Children and Youth in Aboriginal Australia: An Overview of the Literature

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The following overview of the existing literature relating to Aboriginal childhood and adolescence across Australia is intended to support the development of this potentially strong interdisciplinary research field. It presents a select number of works in historical context, concluding with critical comments and supplemented by additional references presented according to type of study. No claim is made to have covered the literature exhaustively.

Keywords: Aboriginal Children and Youth; History of Aboriginal Studies; Research Development

Ethnographies up until today have rarely presented the voices of young Aboriginal people themselves, or detailed observations of their everyday lives, except in the form of self-accounts, which seems to be a burgeoning genre. Nor has there been a focused or unifying approach to the study of Australian Aboriginal childhood, be that in anthropology, which this review primarily covers, or through cross-disciplinary efforts. These shortcomings point to a real knowledge gap: a piece of the cultural history of Aboriginal Australia is missing, and theoretical questions about the perpetuation and transformation of Aboriginal society remain unexplored. Consequently, the contemporary anthropology of Aboriginal childhood is advancing only slowly. It seems important to fill this gap of knowledge of the lived experience of young Aboriginal people; they are members of the fastest growing population sector in Australia, which is perhaps also its culturally most distinctive, diverse and disadvantaged group. Ethnographic research with Aboriginal children and youth in various settings—the family, childcare centres, schools, the street, the bush and so on—is of intrinsic intellectual value. My view is that detailed knowledge of the contradictory pressures experienced by children and families today, as well as of

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existing strengths and local concerns, can make an important contribution to studies of modernisation. Arguably, child-centred ethnographies are also central to the development of avenues for constructive interaction between Aboriginal families and the state.

The Early Literature, 1890s–1930s

The ethnological and ethnographic literature of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries referred to infancy, childhood and young adulthood in chapters on totemism and conception beliefs, women’s life, the family and the life cycle, while by far the greatest focus was on initiation practices for boys. These phenomena were predominantly described in taxonomic terms and without any developed theoretical perspective. As Elkin (1974, viii) pointed out, the theoretical interpretation of the early Australian material was left to others, including Frazer (1906–15), van Gennep (1909), Durkheim (1912) and Freud (1913). The contributions from this period by Radcliffe-Brown (Brown 1913) and by Malinowski (1963 [1913]) need to be singled out from the dominant social evolutionary paradigm of other writers, in so far as both managed to theorise a particular cultural phenomenon; Radcliffe-Brown with his groundbreaking conceptualisation of the section and subsection systems that he had studied in Western Australia, and Malinowski who produced a social morphology of the Aboriginal family. The latter remains significant for the study of Aboriginal childhood today.

Ethnography of Aboriginal Family Life

Malinowski’s literature-based doctoral thesis, *The family among the Australian Aborigines*, is the first major contribution to the sociology of Aboriginal family life. This book offers an exhaustive treatment of all scholarly and lay accounts on the subject available at the time. As such, it presents the major literature review for that period. Carefully distinguishing between statements about customs, on the one hand, and reports of concrete incidents—for example, betrothal, wife stealing, child minding, expressions of parental love—on the other, Malinowski established that the individual family, based on strong emotional bonds between parents and children, was the primary social unit. As subsequent ethnographers also found (Berndt and Berndt 1942b, 145; 1981, 43), the individual family, and not group marriage, licentious promiscuity and communal parentage, was basic to everyday social life. The family, Malinowski (1963, 293) explained, was ‘deeply rooted in its social conditions’ and ‘the object of a set of well-determined, categorical and collective ideas’. Of special relevance for a comparison between the treatment of children then and now is Chapter 7, ‘Parents and Children’, in which he amassed observations on infanticide, breastfeeding and infant care; maternal and paternal roles and parental expressions of lifelong love for their children; the role of grandparents; living arrangements; socialisation and notably the absence of disciplinary action by parents;
the nature of education; and the end of childhood marked by segregation from the parental home through bachelor camps in the case of boys and the shift to husband’s country in the case of girls. Malinowski found very little information on how children and youth themselves experience life, as the literature by and large presented a generalised parental point of view. Another early writer to make ample use of the Australian ethnographies, mainly for a sociology of childhood in ‘primitive’ society, is Nathan Miller (1928). However, his literature-based study of the role of children in the perpetuation of culture does not seem to have inspired fieldworkers in Australia.

Following the establishment of Australia’s first university department of anthropology in Sydney in 1925, three fieldwork-based anthropological studies appeared: those of A. P. Elkin (1974 [1938]), W. Lloyd Warner (1937) and Phyllis Kaberry (2004 [1939]). Elkin’s and Warner’s works show no particular concern with infancy, childhood or youth in their own right, although Elkin offers reflections on the psychological impact of male initiation rites. The case of Kaberry was different. She was supervised by Elkin who, in 1935, had urged the Anthropological Section of the Australian and New Zealand Association for the Advancement of Science that ‘specially trained women who do anthropological research amongst the Aborigines, should work consistently through the native women . . . to get a real understanding of childhood, motherhood, the family and woman’s place in society’ (Elkin 2004 [1939], xxxi). One of the first female fieldworkers, Kaberry (2004, Chapters 2–4) made a solid contribution to the sociology and cosmology of infancy, childhood and maidenhood in the Kimberley region of Western Australia. Her pioneering observations on the social, emotional and physical relationship between mothers and children, the nature of children’s environment, male and female education, discipline and temperament, maidenhood, and the social impact of male initiation offer valuable information to fill in the cultural background against which current processes of family formation are taking shape.

**Child-focused Research Techniques**

Towards the end of this early period, two male figures stood out for their special contributions to the understanding of Aboriginal childhood: the psychoanalyst-ethnographer, Géza Róheim, and the anthropologist, Donald Thomson. From the late 1920s until the 1960s, Thomson (1936, 1946, 1975, 1983) produced fine observations and an extensive visual record of the treatment of infants, children’s play traditions, parent-child relationships and socialisation techniques on Cape York Peninsula, in Arnhem Land and in Central Australia. Róheim (1974), who conducted eight months of fieldwork in Central Australia in 1929, was the first and still remains one of the very few to employ projective play techniques that facilitate insights into the inner life of children in relation to their social experiences. He recorded some play dialogues as well as children’s own folklore and stories for children (Róheim 1988), thus providing for the first time material from the children’s point of view.
Other ethnologists from this period sought to understand something of the worldview of children by way of obtaining drawings on paper from them. Among the first was Norman Tindale who, in 1933, collected child and adult drawings in the Mann and Musgrave Ranges, four years before the first mission station was established in the region, at Ernabella. (His collection is in the South Australian Museum.) In 1935, Charles Percy Mountford (1938) collected drawings for comparative purposes by Ngaatjatjarra youth in the pre-initiation stage and by initiated young men. In 1940, he asked men, women and children (aged between 5 and 12 years) who were Pitjantjatjara and Yankunytjatjara speakers to make drawings for him. During this exercise, the children sat in the recently established classroom at the Ernabella Mission Station. They were not given any instructions or suggestions of what to make, but were asked for explanations of their images showing elements of their environment, such as trees at particular sites, traditional shelters, ogre-figures, the school swing, birds and animals. (This is the Mountford-Sheard collection held at the State Library of South Australia.) Children’s drawings were also encouraged during the 1930s at the Hermannsburg Mission Station, by artist Rex Battarbee and arts educator Frances Derham. Some of the children later became famous artists in the Hermannsburg watercolour movement (Fontannaz 1995). The use of drawings as a research technique continued during the following decades, with Ronald and Catherine Berndt in 1941 (Berndt and Berndt 1942a, 313) and Nancy Munn (1965) in 1964–5 employing it in their respective fieldworks with Pitjantjatjara speakers, among them children.

Middle Period, 1940s–1980s

With ethnographic fieldwork firmly established in Aboriginal Studies and a widening of interests beyond the classic themes of kinship systems, comparative social organisation, male ritual life and mythology, others began to redress the imbalance of male-centred studies. Research by R. and C. Berndt at Ooldea in 1941 may be seen as a starting point in this development. The husband-and-wife couple made it their specific research aim to produce a full account of the local culture of this south-eastern section of Western Desert society through a complementary approach: Ronald Berndt was to study men’s life, while his wife set out to record the cultural traditions and socio-economic life of women and children. They sought, furthermore, to examine the impact of ‘detribalisation’ and the process of acculturation, in order to understand the structural conditions and lived reality of a contemporary Aboriginal society.

Culture Contact and Securing Aboriginal Knowledge

The Berndts’ ‘Preliminary report of field work in the Ooldea region, Western South Australia’ first appeared as twelve articles in *Oceania* (1942–1945), which were reprinted together as a separate volume in 1945. The report contains prolific
information on the life stages for males and females, socialisation, education, emotional links between the generations, and sexuality. These topics are dealt with in four sections of the report: ‘Acculturation and native policy’ (Berndt and Berndt 1945, 27–38), ‘The life cycle’ (77–123), ‘Social organization and institutions’ (47–61) and ‘Women’s life’ (208–260). Later, they produced a more generalised account of infancy and childhood from across Aboriginal Australia, in their reference book, The world of the first Australians (1981 [1964]), which also contains magnificent photographs of family scenes. The Ooldea report reflects the detailed ethnographic approach of the Berndts, who have typically supported their findings through the presentation of extensive interlineal translations of their informants’ accounts and explanations. A desired side effect is that their records become potential sources of knowledge for future generations of Aboriginal people, who may wish to recreate links with the past or retrieve lingual information. Such was, indeed, the principal aim of another work the Berndts had begun in 1939 in collaboration with Yaraldi-Ngarrindjeri elders Albert Karloan, Pinkie Mack and others, when Karloan urged Ronald Berndt to record the story of his people. Systematic research was carried out in 1942 and 1943, following directly upon the Ooldea project. Although this fieldwork on the Lower Murray River was primarily a study of acculturation of a people whose younger generation had lost almost all interest in their cultural history, the Berndts (1993, 9) nevertheless committed to documenting the traditional past as it was ‘locked up in the mind of two persons’. Their encyclopaedic account of traditional Ngarrindjeri society appeared fifty years later in 1993 as A world that was, an oral history project that captures a memory culture, appended by roughly 200 pages of interlineal translations of oral texts and songs. It appears that this kind of reflective engagement in particular—the long hours of listening, recording and the act of remembering—allowed for subtleties of perception and psychological insight to occur in both the speaker and the listener.

More specifically focused on autobiographical construction was Stanner’s (1960) biography of ‘Durmugam, a Nangiomeri’ with whom he had worked in 1932. It points to the cultural significance of selective remembering, showing how the gaps and omissions in a person’s memory add to the patterning of the representation of life events.²

Proliferation of Family Studies

Significant information on the way family members behave towards one another comes from Mervin Meggitt’s (1962) research with the Warlpiri people of Central Australia during the 1950s. Supported by his wife, he was able to observe how parents relate to their male and female children, and how the care of children was monitored within the extended family.

The 1960s, 70s and 80s saw a proliferation of Aboriginal family studies, mostly by female anthropologists: Diane Barwick (1974) on family process, socialisation and regional kinship links in Victoria and New South Wales, whose work later inspired
Yorta Yorta Aboriginal researcher Julie Andrews (2008) to study socialisation in her home community; Jane Goodale on children’s (1960) and women’s life (1971) on the Tiwi Islands; Annette Hamilton on child rearing in central Arnhem Land (1981), on the relationship between production and reproduction in the Western Desert (1979), and on childcare and health in the same area (1982); Victoria Burbank (1988) on maidenhood in south-central Arnhem Land; Diane von Sturmer (1980) on the social relations of child-rearing on western Cape York Peninsula; and Gillian Cowlishaw (1979) who produced an exhaustive analysis of the literature on motherhood and socialisation (see also Cowlishaw 1982a, 1982b). This latter work can be seen to update Malinowski’s literature-based study of the family. Interestingly, these two PhD dissertations differ strongly in their assessment of Aboriginal motherhood: where Malinowski (1963 [1913]) describes love and affection between parents and children, Cowlishaw (1979) highlights the negative aspects of the relationship, especially maternal resentment in the face of the hard work of child rearing.

Since the late 1970s, anthropologists have examined the nature and conditions of autonomy in Aboriginal societies, exploring from various theoretical angles its personal, cultural and political dimensions. As these three dimensions of social life are closely intertwined in the Aboriginal world, autonomy appears as a key attribute of personhood, which raises the question of its place in childhood. Previously discussed by Fred Myers (1986) in his study of Pintupi social life (see below), and an ongoing subject of analysis in the work of Gary Robinson (described in the next section), the childhood foundations of an autonomous self were most extensively observed by David Martin (1993). Following Bourdieu’s emphasis on social practice, Martin argues in the first chapter of his PhD dissertation that children in Wik society of Western Cape York Peninsula internalise the social concept of autonomy because they receive little formal teaching from adults; their primary social learning environment is that of the peer group, in which self-assertion is the order of the day. Anchored in the subject from early childhood onward, the cultural ethos of autonomy is reproduced across the generations and, on this account, is relatively resistant to change, regardless of the profound transformations that are taking place in Aboriginal communities. However, as Myers and Robinson also explain, Aboriginal autonomy is paired with the equally important notion of relatedness, which binds and directs assertions of the self to others. If the tendency towards individuation has been reinforced through the adoption of novel means of self-assertion, as Martin suggests, it has not led (yet) to the formation of a modern self, at least not in the communities observed here. (It might be noted in this context that this nexus of childhood and modernisation of Aboriginal life-worlds is currently the theme of heated debate among Australian anthropologists, fuelled by a new program of state interventions).

Fred Myers’s (1986) analysis of Pintupi society is another important contribution to the understanding of Aboriginal concepts of growing up. Although he did not specifically focus on children’s lives and socialisation during his fieldwork in the 1970s and 80s, he shows that salient moral concepts organising Pintupi social and
political life are framed in the emotional and relational terms—‘holding’, ‘looking after’, ‘giving’—of infancy and childhood (cf. Myers, in press). Róheim was perhaps the first to clearly perceive the significance of ego strength coupled with compassion in the psychogenesis of Central Australian children (see Morton, in press). However, it is Myers’s much-cited book, *Pintupi country, Pintupi self*, that has made ‘autonomy and relatedness’ commonplace in Aboriginal Studies terminology, prompting others to explore these dynamics in communities elsewhere.

Aboriginal family life cannot be understood without knowledge of its relationship to the state. This relationship was first comprehensively documented by Charles Rowley (1970, 1971a, 1971b) in his three-volume account of the history of Aboriginal dispossession, displacement and discrimination. This first independent study (conducted between 1964 and 1967) of the social and economic situation of Aboriginal families throughout Australia analyses how government policies and practices have led to the marginalisation and destruction of Aboriginal societies across all States and Territories. Rowley’s report may be seen to have initiated later works addressing the problems experienced by Aborigines of mixed descent and the so-called Stolen Generations (e.g., Haebich 2000), and much is to be learnt still from Rowley’s detailed recording of past errors and crimes committed in the name of welfare ordinances and child-related policies.

*Psychological Studies*

Credible psychological research with Aborigines began in 1898 with the Cambridge anthropological expedition to the Torres Strait Islands, which included studies on perception in Queensland by pathologist C. G. Seligman (see Kearney 1973, 18). Stanley Porteus (1917) was the first to apply psychometric intelligence tests, in 1915 at Point McLeay Mission Station in South Australia, finding ‘a shorter period of cognitive growth’ in Aboriginal children (Kearney 1973, 18–19). Porteus later examined Aboriginal people at Hermannsburg Mission, Beagle Bay Mission, and in the Kimberley, yet neglected to pay attention to the cultural suitability of the tests applied. By the mid 1970s the field had expanded to include studies of emotional expression, personality, motivation and children’s cognitive development (Kearney, de Lacey and Davidson 1973; Kearney and McElwain 1976; Kearins 1986). Although Chase and von Sturmer (1973, 14) suggest otherwise, psychological studies seem to have had little direct impact on anthropology up until the 1980s, despite the interest in anthropology and linguistics in the structure of the mind, and the insightful psychological observations by ethnographers such as the Berndts, Stanner, Hiatt (1975) and Munn (1970). Burbank’s (1988, 2006) work on Aboriginal children and youth which applies a ‘culture in mind’ model, Hamilton’s (1981, 1979) observations on attachment, Morton’s (1989) psychoanalytic interpretations of the symbolic representations of mother-child links in certain cultural institutions, and Robinson’s (e.g., 1990, 1992a, 1992b) ongoing research of transforming family dynamics appear to be exceptional in the Australian context.
In addition to Röheim’s psychoanalytic investigations in Central Australia, there are a few psychiatric studies on children’s sexuality: Money et al. (1973, 1977) on sexual training and traditions on Elcho Island, and Eastwell’s (1977) longitudinal study of mental illnesses in an East Arnhem Land community. Bearing parallels with findings from other non-Western societies, for example, the Pilagá Indians of Argentina (Henry and Henry 1974), these researchers have observed that Aboriginal children were afforded great sexual freedom while displaying very few neurotic symptoms. Less credible is Arthur Hippler’s (1978) study of the cultural basis of personality among the Yolngu, which provoked substantial criticism by other researchers (see Morton, in press). However, as the only application of the culture and personality methods in the Aboriginal context, Hippler’s is an historically significant study. It attempts to grasp the unconscious concerns, defences and coping mechanisms characteristic of one cultural group as its members are shaped in the course of socialisation. Importantly, this approach can account for the resilience of certain behaviours and cultural personality traits across the generations.

Recent Works, 1990s–

Since the 1990s, publications have been concentrated in three major areas: applied research and surveys that aim to produce data relevant for policy development and resource allocation; linguistic research; and works by Aboriginal people. Together, they invite exploration of the links and tensions between self-perceptions and externally defined assessments of young Aboriginal lives.

Applied Research

Recognising that Aboriginal children may have special needs and aspirations, the Australian Government initiated two large-scale studies on Aboriginal children’s health, social and emotional well-being, and education. These are the Western Australian Aboriginal Child-Health Survey (WAACHS) begun in 1996 (Zubrick et al. 2004, 2005, 2006; Silburn 2006), and Footprints in Time—The Longitudinal Study of Indigenous Children (LSIC) begun in 2008 (FaHCSIA 2009). These survey-type studies are establishing epidemiological databases that lend statistical evidence to the much deplored ‘gap’ between the health and educational standards in the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal child population. However, knowledge of, and action against, the marginal economic status of the majority of Aborigines and related problems are not new. At least since the 1950s, support organisations and Aboriginal people themselves, including civil rights activists, frontline workers and, more recently, justice commissioners, politicians and a growing number of academics in the fields of history, anthropology, education, law, psychology and medicine, have worked towards improving social conditions for Aboriginal people, especially in health, education and housing. Their records are likely to contain valuable information on children and young people, and it would be a worthwhile research task to assess these.
Recent studies of Aboriginal youth (Palmer 1999; Corn 2001; Senior 2002) have been conceptualised as applied research and/or in terms of crisis. A perceived plethora of problems, such as the comparative novelty of this life stage in Aboriginal societies, cultural change, poverty, young parenthood, low health and education levels and widespread substance abuse, has prompted a number of studies aimed at developing solutions sponsored by non-academic ‘stakeholders’, including Indigenous organisations, mining companies and government departments. A particularly negative assessment of children’s and young people’s lives is David McKnight’s (2002) ethnography of Mornington Islanders. He observed the disintegration of socialisation practices, of the relationship between the generations and of morale between the 1960s and 1990s, concluding that disorientation and lack of discipline and motivation are major factors accounting for widespread alcoholism, violence and other forms of self-destruction. A different and more positive view has been presented by Pauline Fietz (2008) on the basis of her research on the nature of peer groups at Docker River. While also recognising the difficulties faced by young people, Fietz nevertheless shows how Pitjantjatjara youth are socially productive and resourceful.

A theoretically sophisticated analysis of Aboriginal youth in the context of cultural transition is presented in the work of anthropologist Gary Robinson. Still awaiting a monographic synthesis, Robinson’s longstanding and ongoing research with the Tiwi—on family process (1992a, 1995a, 1997a), violence and individuation (1995b, 1997b), youth suicide (1990, 1992b), and young people’s inner life in the face of social crisis (2008)—presents a unique contribution to the contemporary child- and youth-focused anthropology of Aboriginal Australia. Through his detailed observations and case analyses of Tiwi family dynamics across several generations, Robinson offers precisely those ‘actual histories of socialization’ that Myers (in press) suggests are necessary for a fuller understanding of young Aboriginal people. Partly deriving from his collaborative therapeutic interventions, Robinson’s material documents the psychological impact of modernisation: the progressive incorporation of Aboriginal social forms into a Western institutional infrastructure and the concomitant transformation of personhood.

Linguistic Studies

Linguists, some of whom have long collaborated with Aboriginal people in producing educational material, are turning towards young people’s speech production, while sociolinguists have begun to explore emergent forms of literacy in remote communities. The current comparative research on children’s language acquisition led by Jane Simpson and Gillian Wigglesworth (Disbray and Wigglesworth 2008), Langlois’s (2006) research on Pitjantjatjara teenage speech, O’Shannessy’s (2005) study of a new language that young people at Lajamanu have developed over the last thirty years and of children’s lingual awareness (2008), Nicholls’s (2000) social analysis of graffiti in the same community, Kral’s (2007) and Kral and Ellis’s (2008) social history of literacy at Warburton, all present a shift away from the adult
perspective and towards young people’s own symbolic systems. Child-centred studies of play, of which there are as yet only a few (Eickelkamp 2008a, 2008b, 2008c) point in the same direction, although it must be emphasised that there have been earlier efforts at documenting children’s traditions: by anthropologists (Berndt and Berndt 1952, 1953, 1954), musicologists (Ellis and Ellis 1970; Kartomi 1980; Marsh 2002) and folklorists (Factor 1988; Haagen 1994).

**Self-representation**

Other voices have gained importance in the slow process of communicating Aboriginal experiences in their own terms. Among these are visual and performing artists, filmmakers, storytellers, writers and interpreters, whose work is directed at the general public or their local Aboriginal communities. Works for and by children include picture books with ‘Dreamtime’ stories, documentaries—some in Aboriginal languages—that deal with young people’s contemporary experiences in remote communities and town camps (e.g., Wirriya, Small Boy 2004), a first commercial children’s television drama series (Double Trouble 2008), and interactive websites encouraging communication among young people at the local level and beyond (e.g., www.usmob.com.au).

Transliterated or written memory accounts by Aboriginal people have become an important medium of self-expression (Eickelkamp 1999; Ilyatjari 1998; Kngwarraye Thompson 2003; Napanangka et al. 1997; Pring 1990; Varzoon-Morel 1995). They connect the younger generation with the past and serve as educational resources for Indigenous Studies in Aboriginal schools. More recently, with the expanding establishment of childcare centres in remote areas, local traditions of child rearing and socialisation are being documented and, in the process, formalised, by and for Aboriginal childcare workers (e.g., Warrki Jaarinijaku 2002).

Self-accounts facilitate Aboriginal people, including those without formal academic skills, becoming authors in their own right and thus speaking directly to non-Aboriginal audiences. Illustrative is the bilingual memory account by Tommy Kngwarraye Thompson, Growing up Kaytetye (2003), which presents an important source of knowledge and pride in cultural heritage. Especially significant for a cross-cultural pedagogy is his explanation that ‘the Dreamtime created the games and cubbies for the children. It’s their Law’ (p. 67). This matches my field experience with Anangu Pitjantjatjara speakers who explain that all forms of children’s activities and much typical behaviour derive from Tjukurpa (‘Dreaming’), even though the children are not aware of it (see Eickelkamp 2008a).

**Concluding Comments**

Despite a long and rich history of observations relating to Australian Aboriginal childhood and youth, child-focused Aboriginal Studies is only beginning to emerge as a specific research area. As yet, there exist no shared methodological and theoretical
assumptions. Several factors have contributed to this somewhat paradoxical state. The ‘classic’ ethnographers of Aboriginal societies and early compilers—A. W. Howitt (1996 [1904]), John Mathew (e.g., 1910), R. H. Mathews (1897, 2007), W. E. Roth (e.g., 1984), Spencer and Gillen (e.g., 1927), and C. Strehlow (1907)—did not entertain a developmental perspective. This is hardly surprising given that the science of human development was only coming into being at the end of the nineteenth century and, like much of the social and biological sciences, was still enmeshed in evolutionary theory (Grinder 1967).

With significant exceptions, investigations into the links between ontogeny and culture remained outside the scope of research in Australia, even when these became a significant theme in American anthropology. The major focus of early academic anthropology in Australia was the analysis of the structure and function of social organisations. From this vantage point, children’s worlds loomed small. The references to children’s lives that are scattered throughout the anthropological literature, as well as the few comprehensive studies of Aboriginal socialisation practices, show no signs of the influence of Margaret Mead’s (1928, 1981 [1930]) pioneering work on childhood, adolescence and temperament in nearby Melanesia. Indeed, the culture and personality school never exerted influence in Australian anthropology, despite the interest in psychology and psychoanalysis of some major ethnographers (Ursula MacConnel [1931], the Berndts, Meggitt, Les Hiatt and his student Annette Hamilton). It was not until the 1980s that a psychological anthropologist took into consideration Mead’s work and analysed a stage of human development in Aboriginal Australia. This was Victoria Burbank (1988), whose research on female adolescence in an Arnhem Land community was part of the cross-cultural Harvard Adolescence Project.

Related to this lack of interest in recording and theorising childhood was a view of cultural knowledge as something from which children are by and large excluded. Under the perceived pressure to document societies in decline, early efforts were directed at salvaging knowledge of languages, ritual life, cosmology, social organisation and kinship from the older generations, mostly from men. Although for different reasons, Aboriginal people, too, have regarded elders rather than the young as knowledgeable culture bearers, holding that the uninitiated have no right to speak in a representative manner about ritual matters and other significant aspects of local traditions.

Furthermore, knowledge transmission across the generations, in the first instance from the older to the younger, has been described as failing. Catherine Berndt (1989, 11 cited in Tonkinson 1993, xxii), for example, saw that cultures under pressure reach a point of ceasing to teach certain traditions to the younger members of their society. Most contemporary ethnographers would also have heard older people say that they have no descendents left to whom the ancestral traditions could be entrusted. Yet, equally, there are signs that societies undergoing acute cultural, socio-economic and demographic changes seek to engage their young in particular. For example, male initiation has intensified in parts of the Central and Western Deserts, having become
larger in geographical scope in some areas (Peterson 2000) and involving boys of an increasingly young age in others (Yengoyan 1970). Indeed, in their record of Yaraldi-Ngarrindjeri traditions of the Lower Murray River and Lakes region in South Australia, the Berndts themselves report a development towards initiation as a form of cultural protection against foreign intrusion, when they write: ‘From an Aboriginal view, once a young man was initiated he was firmly set within the traditional perspective and consequently, European intrusion could have only a minimal effect on a young man’s miwi [soul]’ (Berndt and Berndt 1993, 179). Such competition over the minds and hearts of young people appears to characterise contemporary circumstances also, especially in relation to school-based education and other child- and youth-focused interventions by the state.

When the preservation of Aboriginal cultures and languages became a social justice issue aligned with the advocacy of Indigenous rights within the nation state, studies of childhood and youth remained at the margins of academic interests. This is now changing: at present, theories of human development are a matter of governmental concern, and research with young Aboriginal people is significantly framed by the political demand for interventions deemed to improve Indigenous social indicators. The well-being of children has become the central issue in public and academic debates about the future of Aboriginal communities, debates that are clad in ideological assumptions about desirable outcomes, normal child development, and social integration. If not for the first time, these concerns have left Australian anthropology struggling to come to grips with the tension between cultural survival and mainstream life options for Aborigines. Arguably, child-focused research in Aboriginal Australia is most appropriately conceived as research of modernisation processes. Further development of this field requires multiple lines of inquiry across the disciplines—from anthropology to linguistics, psychology, medicine, education, arts and sociology—in the form of both basic and applied research projects, and beginning with comprehensive ethnographic studies of young people’s lives now.

Notes

[1] Acknowledgment: I thank two anonymous reviewers provided by Anthropological Forum for their helpful comments and, in one case, the concrete suggestions made.

[2] Note, however, that Stanner created much of the plot of Durmugam’s life story, which contains few verbatim lines by the hero (Beckett 2008).

References


Further Reading According to Disciplines.

Ethnographic-anthropological

Berndt, R. M. 1979. Traditional Aboriginal life in Western Australia: As it was and is. In Aborigines of the West: Their past and present, edited by R. M. Berndt and C. H. Berndt, 3–27. Nedlands: University of Western Australia Press.


Education


Youth Studies


Child Protection


See also the useful annotated bibliography for the field of Aboriginal child socialisation by Teresa Butler-Bowden in Warrki Jarrinjaku 2002.