures of bonded labor in Pakistan, which eventually led to his death. We know little about the speech registers youths use during their political activity or across a range of situations. Although we may know about the phonological, prosodic and lexical features of the language varieties youths select, we know little about these speakers' language ideologies or speech activities. We don't know much about how ethnicity, class, age and gender become relevant in interaction or consequential for the deployment of alternative language choices by bilingual, multilingual or multidialectal speakers. We know little about the nature of multiethnic communication during mundane interactions between new, immigrants and established residents in important mediating institutional settings (such as schools) where they come together. We know almost nothing about how autistic, physically challenged, blind or deaf children acquire language and become members of discourse communities (although the Nicaraguan sign-language project constitutes an important exception). Without a longitudinal study we cannot know how individuals of any social group change their language variety, ethnic, class or gender identification or interactive strategies across developmental time.

Making the Unknown Knowable

To study children as social actors we need detailed longitudinal ethnographic study of their activities and language practices in a wide variety of consequential settings. Linguistic anthropology has provided a rigorous methodology for documenting such practices. Ethnographic recordings of extended interactions can be examined again and again with new research questions. These records constitute more than informant

narratives told to (and elicited by) the anthropologist. Through them we can hear the voices of people we study in the midst of their everyday conduct articulating for each other what constitute important events of their lives.

Usually viewed as a symbolic medium, language constitutes a core form of social organization. Children acquire what it means to be human in their society through participating in diverse culturally situated social practices and linguistic routines. Through language children of diverse ethnicities, social classes, ages, abilities and genders orchestrate their social organization and socialize one another across a range of activities. Without longitudinal ethnographic studies of children from different ethnic backgrounds in diverse structural settings we will not know how children's lives are shaped by their encounters with family, peers, adults and others expressing various language ideologies, in neighborhoods, schools and after school or how children change developmentally over time.

We need to move children from the margins to the center of anthropological inquiry. Over 40% of the world's urban population will be children 15 and younger by the year 2000, many of whom are especially vulnerable. More than 15 million children in refugee camps face the special dangers of high infant mortality, exposure to violence, separation from families, sexual violence and militarization. In societies undergoing rapid social, economic or political change -- whether due to urbanization, colonialism, apartheid or war -- children create groups apart from adult supervision for emotional support and physical survival, as they experience the world differently from their parents and grandparents. It is time we take children seriously and use the distinctive practices of anthropology to give voice to their social worlds and concerns.

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