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Why Don't Anthropologists Like Children?

ABSTRACT Few major works in anthropology focus specifically on children, a curious state of affairs given that virtually all contemporary anthropology is based on the premise that culture is learned, not inherited. Although children have a remarkable and undisputed capacity for learning generally, and learning culture in particular, in significant measure anthropology has shown little interest in them and their lives. This article examines the reasons for this lamentable lacunae and offers theoretical and empirical reasons for repudiating it. Resistance to child-focused scholarship, it is argued, is a byproduct of (1) an impoverished view of cultural learning that overestimates the role adults play and underestimates the contribution that children make to cultural reproduction, and (2) a lack of appreciation of the scope and force of children's culture, particularly in shaping adult culture. The marginalization of children and childhood, it is proposed, has obscured our understanding of how cultural forms emerge and why they are sustained. Two case studies, exploring North American children's beliefs about social contamination, illustrate these points. [Keywords: anthropology of childhood, children's culture, acquisition of cultural knowledge, race]

THE TITLE QUESTION of course is only half serious and clearly incomplete. Half serious in that anthropologists as individuals presumably enjoy the company of children as much as anyone else. Incomplete in that my intention is not only to draw attention to the marginalization of children, but also to persuade that there are good, indeed quite compelling, reasons that children deserve a broad-based scholarly regard.¹

Many readers might object that anthropologists have done a good deal of research on children, as the substantial literature concerned with the intersection of culture, children, and childhood attests. As one observer put it, there are "enough studies of children by anthropologists to form a tradition" (Benthall 1992:1). To cite a few examples familiar to most anthropologists: the work of Margaret Mead (1930, 1933); Beatrice and John Whiting (1975; Whiting 1963; Whiting 1941); Brian Sutton-Smith (1959); Mary Ellen Goodman (1970); Helen Schwartzman (1978); John Ogbu (1978); Charles Super and Sara Harkness (1980); Robert LeVine (LeVine et al. 1994); and linguistic anthropologists Bambi Schieffelin (1990; Schieffelin and Ochs 1986), Elinor Ochs (1988), and Marjorie Goodwin (1990).² Critically for the discussion at hand, this work has not coalesced into a sustained tradition of child-focused research. Nor, as a chorus of researchers have lamented (Caputo 1995; Hardman 1973; Schwarz 1981; Stephens 1998; Toren 1993), has it succeeded in bringing children in from the margins of anthropology.

Admittedly, mainstream anthropology (tacitly) acknowledges that work with children is a reasonable pursuit. By and

large, however, it is accepted that it is a pursuit that can be ignored. I believe that it cannot. My goal is to address, question, and suggest ways to redress the neglect. In this article's first section, I review this curious marginalization, consider why it is so widespread, and suggest that there is ample reason to believe that child-focused research *should* occupy the attention of both specialists and those in the mainstream. In a second section I offer a brief empirical case study illustrating this last point. With it I attempt to show that attending to children, their singular cultural forms, and their unique conceptual architecture paradoxically reveals significant insights about the nature of *adult* cultural experience. Many adult cultural beliefs, I suggest, are sustained precisely because of the way the child's mind is organized and the way children organize their own cultural environments. Many cultural forms are stable and widely distributed just because children find them easy to think and easy to learn (Sperber 1996). Pursuing this argument affords an informative yet unappreciated perspective on the relationship between individual psychological phenomena and their role in the constitution of cultural forms.

1

In the briefest terms, mainstream anthropology has marginalized children because it has marginalized the two things that children do especially well: children are strikingly adept at acquiring adult culture and, less obviously, adept at creating their own cultures. Although it is uncontroversial that children

acquire the wherewithal to participate in the cultures they inhabit, the processes by which this happens has drawn relatively limited attention—presumably because most anthropologists consider these processes unremarkable and uninformative to the field's principal concerns. Children also create and inhabit cultures of their own making, cultures that in significant measure are independent of and distinct from those of the adults with whom they live. In making their own cultural traditions, children deploy singular conceptual skills that significantly constrain and mold not only their own cultural productions but also those of adults. By viewing children as vehicles into which culture is poured, anthropology has put the cart before the horse. In this article's second section I empirically flesh out this argument. By necessity, however, this presentation is brief and illustrative; my goal is simply to demonstrate one way in which children, their cultural acquisitions, and their cultural productions can be studied and suggest ways that this knowledge can be used to extend our understanding of cultural environments generally.

As I just pointed out, anthropology's indifference to children is not a function of an absence of child-focused research. What is disappointing is the modest effect this research has had on the mainstream. According to the American Anthropological Association's 2000 *AAA Guide*, there are 155 active full-time sociocultural anthropologists appointed in the National Research Council's ten top-ranked departments. Of these, only nine (including the author) declare child- and youth-related topics among their interests. I do not mean their *primary* interest. Among these nine scholars, child- or youth-related work is on average the third area of interest listed. Moreover, four of the nine are primarily concerned with youth or adolescence, an age that by definition is at the borders of childhood.

Publications follow interest. Between 1986 and 2001, according to the Eureka database of peer-reviewed journals, the *American Anthropologist* has published three articles on children (excluding book reviews and studies of nutrition). A search for articles from the *American Anthropologist* in which "child," "children," "child-care," or "childhood" figured as a subject or keyword yielded 14 hits since 1904. If introductory college texts in anthropology are a harbinger of things to come, the future hardly seems brighter. In a recent review of 30 popular anthropology textbooks, Erika Friedl found a pattern that with few exceptions, children not only are underrepresented in our texts but also undertheorized and outright neglected is both strange and disconcerting: "With few exceptions, children not only are underrepresented in our texts but also undertheorized and outright neglected" (2002:19).

It might be countered that not every interesting phenomenon is of interest to everyone. There is no a priori reason that mainstream anthropology should find children an irresistible research topic. There are, however, a number of substantive reasons. The most obvious is contemporary anthropology's commitment to the idea that culture is learned, not inherited. Although acquiring cultural skills is a life-long project, it is patent that children do the bulk of cultural learning. By adolescence, children in every known society

display elaborate and culturally specific ways of making-meaning and modes of behavior that are manifestly well developed. Although often not considered fully expert, by adolescence children are adept participants in a cultural tradition.

This is not a latent fact or hidden dynamic that must be adduced through close and systematic analysis. Virtually all folk traditions recognize, and many explicitly comment on, this state of development. Consider, for example, the age-dependent "costs" of transgression. Young children's errors, from a cultural perspective, are relatively low cost, provoking limited or no condemnation (Lancy 1996). In contrast, errors in cultural performance committed by postadolescents are generally seen as more serious and are more likely to arouse direct criticism, punishment, or other sanctions. Plausibly, the reason for the difference in cost is the conviction that by or shortly after adolescence a significant degree of cultural competency is expected. This observation is not a function of any particular way of construing culture. Regardless of one's orientation—regardless of whether culture is identified with conceptual skills, or a specified range of sentiments, or the wherewithal to produce cultural performances, or the capacity to transact cultural relations, or the processes by which unequal cultural capital is extracted—it is during childhood that the overwhelming bulk of these achievements are reached. Because so much anthropology is devoted to identifying, understanding, and conveying what people do, it seems uncontroversial that exploration of how they come to do it would be a central preoccupation of the field.

This last point might be termed a theoretical imperative. Another compelling reason to study children derives from an imperative to "embarrassment management." Imagine the following scenario: An ethnographer works among a population whose social structure is sharply stratified. One group, whose cultural identity derives from a notion of maturity and attributed competence, wields significant power over a subaltern class, whose identity derives from a notion of immaturity and attributed incompetence. There are culturally specified economic, emotional, and social relationships between these two groups, both of whom are named by terms roughly translatable into familiar English terms. There is extensive ongoing contact, and subjacent conflict, between the subaltern and elite. Although the former significantly outnumber the latter, there remains a closely managed relationship of power that systematically disenfranchises the subaltern population. In this culture, like many others, the elite talk endlessly about their subaltern clients and seem to derive an important dimension of their sense of self and competency by the relative successes and failures of their clients. Moreover, the ethnographer spends a great deal of time among the subaltern group, informally observing their activities, their publicly punished transgressions, and their publicly praised successes. Remarkably, the ethnographer never, in all her writings, mentions the subaltern population, making scant reference to the economic and emotional relations that dominate the elites' interaction with them.

My point here is transparent. Such an account would be seen as fundamentally flawed; similar lapses in attention to gender issues, once effectively challenged, brought on a significant reorientation of the field. Ethnography and theory that ignored women were recognized as impoverished and misleading.

Our hypothetical ethnographer, however, might seek to deflect criticism by observing that unlike gender and gender relations, which are constructed and interestingly varying across culture and time, the particular elite/subaltern complex she omitted involves a relationship of power, authority, economy, and sentiment that is universal—and many anthropologists do not feel compelled to attend closely to invariant domains of experience. It is not obvious, however, that gender is less a universal and more a construction than childhood. Both are universally encountered and both are systems of inequity, disadvantage, and sustenance. Bear in mind that an adequate treatment of gender in culture involves more than simply acknowledging gender relations. An adequate treatment of childhood and children similarly involves more than acknowledging that adults and children stand in a particular relation. “Add children and stir” is no more insightful than “add women and stir.” In both cases, a genuine change in gaze yields a reconfiguration of the field.

There is a final motivation to move children in from the margins that turns on methodological and theoretical compatibility. Children's lives and experience simply lend themselves to anthropological inquiry. In its simplest guise, anthropology is the study of the nature and scope of differences in the ways different populations act, think, and speak. Children's behavior, thought, and speech differ systematically from that of adults. The tools of observation and analysis that afford insight into the specificities of experience of the Ashanti and Nuer, or for that matter gays in San Francisco or transmigrants moving between northern California and west-central Mexico, are just as amenable to studying the specificities of children's experience. Indeed, recent shifts in anthropological focus render the sorts of relations between children and adults even more directly relevant to culture theory. Sub- or embedded cultures and their interactions have nearly replaced culture as the object of anthropological inquiry. Children, as I will discuss below at greater length, constitute themselves into semi-autonomous subcultures, and as such can be as usefully explored by anthropologists as Senegalese street merchants in Marseille, Vietnamese rice farmers in Louisiana, or high-energy physicists at Lawrence Livermore. As the nature and practice of everyday power become increasingly central concerns of cultural studies, the quotidian dimensions of subaltern experience marking children's lives also become increasingly central.

2

Several explanations have been offered for children's marginalization. “Guilt” by association is perhaps the most common. Invidious comparisons of Western children's thought to “primitive” thought that animated much early ethnology

(e.g., Lévy-Bruhl 1979) and that have continued to be drawn (e.g., Hallpike 1979), plausibly evoke discomfort among contemporary anthropologists. Even if they themselves do not envisage doing it, the image of these embarrassing comparisons—like the image of stage theories of social evolution—may have turned some away from the study of children altogether. Second, children are closely associated with women and their traditional spheres of influence—the home and hearth. As a result, some have suggested that children suffered the same systematic exclusion from the anthropological gaze as their mothers (Caputo 1995; James and Prout 1990). Intrinsic dullness is another explanation (although it is seldom, of course, framed in such pejorative terms). For most anthropologists, the commonly evoked image of children is that of adults-in-the-making. Liminality, somewhat ironically given the considerable anthropological interest in other forms of age-related status, in this instance generally translates into the notion of children as culturally incompetent creatures, who are, at their most interesting, simply “appendages to adult society” (Bloch 1991; Caputo 1995; James and Prout 1990; Schwartz 1981; Toren 1993).

These are not entirely satisfying explanations. Like Sartre's (1948) anti-Semite, who, as a result of a disagreeable encounter with a Jewish tailor, despised Jews but not tailors, anthropologists uncomfortable with their predecessor's awkward comparisons of children's and primitive thought did not end up abandoning the study of native populations, only children. Nor are children the only population who suffered invidious comparisons under the ancien régime. Nineteenth- and early 20th-century anthropology had much worse things to say about blacks and women, yet this did not cause anthropologists to exclude race or gender from subsequent study. “Gender, race, and class” as categories have great currency in contemporary scholarship and the attention paid to how they are constructed and sustained are not exceptions but the rule. The feminist turn in anthropology is now several decades old. Women and their lives are closely documented in the bulk of contemporary anthropological work. In contrast, mainstream interest in children remains (figuratively) in its infancy, to cite Sharon Stephens's (1998) *bon mot*. It does not seem plausible that children are off the radar because their mothers *were*.³

Nor does intrinsic dullness necessarily translate into lack of attention. Even the most adult-centric perspective does not in principle preclude interest in children. Arguably, it makes children all the more interesting. Children, after all, *are* appendages to adult society often being the central (if frequently silent) figures in both the commonplace and privileged activities. Rites de passage, the very logic of age-grades, and notions of descent and alliance all turn on the fact and presence of children and youth. Even if children were simply adults-in-the-making, this should invite rather than repel mainstream interest. Children are meaningful creatures in virtually all societies. Practices peculiar to their care and sustenance are indigenously recognized and frequently topics for conversation. Indeed, virtually every cultural system takes “the child” to be a natural fact, even if the particulars of what

constitutes a child vary (Ariès 1962). Notions of "child," "adult," "parent," and "offspring" are all cultural confectations. It is hard to imagine more preternaturally "natural" everyday concepts. People everywhere and at all times have some beliefs about what children are and what should be "done" with them. Issues surrounding cultural and social immaturity are of vital interest to those whose beliefs and practices anthropologists closely attend. In conceiving of children as mere appendages to adult society, anthropology has conceived of them as lacking inherent interest. This conveys the situation, it does not explain it. Being an appendage does not mean being of marginal interest: An arm is an appendage but it is not of marginal interest to those who study limbs.

We need to seek anthropological resistance elsewhere. Anthropology's faint image of children reflects a more general tendency in American social science to view childhood as a way-station on the path to the "complete, recognizable, and . . . most significantly, desirable" state of adulthood (Jenks 1996:9). On this view, children are engaged primarily in becoming "with perhaps some minor variations . . . what their elders already are" (Toren 1993:461). Studying the mechanics of how this happens is the purview of specialists. The underlying image is that children, especially the very young, are radically distinct from and unequal to the adults around them. Importantly for this discussion, they are located in transition to cultural competence rather than as having genuine mastery of it. As a consequence, discussion of children is typically transformed into talk about *adults* and the ways they organize the environment in which children develop so as to facilitate the acquisition of the cultural competence appropriate to the society in which they live. Toren astutely observes that for the field generally discovering how children become "what their elders already are . . . [has] little or no bearing on an analysis of the relations between adults" (1993:461). Knowing about the relationship between adults and their children accordingly provides little insight into relations between adults, the principal phenomenon of anthropological interest.

The body of research exploring the lives of children most familiar to anthropologists is the literature on socialization that reflects this refraction of childhood through an adult lens. By focusing on the adult end-state and adult influence on "achieving" it, children's activities are cast as ancillary or subordinate. As a consequence, the contributions that children make to their own development are often obscured if not effaced.⁴ The rich literature on children's play and games illustrates this well (e.g., Goldman 1998; Lancy 1996; Sutton-Smith 1976). Clearly these studies focus on children and, particularly, on routines and cultural forms that often have neither clear parallel in adult activities nor involve the direct participation of adults. Play provides a wealth of information about the scope of children's cognitive, cultural, and social skills. Notwithstanding these insights, these studies typically stress the relevance of play to *adult* activities and goals, especially the ways in which routinized play, including games, serve to enculturate children to adult norms and standards. Lancy (1996) describes games and play as

enduring *artifacts*, a permanent part of a society's repertoire, reused with each generation . . . sheltered . . . learning opportunities. [In play] children could risk "getting it wrong" without serious consequences. At the same time, from society's vantage point, games are clever devices—they are fun to play . . . and, thereby seduce the child into learning things society thinks are important. [1996:94]

Sutton-Smith's (1976) history of toys, for example, is a fascinating study of the way industrially produced toys serve to train children to expect and enjoy the sort of solitary existence that produces a specific kind of bourgeois citizen.

I am not criticizing this work; as I said considerable insight is afforded by it. Indeed, I relied on it in the earlier discussion of the low cost of children's transgressions. The point here is that this particular focus on play and games dovetails with a perspective that conceives of children and their activities as functional correlates to adult society and adult goals. In so doing, children's activities are explored to the extent that they contribute to adult outcomes; and importantly "ownership" of the means of cultural reproduction rest with adults. Socialization theory—the idea that adult dispositions are achieved largely through adult interventions in children's lives—thus obstructs the appreciation of the contribution children make to the acquisition of cultural sensibilities.

Perhaps, most regrettably, socialization theory often overestimates the influence adults actually wield. Several studies have shown that adults frequently do a rather poorer job of shaping their children's cognitions, personalities, and attitudes than is often presumed (Harris 1998; for examples from anthropology see Toren 1993 for an excellent review; see also Hirschfeld 1989a; Mead 1932). Grasping how remarkably good children are at *acquiring culture* and how difficult "cultural transmission" actually is are difficult when adults are overly generously credited with *teaching it*. Children *do* generally become much like their elders in critical ways. However, they do so in virtue of more than being "socialized" into adulthood.⁵

For cultural reproduction, overly generous appraisal of socialization is not only a function of *what* researchers look for but also *where* they look. On a widely accepted view, the appropriate environment in which to study cultural transmission/acquisition is the one inhabited and controlled by adults, a strategy that makes sense if adults are the principle socializing agents. Accordingly, if it is assumed that adults create the cultural worlds into which children are inducted and that adults largely control the processes by which this happens, then attention to the adult world seems fitting. However, if the goal is to understand how children contribute to making culture, a more appropriate focus would be the arena in which children do most of their culture making: namely, in their lives with other children, what is sometimes called "children's culture."

The idea that children have their own cultures may seem far-fetched to some readers. Children may be uncomfortable in adult culture and even, as they often seem to be in North American and Northern European societies, resistant to it, the frame of descriptive reference is still the dominant cultural

tradition. And there is the rub. It is now a commonplace that cultural environments are manifold: At any given moment the cultural environment which an individual inhabits is fragmented, fluid, noisy, and negotiable—from the perspectives of both information and power. All cultural environments are themselves comprised of multiple, contesting, competing subcultural environments. Recognizing that children's culture is one of these should pose no a priori difficulty. In fact, it has not for many scholars (Corsaro 1997; Goodwin 1990; the contributors to James and Prout 1990; Maltz and Borker 1986; Opie and Opie 1960; see also Eckert 1989; Willis 1981). Children not only live in the cultural spheres of the adults with whom they share a life space—a largely trivial observation—but they create and maintain cultural environments of their own. The cultural environment in which cultural reproduction takes place is accordingly not necessarily, nor even principally, the cultural environment(s) relevant to adults:

A child's goal is not to become a successful adult, any more than a prisoner's goal is to become a successful guard. A child's goal is to be a successful child. . . . Children are not incompetent members of adults' society; they are competent members of their own society, which has its own standards and its own culture. Like prisoner's culture and the Deaf culture, a children's culture is loosely based on the majority adult culture within which it exists. But it adapts the majority adult culture to its own purposes and it includes elements that are lacking in the adult culture. [Harris 1998:198–199]

These observations are more than the recognition that not all children's activities are fully matched in adult society. It is uncontroversial that children participate in special-purpose cultural activities from which adults are largely excluded. Nor is it disputed that children develop and maintain social practices, networks of relationships, and systems of meaning that are distinct to their own social and physical spaces. The notion of a culture of childhood, however, captures more than special-purpose child-focused activities. Children's cultures encompass substantial and elaborated environments that are not only distinct from, but independent of the adult environments in which they are embedded. Children maintain a rich repertoire of games and songs—cultural forms—that do not appear to be linked to adult culture, forms “circulate from child to child, beyond the influence of . . . adults [who] know nothing of them. . . . From generation to generation, this thriving unselfconscious culture remains unnoticed by the sophisticated [*sic*] world and quite as little affected by it” (Opie and Opie 1960:1). Critically, in constructing their cultural environments children engage in the same kind of activities, deploy the same kinds of relations of power, authority, and status, and draw on the same moments of meaning as adults do as they create and inhabit their own cultural worlds.

3

Lack of appreciation for children's rich cultural competences and ignorance of the wealth of cultural forms that children

create and sustain on their own have obscured how central an anthropology of childhood—to put a name on the project I am promoting—would be to *any* understanding of cultural reproduction. Theories of cultural reproduction—or, for that matter, theories of the disruption of cultural reproduction—are adequate only to the extent that they are based on a realistic account of the lives and forces that shape the lives of precisely the individuals who bear that reproduction. I have suggested, however, that the broad mainstream(s) of anthropology are more than uninformed about children. Anthropology has displayed an enduring aversion to children, a resistance to an anthropology of childhood. It is not simply that children do more than many acknowledge. That they do it so *exceptionally well* is a point of tension for many anthropologists.

It is uncontroversial that children are great learners generally and talented students of culture in particular. They rapidly and readily acquire the abilities to slip seamlessly into the cultural life around them. This seamless elision into a specific cultural existence is a function of some “deep” abilities. Few would be satisfied with an account of cultural acquisition based on simply mimicry. Children do not ape culture, they *learn* or *acquire* it. They come to *represent* cultural information, manipulate these representations, and use them as the basis for making sense of the world and organizing action in it. Representations, manipulations, and computations are internal to individuals and thus psychological phenomena. Anthropology—including the bulk of psychological anthropology—has long resisted acknowledging let alone systematically exploring internal mental states. It hardly seems an overstatement to say that anthropology since Durkheim has demonstrated a sustained aversion to things psychological (see Strauss and Quinn 1997, chapter 2, for a comprehensive treatment; see also Bloch 1998; Hirschfeld, 2000a; Sperber 1996).

Casting children's experience and development in terms of psychological phenomena is not the equivalent to claiming that culture *is* ideation, that it can be reduced to ideation, or even that there is some subset of our knowledge that is specifically cultural. It is to suggest that participating in a cultural environment means participating in a particular set of causal cognitive relationships through whose agency a corpus of knowledge is distributed (Sperber 1996). It is a fundamental tenet of anthropology that cultural forms pass from one generation to the next through the agency of teaching and modeling, both direct and indirect. As observed above, this argument is implicitly causal—certain parental routines create the conditions for certain childhood experiences that shape individual and collective identities and it identifies the predominance of cultural practices with their own reproduction.

There is no doubt that cultural learning is empirically inevitable. Humans are, from birth, cultural creatures shaped by the cultural environments they inhabit. Culture so thoroughly saturates the environment that *not* acquiring it seems almost unthinkable. The usually tacit assumption is that by exposing an individual to a range of cultural knowledge, the

individual acquires a more or less faithful version. Implicit here is the further assumption that most cultural knowledge is expressed in patterns of behavior, speech, and artifact that the learner eventually comes to recognize. Reflecting on how easy college teaching would be if this were the case should signal that this view is at the very least an incomplete account. Even if this theory of learning were enhanced with some constraints (e.g., that knowledge is acquired only if the presentation of the knowledge is clear, informative, and relevant to the learner and that the learner is well motivated), the theory remains insufficient as anyone who has tried to teach an adolescent common courtesies can attest. There simply is no psychologically plausible account of how *knowledge*, particularly the sort of abstract knowledge encompassed in cultural schema, models, key symbols, or regimes of truth, could be acquired from exposure in the absence of considerable mediation on the part of the learner (Hirschfeld 2001).

This may strike many as a curious claim. After all, cultural information, cultural knowledge, is conspicuous to the point of extravagance. It virtually saturates the environment. It is both promiscuous and redundant in that every act, every public representation, has a cultural character, a cultural dimension that indelibly marks it. That children would learn to be cultural actors, that they could readily induce cultural knowledge solely in virtue of living in a culturally rich environment, seems more than plausible. All the more so on theories that cast cultures as bounded, relatively stable, and homogeneous environments, populated with actors who consistently share interests and knowledge. If cultures—cultural environments—are spatially discontinuous, fragmented, fluid, contested, and ever transforming worlds, as increasingly has been argued (Brightman 1995; Dirks et al. 1994; Gupta and Ferguson 1997), then no matter how conspicuous or culturally saturated these environments might be, learning about them is no trivial task. Learning “that X” when everyone around you says X, behaves as if X were true, and places a common moral value on X would presumably be a good deal easier than learning “that X” when X is debated, highly contested, and under moral and political challenge and exception. Learning “that X” under these conditions requires organisms that have significant talent for identifying what is relevant information in the environment and ignoring what is not.

Anthropologists have never credited children with the sort of talent—the sort of agency—that it would take to accomplish this task. As Hardman (1973) notes, even anthropologists concerned with children

view them to a greater or lesser extent, as passive objects, as helpless spectators in a pressing environment which affects and produces their every behaviour. They see the child as continually assimilating, learning and responding to the adult, having little autonomy, contributing nothing to social values or behaviour except the latent outpourings of earlier acquired experiences. [1973:87]

This is an impoverished and potentially pernicious account of cultural learning (or learning in general, for that matter). Ignoring the major accomplishment that acquiring cultural

knowledge actually is, encourages anthropologists to overlook the crucial contribution that children make to the creation, sustenance, and distribution of cultural forms (Sperber and Hirschfeld 1999). It emboldens the field to see the acquisition of knowledge as a straightforward process, or more accurately, as a straightforwardly simple process. As several anthropologists have recently observed, it is not (Bloch 1998; Strauss and Quinn 1997; Wertsch 1998).

Acquiring cultural knowledge is an asymmetrical achievement, not because the expert is an expert and the novice a novice, but because the child brings to bear specialized cognitive skills and domain-specific programs that make development possible (Hirschfeld and Gelman 1994). In a sense, the novice is the expert: an expert at learning. Without the singular architecture of children's minds culture would be impossible. This claim is more than the throw-away acknowledgment that humans have individual minds and therefore something interesting—but largely irrelevant to anthropology—could be said of the mind. I intend a much stronger claim, namely, that culture cannot be understood *except* in terms of the cognitive architecture of children and the specialized learning mechanisms that the architecture affords (Hirschfeld 1996; 1997).

4

I turn now to two specific cases with which I illustrate the processes that I have described: namely, a distinct children's cultural tradition, a similar adult tradition, and the cognitive susceptibilities and competences that shape the relationship between the two. Both traditions are cultural confections of American society (although both have counterparts in a wide range of cultures). The two forms—preadolescent cootie lore and “adult” construal of race—at first blush surely seem incommensurate. I will try to establish that they are not. In particular, I seek to show how the operation of a specialized learning program, deployed in the context of a specific cultural environment, creates the conditions by which children create and sustain a “simple” game and by which adults organize and sustain fundamental access to power, authority, and resources. Because I have written about racial thinking at length elsewhere (Hirschfeld 1989a, 1996, 1997, 2000), my discussion of it here will be brief. The material on cooties has not been reported, and I will present it here in more detail.

Over the past several years, my collaborators—Susan Gelman, Rachel Heiman, Gail Heyman, Katie Hinds, Barbara Hofer, Oren Kosansky, Ivelisse Martinez, and Heidi Schwein-gruber—and I have investigated a constellation of practices and beliefs of North American children about “cooties” (Martinez et al. 1999). We observed children in 2nd and 4th grades during free play, interviewed children in small groups and individually at school, and eventually asked another group of kindergarten, 2nd and 4th grade children to participate in several experimental tasks. Children were drawn from two different areas. The first consisted of schools in and near a Midwestern college town whose catchment is largely white and middle class. The second consisted of schools

about 50 miles away, whose catchment was rural and small town and largely working class. About half the students in these schools are white.

In the most general terms, cooties are a social contaminant that pass from one child to another, a form of interpersonal pollution. According to one source, the term *cootie* is a transformation of a British colonial word for lice that was popularized by returning World War I veterans (Samuelson 1980). Consistent with this interpretation, *The Oxford English Dictionary* defines *cootie* as body louse and suggests that it may be derived from the Malay word *kutu* meaning "a parasitic biting insect." Contemporary North American children's usage sometimes follows this gloss. More frequently, however, children describe cooties as something that cannot be seen but that is disagreeable (a fair number of children used one of three tropes in describing cooties: the invisible particulates associated with germs, farts, or "boogers"). Adults, presumably "recalibrating" memories of their own childhoods, sometimes use *cooties* and *lice* interchangeably. One author entitled an article "Cootie Control" that advised parents on how best to treat head lice infections despite the fact there was no mention of cooties in the body of the text (Nathanson 1997).

The overwhelming association with "cooties," however, for both adults and children in North America, is attributions by children of an *invisible* contamination that passes from one child (often a member of a stigmatized group) to another and the prophylactic routines used against cootie contamination. There are a number of these prophylactic routines, including "cootie catchers" fashioned out of paper, pretend injections, and special ways of crossing fingers or hands: "if you cross your hands you won't get them. If you get on a pole you won't get them"; "if you don't like person and you touch them, you can get cooties unless you cross your fingers"; or "if cooties are in your house, you lock up all of the doors and turn off all the lights."

There has been little scholarly work on cooties. The two noteworthy studies are by Samuelson (1980) and an extended discussion in Thorne's (1993) *Gender Play*. There are many more fictional treatments. Several adult-authored novels, some targeting adolescents but some meant for adult audiences, have used cootie lore and its practices to convey a sense of deep and inextricable social taint, dread, and exclusion (Hayter 1997; Holub 1998). On the whole, however, cooties are a domain of younger grade-school children's activities, enacted by children, regulated by children, and experienced by children. If the culture of childhood consists of semiautonomous cultural forms maintained through children's practices, cootie lore is exemplary.

Cooties are invisible; cootie practices are not. The paradigmatic scenario involves a child or several children who broadcast with gestures and other manifestations of disgust and horror that they have come into contact with someone else's cooties. The polluting child may be identified as an individual or, more typically, as a token of a social category: "If a girl touches me then I say Rhhhhh!"; "if you touch somebody, well if [you] touch a boy, girls don't like boy cooties,

and the boys don't want girl cooties . . . the boys run from the girls."

These activities may sound, as they sometimes actually are, like the hyperbolic, physicalized, and playful rehearsals of routines of gender avoidance common among preadolescents. Cooties attributions, however, are often more serious and the sometimes playful quality of the "game" not very effectively masks much deeper emotion.

An interaction that occurred during an earlier phase of our collaborative ethnography of children's culture illustrates this vividly. One of the lead researchers on the project, Ivelisse Martinez, witnessed the force of cootie fear first hand. Martinez was chatting with a group of nine-year-old children in a classroom (not about cooties) when a girl approached the group and sat in an available chair. Almost immediately and quite suddenly she became demonstrably upset. Martinez asked her what was wrong. The girl breathlessly replied that she just realized that the last child to use the chair had cooties. The remark was not a function of the discussion nor provoked by anything else Martinez observed. She was convinced that the girl's reaction was neither pretense nor fanciful. It was an expression of actual fear of pollution.

In one respect the event was exceptional. Characteristically, cooties involve attributions of pollution or the danger of pollution that occur when both the cooties contaminator and potential contaminatees are actually in the midst of interacting. Attributions tend not to be delayed. Despite this "real-time" quality of cootie attribution, there is also a characteristic uncertainty about cooties. A child not only never knows when he or she will "get" them, but also never knows when he or she might be accused of "giving" them. Unlike, for instance, other cultural forms in which social contamination occurs—caste pollution in South Asia seems an appropriate point of comparison—cooties contamination is not a constant threat for which regular, routinized protections are available. Nor are there specific circumstances in which cooties threat is always present or even specific to a particular person or a particular group—as there is for menstruating women in some societies. In short, there are neither specific contexts nor a class of persons for whom or from whom the risk of cooties contamination is *invariably* present. The same person can be the source of cooties at one moment but benign the next. Indeed, some of the "excitement" of the cootie phenomenon seems to be derived from this lack of predictability.

Given the association with disgust and pollution, not surprisingly, cooties also serve as an offensive "weapon," as when one child tries to contaminate another in "cootie tag" (Samuelson 1980; Thorne 1993). Opie and Opie (1969:75–76) classify a British variant ("the Dreaded Lurgi") under the rubric "the Touch having Noxious Effects," in their section on "Chasing Games." Although attribution of cootie contamination is often gamelike and playful, they can, as observed above, be both strategic and serious. They are frequently used in a familiar and cruel scheme for excluding unpopular, new, or otherwise stigmatized children. The novels I mentioned

earlier convey this aspect dramatically. In one, entitled *Ivy Green, Cootie Queen*, and meant for early grade school-aged children, Holub (1998) tells the story of a young girl stigmatized by a rumor circulated by the "popular" girls that she has cooties. More dramatic—at least for adults—is a novel intended for an adult audience called *Revenge of the Cootie Girls*, in which Hayter (1997) vividly describes the lasting trauma social exclusion in grade school by having been labeled a "cootie girl." The force of this is underscored when she explains to an uncomprehending Japanese friend that a cootie girl is a social pariah.

The sense of genuine emotion evoked by cooties—and the enduring memory of that emotion—was intriguingly conveyed in a piece in the *New York Times* during the 2000 presidential primary season. The article, published in the Sunday Week in Review section, illustrated the growing atmosphere of tension between the two leading Democratic candidates with the following description: "The vice president has gone on referring to Mr. Bradley as his friend—at least until their chat on 'Meet the Press,' when Mr. Gore put out his hand . . . and Mr. Bradley stared at it with a look that said, 'Ewww, cooties' " (Henneberger 2000).

Simply mentioning cooties to undergraduates in my courses triggers a flood of memories and invariably provokes a collective spasm of squirms and nervous laughter. Like immigrants, whose memories of childhood often have a special clarity because they evoke not only a particular moment in their lives but also particular cultural and often sensory experiences (Hoffman 1994), North American adults have little difficulty instantaneously retrieving memories of cooties practices and re-experiencing the affect inscribed in them.

We found, paradoxically, that despite cooties' instrumental force and lasting salience, children give surprisingly vague answers when we asked what cooties actually are, a pattern that Samuelson (1980) also reports. Cootie lore is not conceptually orderly. In response to our questions, one child would use language appropriate to describing familiar but invisible particulates like germs ("cooties is like germs, it has germs on it"; "cooties can give you germs." "They give you bad germs that can kill you.") or those associated with violations of personal hygiene ("usually if one of my friends uses the bathroom on themselves they have cooties"; "when someone digs up their nose or eats their boogers"; "cooties are where somebody licks the bottom of the chair or eats paper"; "when you are by somebody and they fart maybe that can give you cooties"). At other times, children use language more typical to descriptions of ephemera like bad associations or misbehavior ("if you don't like a person and you touch them, you can get cooties"; "people who have cooties steal stuff from people and they talk too much and they fight people, and they beat up girls. . . . They are bad"; "usually you get cooties when somebody does something nasty"). Not infrequently, children use mixed descriptions, particularly by prefacing descriptions that simultaneously imply endorsement with disavowals of belief in cooties: "I don't believe they are real. If they were real, they are probably pretty small so that you couldn't see them"; "I don't like them.

'Cause it's just a game that I don't play. I used to, but don't anymore. I really, really don't like it's gross. . . . All different kinds of people get it."

These vague and varying statements do not mean that cootie lore is inconstant, rather, as I said earlier, that it is untidy. One measure of this is that degree to which the same "untidiness" is distributed over time and space. Thorne (1993) observes that the same pattern of practices and beliefs is found in communities in California (mixed Chicano/Latino/Anglo), in Michigan, and on the East Coast. Similarly, our interviews, like those conducted by Samuelson (1980), reveal considerable consistency between adult reminiscences and contemporary children's routines. Perhaps most strikingly is a recurrent pattern in children's "games" across cultures. Samuelson (1980) reports versions of cooties in England, Spain, Madagascar, and New Zealand. Opie and Opie (1969:75–78) recount a British game called "The Dreaded Lurgi," whose name derived either from a then-contemporary radio show or, and intriguingly, from a supposed ailment "found" in East Anglia from which "the idle" suffer. They note, however, that basic form has existed "generation after generation." Lurgy tag (East Anglian spelling) involves a kind of tag in which the chaser through skin-to-skin contact transmits "something evil or sickening." Like cootie attributions, Lurgy tag is not always playful. One headmistress told of discovering the game when a student came crying because "everybody said she had 'it,'" a troubling complaint, the Opies report, which had been reported in "a number of schools, large and small."

As with cooties, lurgy picks out and highlights negative sentiments toward stigmatized children: "In Norwich we found the word 'lurgy' in everyday use amongst children—'You're lurgy'—but with the restricted inference that the person was 'stupid, goofy, looney, nuts, [or] a nit'." Similar routines are found throughout Great Britain and "such games seem to be played around the world. In Auckland, New Zealand, when a boy is tagged by a girl, the others deride him shouting 'You've got girl fleas' " (Opie and Opie 1969:77). The Opies describe similar forms outside the United Kingdom:

In Valencia the ordinary game of chase is 'Tu portes la pusa' (You carry the flea). At Massa in the Bay of Naples, the game is 'Peste'. And in Madagascar . . . the child who did the chasing was *boka*, a leper, and when he touched someone his leprosy was conveyed to the one he touched, who in turn rid himself of the disease on someone else. [1969:77]

A comparable children's cultural form exists in Japan. *Engacho* are prophylactic routines that Japanese children use against a form of social contagion that shares a number of features with the forms discussed above. A typical situation in which an *engacho* routine would be enacted would start when a child is polluted by being soiled, say through contact with dog feces (or who might otherwise be stigmatized, possibly in virtue of being an ethnic minority). Successive contamination to other children, however, is not *through* contact with the initial polluting substance, but *in virtue of* it. Thus,

as with cooties and several of the other forms just discussed, social contamination results from contact with an invisible, essentially abstract, substance that transfers from one child to another. To prevent contamination or remove it, engacho routines are enacted, which typically involve finger gestures also reminiscent of cootie lore. As in the United States, contemporary authors have used engacho to evoke nostalgic memories of childhood in adults. The material presented here was provided by Yu Niya,⁶ who in addition to drawing on her own childhood memories, discovered an internet chat room devoted specifically to engacho. In it there was a discussion, which she reported in an email to me, of a recent animated film entitled:

Sen to Chihiro no Kami Kakushi (Sen and Chihiro Spirited Away) by Hayao Miyazaki, [which] depicted a scene of Engacho. Sen (the heroine, a 10-year old girl) goes to a wonderland and kills a little evil monster by stepping on it. Then she makes two crossed rings with her thumb and index and says "Engacho!" The old man sees it and cuts the ring with his palm, saying "Engacho kitta." And Sen finally feels relieved. [personal communication]

The debate apparently began during a discussion of regional variation in engacho routines and the possibility that some viewers might not be familiar with it.

The point of these various and varied examples is not that cootie lore, engacho, the Dreaded Lurgi, etc. are versions of each other; nor are they expressions of some universal developmental moment that children everywhere pass through. Later I will suggest that to understand these cultural forms is to understand specific aspects of children's conceptual architecture. These cultural forms, nevertheless, are massively underdetermined by that architecture. They are literally the mind-making contact with public representations.

For the present discussion, however, what is relevant is that all these "games," routines, and other cultural forms are what Opie and Opie (1960) call children's unselfconscious culture, reproduced without adult intervention. For example, to return to cooties in particular, while adults raised in the appropriate culture readily recognize and remember cootie lore, children learn cootie lore only from other children and enact it only with other children. Children give cooties only to each other and get them only from each other.

The tethering of cooties to the conceptual, physical, and relational space of children creates possibilities that often remain obscured. Although cooties are extremely evocative for adults, paradoxically adults typically also think of cooties as one of many trivial childhood activities. However, within children's culture cootie practices represent, regulate, and enact relations of power among children. Cooties mark and police social and personal distance and rehearse relations of social status and power through threats of contaminations and claims on impurity. In these respects there are manifest parallels between cootie lore and the various children's cultural forms discussed just above. There are also blatant parallels with adult cultural forms of *social* contamination that regulate relations of power and authority. Caste in South Asia is a conspicuous example. Race in American society is another.

Although cooties lack the systematicity and apparent independence of context that are characteristics of systems of racial and caste thinking, there are crucial similarities both with respect to beliefs and the use of those beliefs in the service of systems of power and authority. To repeat this important point: Cooties are about power and authority *within children's culture*. Cooties are used to establish and maintain unequal social relations between children. At the very least they are a means of signaling and ultimately enforcing such relations. As Thorne notes "recoiling from physical proximity with another person and their belongings because they are perceived as [having cooties] is a powerful statement of social distance and claimed superiority" (1993:75).

This power derives from at least two aspects of cootie lore; the untidiness or lack of systematicity in cootie attributions and the putative nature of cooties themselves. Attributions of cootie contamination are typically unpredictable, one never knows when, in what context, or by and about whom they will be made. "[Cooties] come from different people. Any kind of person can have it, but I don't know what makes you have it." In one sense, then, a cooties attribution at any given moment calls attention to existing social distance rather than creates it.⁷

In this respect, cooties functions much like race and caste, and does so presumably in virtue of being attributed with a singular "natural" nature. A central element of racial and caste thinking is naturalized difference and the use made of it to police social difference. Part of the reason that cross-racial and cross-caste contact is thought to be polluting is that such contact supposedly violates or disrupts a natural order. Children share these beliefs. Even preschool-age children apply essentialist reasoning to racial and caste differences and they expect both racial and caste groups to reproduce in much the same way that other natural things do, particularly nonhuman living species (Hirschfeld 1996; Mahalingam 1999; Springer 1996). One possible explanation for the frequent association of cooties with germs and lice is that cooties too represents a naturalized (as distinct from a natural) image of the world. That is to say, cooties evoke germs and lice not because of *empirical* parallels between cooties and small vermin but because of a *conceptual* parallel. Germs and lice are biological or natural phenomena. The conceptual parallel suggests that juvenile modes of establishing and signaling social distance are naturalized, just as are adult forms tend to invest important value-laden aspects of sociality with a natural basis.

Finally, a particular kind of social relation is policed and signaled through cooties attributions. Cootie routines reflect beliefs about *group* contamination, especially gender (Powlishta 1995; Thorne 1993). Gender, however, is not the only intergroup relation expressed (or publicly commented on) through cooties. As already observed, cootie attributions frequently pick out individuals stigmatized because of their character or appearance (e.g., children who misbehave or who are overweight). Cooties are also linked to stigmatized groups, as one boy made unselfconsciously clear: "They [cooties] are gross, people run from people when someone farts,

or licks their toes, or dig up and eat their boogers. African people, Panama people. Girls have them more than boys." (The intersection of cooties, intergroup relations, and prejudice was not missed by at least one (adult) playwright. In March 2001, the San Francisco Bay Area Discovery Museum presented an interactive play meant "to promote tolerance and diversity" entitled *Cootie Shots: Theatrical Inoculations against Bigotry*.)

One explanation for the parallels between cootie lore and race, caste, and gender on the one hand, and germs or lice on the other, is that cootie lore is a *version* of these other belief systems. Cooties could simply be an analogue by transfer of properties whose "base" resides in another domain, one largely structured (supposedly) in and by adult culture. Cooties, on this view, would be a transfer, perhaps even a degraded transfer, of relations and justifications for the way power and authority are distributed and regulated in the dominant, adult cultural tradition. Cooties might, thus, be a juvenile version of dominant culture, much in the way socialization theory anticipates that children's cultural forms are way-stations on the pathways to adulthood.

To explore this possibility—and to ultimately reject it—we need to look at how closely cootie lore and these other systems of relations are structured. Before doing this, however, we need to rule out an even more straightforward possibility: cooties may simply be a way of signaling friendship (and lack thereof).

Friendship and Enmity: In order to consider this possibility, we asked a group of children to imagine the following scenario (adapted from a task used by Rozin et al. 1994):

You are going to another school to sing with your class and your teacher tells you to get a class shirt, you know, one that says the name of your school and your grade. You need to get it from a pile of shirts in a corner of your classroom. Your teacher wants you to get ready. You hurry up and grab a shirt, you put it on, and go join the group from your class.

Half the children participated in a positive scenario:

Think of a person, a kid you know, that would make you happy and make you feel good if you found out that he or she had worn the same shirt that you picked and put on before you wore it.

Half the children participated in a negative scenario:

Think of a person, a kid you know, that would make you unhappy and make you feel bad and upset if you found out that he or she had worn the same shirt that you picked and put on before you wore it.

We then asked the child to rate how likely was each of a list of explanations for their discomfort (at discovering that they had worn a piece of clothing last used by a desirable or an undesirable child). We told the child that the list of explanations was collected from the remarks that children had given us when we conducted the same experiment at another school (the list was in fact drawn from remarks children had made during unstructured play that we had observed during the earlier, ethnographic phase of the research). Each explanation reflected one of several modes of contamination: contamina-

tion by association ("made me think about how much I didn't like that person"), social contamination ("other kids might know who wore it before"), contamination because of characteristics of shirt ("it wouldn't fit right after the person wore it"), or contamination because of particulate transfer ("it would have germs or tiny little things that would make me like that person"). Children rated contamination by association, social contamination, and contamination because of characteristics of shirt as plausible explanations. There were no reliable differences across ratings of the three explanations. Contamination involving particulate transfer/transmission, however, was rated less plausible, essentially no better than chance.

Following the first set of questions, we told each child that children at another school sometimes brought up cooties in their explanations of their discomfort in wearing the sweat shirt of the undesirable child. We told them that we wanted to take the opportunity of these one-on-one situations to tell us what they knew about cooties ("What can you tell me about cooties?"). Their responses were coded into several broad categories.

In marked contrast to the explanations they gave for their discomfort at wearing the undesirable child's sweat shirt, children were significantly more likely to bring up particulate transfer/contamination when talking about cooties. The greatest portion, 31 percent, of their descriptions mentioned the transfer of some substance (body excretions, germs, disease, etc.), 17 percent pretense (cooties is just a game), and 11 percent social (social categories or relationships). Thus, unlike their explanations of "simple" social contamination—that emphasized associative thinking and social relationships—cooties evoke a sense of particulate pollution that conformed to a naturalized model.

These data help situate cootie lore relative to simple social likes and dislikes. Clearly cooties can be used as a way to call attention to desirable and undesirable children and to rehearse notions of social distance and hierarchy. We know from other studies that stigmatized groups are likely to be associated with cooties (Thorne 1993). In addition to asking children to explain their comfort/discomfort with wearing the sweat shirt, we also asked children to tell us about the desirable/undesirable child (what they looked like, how the child's family was similar to and different from their family, whether their parents would be upset if the child played at the desirable/undesirable child's house, etc.). Children reliably associated desirability/undesirability to social status, gender, and race. Children enjoy contact with children who are socially like them but are uncomfortable with even indirect contact with children who differ from them in race, social class, and gender. There is, however, an important difference between simple desirability/undesirability and cootie attributions, a difference that indicates that cooties is a singular cultural form. Cootie contamination is linked to the transfer of particulate but invisible material, whereas simple likes and dislikes are not.

Germs: This then raises the possibility discussed earlier. Perhaps cootie lore is just a version of children's beliefs about

another naturalized particulate transfer, germs. There are obvious parallels between children's beliefs about cooties and children's and adults' beliefs about material contaminants. The wealth of children's routines with medical-like names, such as "cootie inoculation," "cootie vaccination," "cootie spray," and "cootie immunization" (Samuelson 1980; Thorne 1993) suggest that children conceptually link cooties and germs and infection and hence that cooties may rehearse children's understanding of these phenomena, as several of the quotes above suggest. We should, nonetheless, resist drawing too close a connection between cootie lore and these adult cultural and medical forms. Cooties may evoke notions of germs and lice but there are significant differences between cootie lore and children's naive beliefs about disease. For one thing, as the quotes above also show, cooties are thought to be *like* germs, or to increase susceptibility to germs. They are generally not claimed to *be* germs.

There is another difference between children's theories of cooties and germs; namely, their respective causal relations to other events in the world. While questions remain about how best to interpret children's beliefs about germs, there is a broad consensus that from preschool age on children understand that exposure to germs is causally linked to subsequent symptoms and illness (Kalish 1996; Kister and Patterson 1980; Siegal 1988; Sigelman et al. 1993; Solomon and Cassimatis 1999; Springer and Ruckel 1992). The basic mental model is cause and effect: germs cause illnesses, like colds; lice cause skin discomfort, like itching and rashes. Preschool children also understand that invisible particles (e.g., sugar dissolved in water) have causal properties (e.g., they produce a sweet taste) (Au et al. 1993).

Unlike germs, however, children do not believe that cooties *cause* anything. *Getting, passing on, and getting rid of* cooties is central to cootie lore; what happens materially after this is not, as the following remark shows: "Or someone might do something really disgusting. It's when you dig up your nose and you touch somebody, and you have to cross your fingers." Even preschool children understand that crossing fingers is not an effective way of avoiding *germ-born* infections. Rather a cootie routine is about bracketing and controlling social interaction ("They are not nice. . . . If they get you, they'll tease you if you don't cross your hands"). By the same token, recall the version from Madagascar described by Opie and Opie in which a child with "leprosy" rids himself of the disease by simply tagging another child. If children's beliefs about cooties were simple reflections of *their own beliefs* about germs and other contaminants, we would expect a fairly faithful correspondence between the mental models of each phenomenon. Nothing in the literature on children's notion of germs suggests that children actually believe that diseases are cured by passing the noxious particles to someone else.

Race: Race is a social force—and hence a cultural form—in both children's and adult culture. Developmental psychologists (Aboud 1988; Katz 1983) and more qualitative researchers (Goodman 1970), however, have long contended that there are fundamental differences between the way chil-

dren understand race and the way adults do. To explore the relationship between cootie lore and children's conceptions of race, we need to understand the relationship between children and adult conceptions of race. A bare-bones description of "adult" racial thinking in North America would include the following three interrelated folk propositions. First, human beings can be exhaustively partitioned into distinct types based on their concrete, observable constitution. "Observable constitution" means that racial types are embodied, natural, and enduring. Second, membership in a particular type carries with it nonobvious and inner qualities as well as outward ones. Third, the first and second propositions are linked by a causal theory that posits that individuals have both the observable and nonobvious qualities of a particular racial type in virtue of having a particular racial essence. That this conceptual edifice reflects the contingencies of the regulation of power and authority, which the system of racial thought serves. On this argument, race is about relations of power, power is about aggregate structural (political, economic, or cultural) relations not mental ones, hence the *concept* of race is a function of existing structural relations (see Hirschfeld 1996).

This account is *not* a theory about the ontogenesis of racial cognitions but a theory about its social construction. The widely accepted developmental account is even simpler (see Aboud 1988; Katz 1983). Children form racial categories by opening their eyes and looking. A slightly more subtle version might hold that in virtue of the contingencies of power and authority, adults draw children's attention to race. *Then* children would open their eyes and discover it. The idea that race's perceptual prominence contributes to its precocious learning is consistent with a long-held view that children are concrete thinkers, tethered to surface appearances. Young children readily learn to distinguish race in much the same way that they learn about other perceptually salient human property—say, being tall or blond. The reason that children learn about being tall, blond, or black before they learn about being Republican or French is because blacks and tall and blond people are more visually prominent than Republicans or French folk (Aboud 1988). The claim about perceptual saliency is in turn linked to a second claim about conceptual properties. According to this argument, children not only *attend* to surface differences, they *interpret* these differences to be superficial. For the young child, being black is initially no more important than being tall, blond, thin, or brown eyed. Thus, while adept at forming racial categories, children are supposed to rely on superficial appearance and when reasoning about race they ascribe superficial and modifiable properties.⁸

Given how widely held these claims are, it is somewhat surprising that so little research has actually tested them. The idea that perception drives children's racial cognitions is an assumption not an empirical discovery inference. For a variety of reasons—not surprising to anthropologists—I had doubts about a realist interpretation of race. I conducted a series of studies to see if children really were as superficial in their thinking.⁹ Against received wisdom, I found that northern European children's initial concept of race contains almost

no perceptual information. What little visual information there was typically was inaccurate and idiosyncratic (Hirschfeld 1993).

I also undertook several studies that explored young children's reasoning about race. Previous research concluded that young children expect that a person's race will change if their surface appearance changes. The work was based on asking children to reason about abrupt and unfamiliar changes in appearance. To see whether the abruptness or unfamiliarity of the tasks affected their judgments, I asked American preschoolers about changes in appearance with which they were familiar; those involved in growth and family resemblance. Children know that as things grow their appearances change. They also know that children resemble their parents in some ways but not others. Using this knowledge as a base, I asked preschoolers whether certain changes were possible. Even three year olds demonstrated that they understand that a person's race will not change as she grows older. In contrast to their beliefs about racial constancy, however, three year olds anticipate that other aspects of physical appearance, like a person's body type (hefty versus wiry), can change during a person's lifetime. Similarly, young children believe that a child and his parents are necessarily of the same race, although they did not believe that a child and his parents would necessarily have the same body build.¹⁰

These findings demonstrate that children, in constructing and interpreting racial categories, *pace* the received view, go well beyond the information given. Even young children have a sophisticated and adult-like cultural understanding of race, favoring a biological, abstract, and essentialist interpretation according to which race is conceptualized as immutable, linked to family background, and diagnostic of group identity. In short, even very young children's conceptual representation of race is very much like the one of the adults with whom she lives. In contrast to previous research that claimed the young children have only a superficial grasp of race, these (and other) studies evince a deep, theorylike, adult concept of race.

Both race and cooties share a singular conceptual feature, a naturalized interpretation of *group* differences, and a singular social feature, the use of supposed naturalized differences to signal and regulate differences in power. This latter feature is uncontroversial with respect to race. A naturalized vision of race has frequently been linked to the contingencies of power and authority (Guillaumin 1980). Cooties, we saw earlier, functions in a similar way—although the power stakes may seem modest to adults, they are not to the children who experience them (the jacket cover for *Ivy Green, Cootie Queen* asks "Is Ivy's Life Ruined?"). Cooties of course do not create group-based social distinctions. Neither do cooties create the exclusionary practices that cause social relations to be regulated through them. What cooties do is naturalize the distinctions; and in this respect, cooties are deployed in children's culture the way race is deployed in the regulation of relations of power and authority in adult society.

The cootie-is-to-children as race-is-to-adults analogy aside, the social and mental representations of race and coo-

ties change in the course of childhood. Consider the way that preschoolers conceptualize the two social groupings. Susan Gelman, Oren Kosansky, and I found that kindergartners are familiar with cooties and use them to mark and regulate social relations. Unlike school-age children, however, they do *not* expect cootie contaminations to involve the naturalized transfer of particulate substance. With race, the inverse pattern obtains. Preschool-age children naturalize race, see it as involving the transfer of a nonobvious essence from parents to children. However, race does not regulate social relations or create social distance for preschoolers, as it does for slightly older children. The race of a child does not predict with whom preschoolers will be friends. Thus, although cooties and race resonate, they do not follow the same developmental course. Nor do they appear to be versions of each other.

5

What then is the relationship between these various cultural forms and why do they so clearly resonate one to the other? I offer the following explanation. Cooties, racial, caste, and gender systems of classification are all expressions of a single mechanism for conceptualizing human group differences. Cootie lore is not a juvenile, children's culture version of these other "more mature" social systems of categorization. All these systems are products of the same conceptual impulse to categorize played out in the culture of preadolescent American children. Each is an independent instantiation of a single dimension of cognition as it comes in contact with distinct dimensions of the cultural environment. One does not cause the other to come into existence nor does it provide a venue for practicing the manipulation of the structural relations inherent in the other. Rather, all emerge from a common willingness or cognitive disposition to imagine the world in a very specific way.

Elsewhere I have described what this very specific way is. I argue that these systems are products of a cognitive device that guides the development and elaboration of human kinds (Hirschfeld 1996). By this I mean that humans are endowed with a conceptual device or module specifically dedicated to processing information and guiding inference about human collectivities.¹¹ Virtually from birth, humans evince the operation of this device. Infants discriminate between individuals as members of different genders and language communities (Hirschfeld 1989a; Hirschfeld and Gelman 1997). From toddlerhood, and perhaps earlier, they sort humans into kin-based, occupational, and racial groupings (Hirschfeld 1989b, 1996). Moreover, they use these groupings to predict nonobvious properties of their members.

The existence of a cognitive device or conceptual module for reasoning about human groups would not be surprising. Much human activity is regulated by and mediated through social collectivities. Yet human collectivities are not as easy to detect as, say, the social groupings of other species. Bees swarm, large social mammals move in herds, fish coalesce into schools, birds migrate in flocks. We can *see* these collectivities.

Human social groups seldom present themselves in such clear forms and not surprisingly researchers have found that even functional groups like coalitions are difficult to detect perceptually (Stanton and Morris 1987). Most of our information about social groups is narrative not visual, yet, as discussed earlier, the standard view is that children learn about them by looking. The result is that there is a prevalent underestimation in both anthropology and psychology of how difficult it is to acquire a culturally-appropriate understanding of social groups (Hirschfeld 2001).

Still, it is obviously useful for people, including children, to know what groups there are in the social universe in which they operate. One of the ways that we come to know what groups there are is to identify what their members are like. Like adults, children recognize that some groups are more important than others. Also like adults, relative importance derives in part from the *kinds* of people there are, their putative *natures*. A recurrent feature of thinking about groups is that some ways of organizing people are more "natural" than others. This is evidently the case with gender, kin groups, age-grades, race, caste, etc. Conceptually, adults tend to naturalize these groups. Intriguingly these are also the first human groups that young children learn about and the groups that young children are most likely to naturalize (Hirschfeld 1988, 1989b, 1995). Of course, children might naturalize these groups simply because adults do. But, as I have tried to show, the developmental evidence does not support this conclusion. Rather, children come to naturalize these groups on their own initiative.

That children do this on their own initiative has important consequences for understanding adult beliefs as well. Children's representations, I argue, are grounded in a specialized cognitive device for guiding learning about social groups. The specialized device, however, not only organizes the way children acquire knowledge about the world, it organizes the way adults envision the social world. Adults recruit for their own social universes the kinds of things that children find easy to learn and hence easy to sustain over time. This is not a logical necessity, of course. Adults could, and presumably do, create social confections with no analog in children's social repertoire. The problem comes in trying to sustain over time that confection. The more learnable a representation is, the more likely that it will continue to be learned faithfully (that is, the more likely a faithful version of it will be acquired by most members of a population). And learnability is a function of children's thinking. In short, the epistemic relationship between child and adult, between children's culture and adult culture, is, in this respect, the inverse of conventional wisdom. Children do not become who their elders are. Rather their elders become what the child— or more specifically what the architecture of the child's mind—affords (see Sperber 1996 for the theory of communication, the epistemology of representations, on which this argument rests).

Gender, kin, age, race, caste, and other naturalized groupings are among the most precociously acquired social entities. They are also the social groupings most closely

bound with the distribution of power and authority. This is not a coincidence. According to conventional wisdom, children come to naturalize these particular groups *because of* the political economic salience they have in the wider (adult) society. That is to say, according to conventional wisdom, they are early emerging categories because they are so socially conspicuous. There is a puzzling aspect to this account. Although, to my knowledge, no one has acknowledged it, the notion that these categories are socially conspicuous is curiously coincidental with the notion that gender, kin, age, race, and other naturalized groupings are learned early because of their marked perceptual correlates.¹² On this argument, as discussed earlier, children learn to recognize these categories because they are so physically conspicuous. As I argued earlier, the idea that these categories are early-emerging concepts because of perceptual salience is mistaken.

Race is important to the organization of power and authority because of a conceptual proclivity children have to naturalize categories like race. A specialized learning mechanism that renders social naturalization an easy "achievement" by making naturalization easily thinkable is a *precondition* for these processes of ideological distortion, explanation, and justification. In a critical sense, power is racialized because children find naturalizing social groups cognitively easy. At least in the case of race, the fact that the concept plays a fundamental role in organizing power and authority is not the cause of its cognitive properties but derives from them. Racial politics sustain themselves not simply because they serve and define relations of power and authority, they are sustained because children make them easy to think (see Hirschfeld [1997] for a detailed discussion of this argument).

It is crucial that I make this point clearly. I am *not* suggesting that race is an innate concept or that children would acquire it without the support of the cultural environment. Race is not an innate concept. Indeed, given that it is historically a relatively recent concept, it is difficult to see how it could be. In the absence of a cultural environment in which race is a fundamental dimension of political, economic, and cultural organization, children would not learn it. This may begin to sound like the view I am challenging, because it appears that I am granting race's precocious acquisition to the central role it plays in organizing society. This is not my claim. There are many ways to organize political, economic, and cultural life and no doubt many have been implemented. The question is how many are still with us? Relatively few. Race, it seems, is one of those that has managed to stick. Other organizing principles have not stood the test of time. Others that have, like class or nationality, are arguably best interpretable as versions of (or derivations from) racial thinking (Stoler 1995). Indeed, it has been argued, correctly I believe, that race is less a central organizing principle of American society than a systematic distortion of that organization (Winant 1994).

Race, I contend, has become so widespread because it is so easy to learn. Of the various dimensions around which political-economic and cultural life can be and has been organized (or, as the case may be, appears to be organized), the

idea of race has "succeeded" because it is so easily learned. It is so easily learned because of the relationship this particular idea has with a special-purpose program for learning about social entities. Specifically, the cultural idea of race meets the input conditions—triggers the operation—of a specialized module for creating human kinds and, hence, is readily stabilized and entrenched in a cultural environment. The human kind module is a developmental device, a mechanism for guiding the acquisition of knowledge.¹³ The idea of race continues to be part of the cultural environment, and hence a dimension of the environment which children "sample" in their early mappings of the social world, because the idea of race "fits" well with the conceptual architecture that guides children's developing visions of the world. In this important respect, the child is the father of man (if you will excuse the overgendered phrase).¹⁴

CONCLUSION

It is worth repeating how curious is anthropology's aversion to children. Anthropologists certainly have lots of opportunities to meet, talk to, and observe children. More importantly, children are theoretically crucial: anthropology is premised on a process that children do better than almost all others, namely, acquire cultural knowledge. Nonetheless, the call to bring an anthropology of children into the mainstream has been repeatedly made by, among others, Hardman (1973), Schwartz (1981), Toren (1993), Caputo (1995), and Stephens (1998). Still, a sustained, coherent, and—most critically—theoretically influential program of child-focused research has not emerged. Rather than repeat, yet again, the same complaint, I have tried in this essay to demonstrate the theoretical relevance that a fine-grained understanding of knowledge acquisition affords. Individuals living within a particular cultural environment seem to maintain relatively faithful versions of each others' cultural knowledge.¹⁵ To the extent that anthropologists have tried to explain this, they have assumed a fairly simple pattern of elders instructing—either directly through tuition or indirectly through modeling—and novices learning. The obverse idea that elders may behave and believe as they do because of the actions of their children has little currency in anthropology. Yet, as I have tried to show, there is considerable evidence that it occurs. I do not mean that as a general rule children shape adult behavior and belief. One open and interesting question is how often this occurs and in what domains. No matter the answer, it should be clear that it is more prevalent and important than anthropologists have realized.

The issues I have emphasized here speak to a more general phenomenon: What makes something cultural? Understanding how things become cultural requires that we understand how children process information. As Sperber (1996: 54) observes, to explain culture "is to explain why some representations become widely distributed . . . to explain why some representations are more successful—more contagious—than others." Whatever else they may be, successful ideas are generally highly learnable. If children cannot represent ideas from

available input, chances are the ideas will remain current only at significant cost.¹⁶ Learning is not as simple—or ignorable—as much of anthropology would have it, largely because the mind—its architecture, the ways it comes to form and use representations, and its natural history—is not as simple as much of anthropology would have it. Anthropologists may not like children, but they should.

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NOTES

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1. These claims should be doubly qualified. First, it is *mainstream* anthropology that has evinced limited professional interest in children and shown little concern to amend this absence. Second, the phrase "mainstream anthropology" here is meant to capture a statistical rather than theoretical regularity. I simply mean the bulk of research done by anthropologists. "Mainstream anthropology" makes little sense if the phrase is meant to pick out a convergent and unified body of theory. It might be more accurate to talk about *mainstreams* in anthropology.

2. My goal here is not to review, even briefly, child-focused research in anthropology, but simply to mention a few authors whose works would be included on most anthropologists' list of anthropologists who have worked with children.

3. One anonymous reviewer suggested that one reason that a serious interest in children has not emerged because, unlike women and other previously excluded groups, there are no children anthropologists, hence no constituency to agitate on their behalf. This seems reasonable, up to a point. The overwhelming majority of anthropologists have children. And within the American middle-class cultural tradition, our children *are* us. Ask most middle-class Americans how they are doing and they will almost certainly begin to talk about their children.

4. The rich corpus of work on language socialization is exceptional in this regard. I cannot comprehensively review this work or even fairly characterize it here. Suffice it to say for the present discussion, the emphasis in language socialization research is largely on language *training*, in particular the ways in which adults practices shape the way cultural and language are jointly learned. The focus is on what adults do in their attempts to ensure that children acquire appropriate linguistic knowledge and cultural sensibilities. With the exception of Goodwin (1990), few anthropologists have been concerned with how children become socialized into childhood—which, as will be suggested below, is arguably the primary task facing the young child. Moreover, anthropological linguistics has remained largely agnostic on the debate surrounding the question whether children learn language in virtue of the operation of an innate language acquisition device or in virtue of domain-general algorithms for acquiring a broad range of knowledge. Arguably, this is a crucial question about the child's own contribution to language learning, which will be discussed briefly later. Anthropological data are particularly relevant to settling on an answer, and the most comprehensive test of the nativist hypothesis is a massive cross-linguistic project in which several anthropological linguists participated (Slobin 1985).

5. Socialization theory rests, Harris (1998) argues, on an unhappy attribution of causality to correlation. Parents who "give plenty of love and approval, set limits and enforce them firmly but fairly,

don't use physical punishment or make belittling remarks" and whose child is "cheerful and cooperative, is reasonably obedient, . . . is neither too reckless nor too timid, does well in school, has lots of friends, and doesn't hit people without good cause" (Harris 1998:17) are thought to be "good" parents. That is to say, their parenting style caused their child to be a "good" child. It is just as likely that children whose personalities are inherently consistent with being "good" children cause their parents to engage in child-rearing practices that are consistent with being "good" parents. We tend to discount this alternative interpretation because we tend to discount the notion of "inherent" personality. Yet there is a great deal of research supporting the claim that siblings are as likely to have similar personalities as two individuals chosen randomly (Harris 1998; Plomin and Caspi 1999; Sulloway 1996).

6. I learned about engacho through personal communications with Yu Niiya and Yuri Miyamoto, participants in a seminar in the Graduate Program in Culture and Cognition, the University of Michigan. Engacho came up during a discussion of cootie lore. I am grateful to them for their help and particularly to Yu Niiya for her efforts in searching for additional information and for preparing a written account.

7. Another interesting difference between attributions of group contamination under cootie lore and those that occur with in systems racial and caste pollution is that, with the exception of gender, cootie lore lacks the explicit referencing of social groups that are hallmarks of racial and caste thinking. Cootie lore typically links social groups to pollution through implicit reference.

8. In one study, Aboud (1988) dressed white children in Eskimo costumes and asked them whether they were now Eskimo. They generally said "yes." In another study, Semaj (1980) lightened young black children's face with makeup and had them put on blond wigs. When these children asked whether they were now white, they too answered "yes." Both findings admit multiple interpretations. Young children could easily be confused about the experimenter's intent. Children call stuffed bears "bears." They know that adults do the same. Rather than averring to a strong belief about race, the children in Aboud's and Semaj's studies may have simply been endorsing loose talk. Young children may also have been confused about how to answer questions about sudden and contrived changes—like a black child suddenly looking white.

9. The discussion here will be limited to the results of studies of children's reasoning about only two racial groups, namely, blacks and whites. However, the research on which this discussion is based explored a wider range of groups including, depending on the study, Hispanics, southeast Asians, and North Africans. Results indicate that in terms of the reasoning described here, children's belief systems are the same across groups of people of color.

10. Body build was used as a comparison dimension for two reasons. First, it actually is fairly stable over the lifespan and across generations. Second, it is a reliable index of population of origin.

11. This argument is detailed in Hirschfeld 1996, Jackendoff 1992, Furth 1996, and Gigerenzer 1997, who also argue for the existence of a special-purpose faculty that guides social reasoning.

12. Kinfolk are not always and certainly not obviously perceptually similar. However, most accounts of the development of kinship categories assume either that the "real" (genealogical) meaning of a kinship term is preempted developmentally by a representation that focuses on the perceptual correlates of its referent (e.g., that *grandmother* means "aged woman, with grey hair and bifocal glasses") or that the meaning is subsumed to some socially conspicuousness aspect (e.g., the identification of kinship with coresidence). See Hirschfeld 1989b for a critique of both these claims.

13. Admittedly, the specialized module evolved in an environment in which race did not yet exist. Nonetheless, specialized modules shape contemporary thought despite the fact that contemporary events meeting their input conditions did not exist during the period in which they evolved. Masks and facial painting are common cultural forms because they meet (i.e., trigger) specialized modules for face recognition that evolved as techniques for tracking and individuating people (Sperber 1996).

14. Race is not the only example of the child's constitution of adult belief. Maltz and Borker describe a similar process with gendered relations of power:

the process of acquiring gender-specific speech and behavior patterns by school-age children is more complex than the simple copying of adult 'genderlects' by preschoolers. . . . Among school-age children, patterns of friendly social interaction are learned not so much from adults as from members of one's peer group. . . . Our analysis suggests a different way of thinking about the connection between the gender-related behavior of children and that of adults. Most discussions of sex-role socialization have been based on the premise that gender differences are greatest for adults and that these adult differences are learned gradually throughout childhood. Our analysis, on the other hand, would suggest that at least some aspects of behavior are most strongly gender-differentiated during childhood and that adult patterns of friendly interaction, for example, involve learning to overcome at least partially some of the gender-specific cultural patterns typical of childhood. [1986:215]

15. This should not be confused with the claim that people believe the same things, a canard about sharing that anthropology is well rid of. People may have similar representations in their minds without having the same attitudes about the representations. I may be aware that in the U.S. women are thought to be poor drivers, but I may not believe it.

16. To be accurate "children" should be replaced by "novice" in the previous sentence. Children may not find new theories in astrophysics learnable, but these theories are still a cultural form. However, if novice astrophysicists cannot learn these theories, they will not be cultural in that they will not be sustained or widely distributed within the culture of astrophysicists.

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