

**The Anthropology of Childhood:  
Cherubs, Chattel, Changelings**

*David F. Lancy* Cambridge, UK:

Cambridge University Press, 2015.

Notes, references, indices, images. 533

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This book tells a story of contrasts. In the subtitle, David F. Lancy indicates that children are seen in their own cultures variously as cherubs, chattels, or changelings and that these views profoundly affect all aspects of their lives. In “neontocracies,” such as mainstream United States culture, children are inherently valuable cherubs who are to be cherished and indulged. Most places around the world, however, are “gerontocracies,” where children are regarded as chattels, that is, sources of work, who are expected to contribute to the family larder from very early ages. Or, sometimes children are seen as changelings, not really wanted and disposable if necessary, but who may become viable members of society at some point. As this is a second edition of Lancy’s earlier (2008) volume, he added another contrast, that is, between most cultures and those that Joseph Henrich, Steven J. Heine, and Ara Norenzayan denoted by the acronym “WEIRD” or Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, Democratic (“The Weirdest People in the World” in the 2010 volume of *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*). Children in WEIRD societies are largely regarded and treated as cherubs while those elsewhere are thought of, and treated as, chattel or changelings.

Lancy claims, with voluminous supporting evidence, frequently presented in the form of short quotes from the ethnographic literature, that the way we, in the West, think of children and treat them places us in a distinct minority in cross-cultural comparative perspective. Moreover, with aid from the Henrich work, Lancy shows that the empirical edifice upon which much of social science is based—especially psychology in its various guises including child, developmental, and educational—comes from a very small, and wildly unrepresentative, minority of the world’s cultures.

In making his case, Lancy draws primarily from anthropology but also from history, primatology, archeology, biology, and psychology, although, with respect to the latter, his efforts are directed mostly at showing its culture-bound nature. He contrasts the development of children depending on the environment and ecology, subsistence methods, marriage and kinship systems, wealth, and the prevalence of disease and warfare in the societies into which they are born. Yet his central theme, as indicated in the book’s subtitle, derives from how children are valued in different cultures.

Children’s learning and play have been two of Lancy’s abiding interests throughout his career. And, inasmuch as a great deal of learning to be an adult takes place during play in much of the world, Lancy devotes a substantial part of the book to play in its various guises. Insights include that play in gerontocracies is much less valued than in neontocracies. Indeed, play is often seen as an impediment to becoming a

productive adult; although Lancy points out that play in non-WEIRD societies commonly models adult chores, such as “hunting” with toy weapons or food preparation with toy utensils. These tasks are typically played until skill levels are achieved such that smooth transitions to productive work can be accomplished. In contrast to gerontocracies, there is far greater adult involvement in children’s play in neontocracies. For instance, in such activities as youth sports, the levels of adult involvement and supervision may be stifling. As Lancy points out, in traditional societies, “All play is active and profoundly social” and located in the real and observable world (p. 407). In contrast, much modern play involves fantasy derived from “TV programs, children’s books, fantasy-themed toys, and parents’ coaching of make-believe play,” making it less active, less social, and, of course, less dangerous (p. 407). But, have we made play better? Lancy seems to have his doubts.

In the United States, we struggle with our educational system wherein nearly half of teachers leave the profession by their fifth year of work due to reasons that include low morale; low pay; the twenty-first-century testing culture; and interference by administrators, politicians, and parents. Lancy shows that adults in the majority of the world’s cultures do not directly instruct children and certainly do not do so using lectures, worksheets, and tests. In the non-WEIRD world, children learn their cultures, or how to be competent adults, by observing and imitating adults or, in many cases, older children. In our WEIRD world, we have transformed

children as autonomous learners into “empty vessels” to be filled by parents, teachers, religious practitioners, and kin. In contrast to most of the world, we regard education as a top-down system.

And Lancy does all of this masterfully. The book is remarkably well written and readable for the density of the information that it presents. It is well organized, beginning with a twenty-five-page outline of what is to come that is both a wonderful prospectus and an appetizer. He concludes the final chapter with a bullet point summary of the book. Following the summary, Lancy has an incomparable bibliography of anthropological and other sources on childhood and, finally, author, topic, and society indices. The quotes from ethnographies included to support empirical and theoretical points are always excellent and to the point. They are short enough to be digested easily but long enough to avoid the appearance of being extracted out of context. If I have a complaint, it is that the book is heavily footnoted but many, and probably most, of the footnotes are so interesting and relevant that the information in them should have been included in the text. I found it a bit distracting to stop reading the text, go the foot of the page and read an often fairly lengthy note, go back to the text and, soon enough, need to go to yet another footnote. But this is a very minor complaint.

This book will make a wonderful text for courses in educational anthropology and the anthropology of childhood. Perhaps, even more importantly, it should be required reading for all developmental,

child, and educational psychologists, and teachers and administrators in day care through highschool. It should be read by members of school boards and politicians who formulate educational policies, especially the ones who bloviate about “common sense solutions” to educational problems. “Common sense” is culture bound; it generally isn’t very common and usually doesn’t make much sense, particularly when considered in comparative context. With respect to parents, *New York Times* writer Michael Erard titled his 2015 review, “The Only Baby Book You’ll Ever Need.” Although I wholeheartedly agree, I think that it is equally good for childhood and adolescence.

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—Garry Chick, *The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA*