

# Book Review Lancy, David F. 2017. *Raising Children: Surprising Insights from Other Cultures*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 220 pp. Hb.: £16.99, ISBN: 9781108400305

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Denmark is the idea of 'being social'. 'Being social' means engaging in peaceful interactions, including others in games, valuing equality, cooperating, practising self-control, contributing to community life and participating in the democratic process. In different chapters we encounter many ethnographic examples of how children are guided into 'being social' by verbal comments and non-verbal cues about their body demeanour, ways of speaking or interacting with others. But 'being social' means not only behaving in accordance with particular rules, but also sharing the social norms and cultural values associated with such behaviour. Civilising children is therefore not only about their self-control and personal development, but more about creating particular kinds of social interactions, relationships and communities, and in the long term, creating a particular kind of nation state.

One of the ways of creating communities in Denmark is by constructing and referring to what the authors of the book call 'civilised we'. In conversations with children, teachers often refer to particular ideas of who is and who is not behaving properly. For instance, teachers often perceive and portray girls as more proper than boys (pp. 130, 157), middle class as better than working or upper class (pp. 183–189) and Danes as more 'civilised' than immigrants (see in particular Chapter 6). According to teachers, the 'improper' behaviour of immigrant parents and children challenges the ideals of 'being social' in Denmark. But conversely, teachers' approach questions to what extent the cherished ideals of equality, cooperation and inclusion are in fact implemented in real life. 'Civilised we' turns out to be middle class, white, Danish and Christian (p. 178).

What I found most fascinating in the book is that the authors are able to show the ambiguities and contradictions embedded in the civilising process. Children are expected to be clean, but not too clean; to adhere to the rules set up by adults, but not oblige them too much and rather do things of their own free will and out of consideration for others; to listen to adults, but also to be naughty and playful; to be a part of the community and follow its rules, but also to be oneself. The authors note the distance for extremes as characteristic of Danish society, the goal is to find a balance, 'the civilised middle position'.

Children of the welfare state is well executed, theoretically supported and an ethnographically rich case study. It provides an important contribution to anthropological studies on socialisation, childhood and welfare societies, while also offering a broader commentary on modern education. As Eva Gulløv and Laura Gilliam notice in their concluding chapter, many of the processes we are experiencing and witnessing in Europe today might be viewed as decivilising. Elias characterises the rise in decivilising processes with the growing distrust in the civilised behaviour of others, the increasing control and regulation of people's behaviour and nationalistic tendencies gaining ground (pp. 265–267). This makes the book all the more relevant. Children of the welfare state should be of interest to anyone concerned with the current civilising and decivilising processes.

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**Lancy, David F. 2017. *Raising children: surprising insights from other cultures*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 220 pp. Hb.: £16.99. ISBN: 9781108400305.**

*Raising children* (henceforth 'RC') is billed as the popular science or 'baby version' of *The anthropology of childhood: cherubs, chattel, changelings* (Lancy 2014) (henceforth 'AC'), by the same author. RC is partly based on Lancy's blog 'Benign neglect', written for the popular magazine *Psychology Today*. The smaller sibling of the mammoth AC (Lancy's lifework), the book is part ethnographic anthology, personal reflection, anti-parenting guidebook and polemic. It centres on the argument that a 'normal' contemporary childhood indeed looks very different around the world.

The book is structured into nine chapters: 'Introduction: leave the kids alone', 'Culture and infancy', 'Questions about infant attachment', 'Children playing and learning', 'Protection versus suppression', 'Going to school', 'The consequences of raising "unique individuals"', a 'Summary and speculation' conclusion and an autobiographical 'Backstory'.

Lancy has taken the occasion of writing RC as an opportunity to update his insights from AC, for instance, with the latest childrearing phenomena in so-called WEIRD societies – Western, Educated, Industrialised, Rich and Democratic (Henrich et al. 2010) – such as Instagram pregnancies and gender-reveal parties. While AC overflows with anecdotal examples from the anthropological literature, Lancy has selected these more carefully for RC. This serves well the strategic purpose of illustrating fewer arguments that read more cogently in RC. As in AC, he highlights important concepts from the anthropological literature, such as 'it takes a village' to raise a child. RC is not merely a condensed version of AC, though. RC is an insightful and exceedingly enjoyable book in its own right. Lancy provides us with critical insights on the appropriation of anthropological scholarship for the semi-religious 'attachment parenting' movement in WEIRD societies, which promotes a close relationship between baby and parents modelled on purportedly similar practices in non-Western societies. Lancy's approach of comparing child rearing in contemporary Western societies with elsewhere in the world is particularly effective when highlighting the pitfalls of the former, e.g. as concerns the failed 'do as I say, not as I do' parenting methodology.

Lancy succinctly explains contemporary Western children's lack of responsibility with the fact that we are today raising unique individuals, to whom we grant unprecedented authority. He identifies the current overprotection crisis as the root cause.

According to Lancy, children's self-starting and self-guided learning and skill acquisition break down in today's world because well-meaning

'helicopter' and 'snowplough' parents prevent their children from learning through their own initiative. In an age of many parents in WEIRD societies obsessed with directing their children in their learning and playing, Lancy firmly establishes the importance of autonomous learning. He urges parents to practise what he calls 'benign neglect', assuring us children's later gratitude for it. RC is thus Lancy's clarion call to leave children alone and let them learn from experience.

Lancy engages with gusto in myth-busting, e.g. concerning the 'mother-knows-best' belief or the role of teachers. He concurs, for instance, with Alison Gopnik (2016) that learning challenges can arise in classroom teaching because children's attempts to follow a teacher's instructions often interfere with their learning. He surmises that teaching may only be of limited success in helping children to acquire the necessary skills for later survival.

RC is also an illuminating read about anthropology. Lancy frequently and lucidly explains the role of anthropologists, e.g. as cultural comparers. At times the book reads more self-reflexively than some post-Writing culture (Clifford and Marcus 1986) works. One could argue that Lancy engages in too much anthropological vignetting at times fathers (p. 45). Overall, however, RC is a very engaging read for a popular science book and genuinely entertaining, such as when Lancy discusses children's highly individualised first names today.

From its colloquial tone, the academic reader (who may have read AC) deduces that Lancy wrote RC with a non-anthropological audience in mind. Despite Lancy's disclaimer that it is not a childcare manual, RC prominently features Lancy's personal views. The book's 'popular' nature may be off-putting to some readers and appealing to others. As a word of warning to academic readers, it dispenses with uniform academic referencing and only includes a 'Selected sources' section at the end, instead of a full bibliography.

Nevertheless, *Raising children* is not only a valuable addition to the expanding canon of writings in childhood anthropology but also will be of interest to a wider audience. It will be popular as a primer for childhood anthropology courses and – given its affordability compared with academic volumes – as a memorable present for parents-to-be.

## References

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