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The chore curriculum

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The chore curriculum.

David F. Lancy

Chapter In *Working and Learning Among Africa's Children*. Gerd Spittler and Michael Bourdillion (Eds). (pp. 23-57), Berlin: Lit Verlag.

Introduction

While claims that anthropology has ignored children (Hirschfeld 2002) have been successfully countered (Lancy 2008, 2011a), children's work has undoubtedly been slighted. The anthropological study of children's play has yielded an enormous amount of scholarship—an annual conference, newsletters, journals and an entire shelf of scholarly volumes. The anthropological study of children's work has been limited, by comparison. This imbalance does not reflect any grounded reality, children in most societies spend as much time doing useful work as they do playing (Harkness and Super 1986). Rather, it reflects an inherent bias on the part of anthropologists whose culture provides no legitimate role for children as workers. And in the vast annals of developmental and child psychology, “work” as a category of children's experience—worthy of study and analysis—is virtually absent. Hence, this volume, growing out of the Berlin conference organized by Professor Spittler, should be seen as a contribution towards redressing this unfortunate omission.

In my first attempt to review and synthesize the material on children's work, distinctive patterns emerged that crystallized into the expression ‘chore curriculum’ (Lancy 1966: 149). In the second survey, further analysis refined and enhanced the value of the concept (Lancy 2008: 235-242). I hope to take it one step further. The term “chore” is somewhat self-evident, except that in contemporary society, we use it to characterize relatively minor tasks, completely peripheral to the “important” work that is done exclusively by adults. However, in the archives of ethnographers and historians we find that children are expected to assist in a variety of critical areas of domestic and corporate production including the care of infants, gardening, herding and foraging. There is a widely acknowledged distinction between the work that all children are expected to do (contingent upon age and gender) and realms of endeavour that are optional or, contingent upon the child's interest and aptitude. A chore is any task that all boys or all girls should master by a roughly agreed upon age and carry out willingly and efficiently. Among the Kpelle, these include running errands, fetching water and firewood, tending younger siblings, weeding in the fields, caring for livestock, daubing mud on the walls of houses under construction, sweeping out the compound and so on (Lancy 1996). The chore inventory is mandatory and corresponds, in the parlance of contemporary (US) discussions of children's education, to the “core” that all pupils are expected to master. In my study of Kpelle children, I found that they may also elect to pursue non-mandatory skills such as weaving, basketry (see also Köhler, this volume, page X) and becoming a

blacksmith. These are not part of the chore inventory and the pattern of skill acquisition and mastery is somewhat different (Lancy and Grove 2010).

The term “curriculum” in chore curriculum conveys the idea that there is a discernible regularity to the process whereby children attach themselves to, learn, master and carry out their chores. While the academic or core curriculum found in schools is formal and imposed on students in a top-down process, the chore curriculum is informal and emerges in the interaction of children’s need to fit in and emulate those older, their developing cognitive and sensorimotor capacity, the division of labour within the family and the nature of the tasks (chores) themselves. In the remainder of this chapter, my goal is to delineate and illustrate the common elements of the chore curriculum.

A Note on Methodology

The methodology used in this chapter involves canvassing the ethnographic record, assembling illustrative cases and teasing out broad, “culturally invariant” patterns. It is referred to as *ethnology*. In a recent exemplar, MacDonald describes her review of the ethnographic record on boys learning to hunt as a “cross-cultural synthesis” leading to an analysis that is of necessity, “qualitative, as the relevant evidence from the ethnographic literature is either anecdotal or generalized and includes limited quantitative data” (2007: 390). The current survey of children’s work grew out of a comprehensive review of the ethnographic record pertaining to childhood (Lancy 2008). In that review, approximately 1350 published and unpublished reports were used, and since publication, an additional 250 sources have been found and added to the corpus. The material is comprehensive with respect to geography and subsistence patterns. This corpus is canvassed for all descriptions of children’s work, however brief, and then this smaller but still extensive corpus of cases is systematically searched and organized around common themes, such as the child’s acquisition of “sense” (see below).

The Pre-school or Play Stage of the Chore Curriculum

In *Becoming a blacksmith in Gbarngasukwelle* I described children’s amazingly detailed and faithful replication of the blacksmith’s forge in an episode of make-believe. The blacksmith’s compound was a happening place in the village, consistently attracting a crowd of enthralled spectators and gossips, young and old (also true in a Kuba village, cf, Binkley 2006: 106). Children could watch the action of the smiths and eavesdrop as village affairs were retailed. They thus built up a stock of script material that could be woven into their make-believe play. The boy playing the smith, in particular, had obviously absorbed a great deal of the processes, both technical—he constructed reasonable replicas of bellows, anvil, tongs—and social—assigning the roles of novice, wives and helpers to his playmates. The terminology for tools, actions and relationships used in the “script” was also a faithful rendition (Lancy 1980a).¹ The town chief’s court

¹ In using this vivid example, I must acknowledge that blacksmithing is not a chore. In fact, becoming a blacksmith requires an apprenticeship. But, as I

proved a similar magnet with similar engagement by children as spectators and later, dramatists (Lancy 1980b; see also Read 1960: 84).

Ethnographic descriptions of work activity enacted in make-believe and play with objects are rich and varied and even include archaeologists' reconstructions of childhood based on the discovery of miniature or crudely made artefacts assumed to be toys (Park 2006: 56-7). In the domestic sphere, we see children playing at food preparation, cooking and feeding the family. In these vignettes we occasionally get a glimpse of development over time in children's make-believe:

When [very young Kaoka] pretend to keep house they make no sexual distinction in the allocation of the tasks. Boys and girls together erect the shelters, plait the mats, cook the food, and fetch the water. But within a year or so, although they continue to play in company, the members of each group restrict themselves to the work appropriate to their sex. The boys leave the cooking and water carrying to the girls, who, in turn, refuse to help with the building (Hogbin 1969: 38).

Similarly, Goody (1992) describes a continuum from make-believe to "for real" food preparation in which older children model for younger ones, real but scaled down pots. These may substitute for toy pots and if the mother is willing, edible ingredients go into the pot rather than grass. In a second illustration of this development from play to work, I was able to observe the "canoe curriculum". Ifaty village in southwest Madagascar depends primarily on marine resources and a modest-sized outrigger sailing canoe is the primary means of accessing such resources as well as marketing them. Virtually all adult males use such canoes almost daily. On the beach and in the shallows, I observed (almost simultaneously): a) a 2-year-old splashing alone in a tide-pool, learning about water; b) three boys around 5 years old clambering over a beached canoe, learning an agile dance from thwart to gunwale; c) two boys about 7 years old independently preparing and then sailing model canoes, making appropriate adjustments to sail angle and rudder; d) two boys of 8 years playing with an abandoned outrigger in the shallows. They climbed on, paddled it, capsized it, took turns as captain and mate; e) when two young men began to rig and prepare to launch a full-size outrigger, the boys paddled over to watch this unfold and; f) shortly after they sailed away, a boy of about 10 came paddling in to shore in a half-sized canoe. Based on previous and more thorough studies of the canoe curriculum, I am confident that these experiences prepare boys to become mariners with little need for any formal instruction (Wilbert 1976: 318).

When children re-enact activities they have witnessed these are not just generic scenes but quite precise and thoughtful replications of complex systems. Katz's (1986: 47-8) descriptions of Sudanese boys' make-believe enactment of two contrasting agricultural systems is a case in point. Aside from farming, children learn critical skills through play

indicate elsewhere, the play stage is found across the task inventory, from chores to relatively simple crafts to full-fledged, complex crafts requiring an apprenticeship (Lancy 2011b).

in varied environments. Among pastoralist societies, we find “Dhebar boys... using camel and sheep droppings to practice herding sheep and lambs” (Dyer and Choksi, 2006: 170). Tuareg boys who will eventually care for substantial camel herds, begin their lives as herders tending a kid they treat as a playmate (Spittler 1998: 343). Franz Boas describes Baffin Inuit boys “play-hunting” seal using miniature harpoons fashioned by their parents (Boas 1901: 111).

Of course, children’s play “pre-school” is not limited to chores but may prefigure virtually any customary adult activity, including for example the processes involved in carrying out trance-induced shamanism (Katz 1981). In order for children to take the initiative and get a head start on learning their culture, chores included, the “culture” must be an open book. The public nature of most adult activity facilitates children’s engagement at a safe distance where they are not interfering. Anthropologists often note adult awareness and sympathy towards children’s mimicry. “When adults are asked about children’s mimetic play they reply: ‘That is how they learn’” (Fortes 1938/1970: 23). Another example is drawn from the Sisala. “When a boy first goes to the farm with his father, he is told to sit in the shade of a tree and observe what his elders are doing. When he asks to help, someone gives him a hoe with which to play” (Grindal 1972: 29).

John Bock has been the scholar most noted for empirical tests of the hypothesis that play equals preparation for work. In field studies among peoples in the Okavango with varied subsistence patterns, he has demonstrated that the likelihood of children mimicking specific adult activities in play closely tracks the relative importance of those activities in the local subsistence system. Furthermore, he has carefully demonstrated the process whereby girls build up skill in grain processing through “play-pounding” (driving a pestle into a mortar to hull grain but without actual grain) which can then rapidly develop into the real thing, functioning from the outset at a high level of skill (Bock 2004: 274). We have evidence then, from a multiplicity of sources, of children playing at the tasks and production systems that they will later assay in earnest. We also have more limited evidence that this play activity is “educational” but several disclaimers are in order.

Children’s motivation to engage in make-believe and object play cannot be attributed solely or even primarily to the desire to learn their culture. The essence of play is its purposelessness. Still, there is little play that does not echo adult activity. Play with toys that are uniquely toys (as opposed to miniature or discarded tools) is associated almost entirely with high civilization and social class. In upper class households in Egypt circa 2300 BCE, one finds an array of professionally made toys that would not look out of place in a contemporary toy store, such as a wooden crocodile with articulated tail and jaws (Wileman 2005: 31). This implies an attitude of indulgence: that parents expect children to play just for fun.

In contrast, village children draw primarily on the scenes from their direct experience (Power 2000: 272) because unlike bourgeois children they do not have access to manufactured toys, storybooks, videos and other sources to launch them into more inventive fantasies (Gaskins, in press). And, in contrast to contemporary bourgeois

society where parents engage with and encourage their child's fantasy play, villagers do not engage directly in children's play (Lancy 2007). "[Sisala] parents regard an interest in children's play as beneath their dignity" (Grindal 1972: 25). Lastly, not all chores are foreshadowed in play. Little girls may care for an infant sibling in lieu of playing with a doll, for example (Broch 1990: 110) or assist their mother in a market stall in lieu of pretending to market (Paradise and Rogoff 2009: 113).

Running Errands

Margaret Mead, reporting on her first field study in Samoa, provides one of the earliest characterizations of the centrality of work in childhood.

The tiniest little staggerer has tasks to perform—to carry water, to borrow fire brands, to fetch leaves to stuff the pig... learning to run errands tactfully is one of the first lessons of childhood... these slighter tasks are laid aside for harder ones as soon as the child becomes strong enough or skilled enough (Mead 1928: 633).

Running errands nicely illustrates key characteristics of the chore curriculum. Fetching and carrying is inherently staged or laddered. "Very young children (age 3) may start with one or two sticks of wood, or yams in a carry net, but by age 8 they are carrying firewood, water, produce and messages" (Zeller 1987: 544). A barely mobile toddler may be asked to carry a cup from its mother across an evening family circle to its father. The same toddler will tag along as an older sibling makes a longer delivery excursion, in effect serving as an understudy. Errands can vary by length and territory, between close kin and strangers, can involve loads of varying size and fragility, and can include an exchange of some kind including a market transaction. Adults match their assignments to the child's level of skill and size and each new assignment ratifies (and motivates) the child's growing competence.

The stalwart little helper publicly advertises the quality of its upbringing and its worthiness as a potential foster child, enhancing the family's reputation. On the other hand, children are favoured as errand runners "because adolescents or adults seen in close proximity to neighbors' houses might be suspected of adultery, theft or witchcraft. And boys are favored because their virtue isn't as fragile as girls'" (Lancy 2008: 238). Learning to become an errand runner rarely entails teaching by an adult. Children observe and replicate the process with only minor guidance from an older, sib role model.

Anthropologists often note with some degree of awe how early the child embarks on the chore curriculum and how significant is their contribution to the domestic economy. Ottenberg notes that, among the Afikpo, babies are routinely cared for by their 4 or 5 year-old siblings (1968: 80). Among the Hadza, groups of children forage in the vicinity of camp while their parents are gone on longer expeditions. From 4 years-of-age they successfully gather baobab fruits, tubers and small birds and mammals, providing up to 25 percent of their daily diet. Marlowe notes: "foraging simply emerges gradually from playing" (Marlowe 2010: 156; see also Tucker and Young 2005: 169).

Even with change in the village economy, such as the introduction of cash crops, children's work remains crucial. For example, in the coffee industry children make varied and valued contributions. The youngest plant seeds in small plastic bags to germinate new plants, they also collect coffee cherries that have fallen to the ground at harvest. Somewhat older children are responsible for weeding and spreading chalk. 12 to 15-year-old boys are responsible for spraying urea as a fertilizer and assisting with trimming, which may involve climbing trees to lop off branches with a machete. All help with the harvest and with sorting the cherries. Agile boys are only too happy to climb into the branches to collect the fruit that adults cannot reach (Ruiz, 2011: 169-171).

Work and Identity

It is not enough to acknowledge that children are kept busy doing chores or that being helpful makes them "fit in". The very identity of the child may be largely defined in terms of the work that he or she does. Throughout human history children have been seen as an investment. Parents have them and raise them so that their labour can support the household, and eventually provide an old-age pension or social security (Clark 1994; Reynolds 1991). Among the severely impoverished Papel in Guinea-Bissau, infant mortality is extremely high: roughly one-third of all children born alive will die before they reach the age of five. In spite of these dire statistics, and the fact that women work extremely hard to eke out a bare survival, Jonina Einarsdottir found that mothers were not interested in reducing their fertility, on the contrary, they wanted as many children as possible. They operated on the assumption that the more you have, the more likely there will be a few who survive and "help with work, contribute to their emotional well-being, take care of them in old age, secure them a respectable funeral, and ease their entrance into the afterlife" (Einarsdottir 2004: 86). A Kpelle mother asserts: "What makes a child good? If you ask her to bring water, she brings water. If you ask her to cook she cooks, if you tell her to mind the baby, she does it. When you ask her to plant rice she doesn't complain" (Lancy 1996: 76). Given these widely shared views, it should not be surprising that for the Nuer (and many others), it is only when:

the boy tethers the cattle and herds the goats... cleans the byres and spreads the dung to dry and collects it and carries it to the fires [that] *he is considered a person* (Evans-Pritchard 1956: 146, emphasis added).

In some societies the association between chores and identity is made even more explicit. Among the Giriama, a two to three-year-old is labelled, in effect, "water carrier". An eight-year old girl is called a "maize pounder", a boy of the same age is *muhohomurisa* or, "herd boy" (Wenger 1989: 98). In pre-modern Russia "our plowboy," "our herd boy," and "our nanny girl" were habitual terms parents used to address their children (Gorshkov 2009: 15). And among the *Tchokwe*, "children are identified through the roles they assume [for example] *kambumbuare* children... who help parents in the field or with fishing and hunting" (Honawana, 2006: 41-42). On the other hand, an adult seen carrying

out chores normally assigned to children would be an object of scorn and pity and Russian children:

who could not learn how to do work appropriate to their age were subjected to mockery... a girl who could not learn how to spin by a certain age was called a “no spinner” (*nepriakha*); if a girl could not weave cloth by age fifteen, she was called a “no weaver” (*netkakha*). Boys who had not learned how to make bast shoes were called “shoeless” (Gorshkov 2009: 23).

Aside from nomenclature that marks the child’s developmental progression as a worker, we find numerous examples of adults turning these transitions into minor rites of passage. These include: a Kaoka boy’s first pig (Hogbin 1969: 39); a Vlach 6-year-old being given his first shepherd’s crook (Campbell 1964: 156); a Kutenai boy’s first bow and arrows (Grinnel 1923: 115); a Netsilik girl’s first caught salmon, her brother’s first goose (Balikci 1970: 45); and “When [an Mbuti] boy kills his first “real animal,” he is immediately acclaimed as a hunter...[and honoured by cicatrization]...an operation performed... by one of the ‘great hunters’” (Turnbull 1965: 257). On the other hand, certain areas of work are considered inappropriate for children (just as certain tasks are reserved for males, others females). The Kwoma prevent children from prematurely assuming more difficult chores because tasks are associated with rank, and moving to a more challenging assignment is tantamount to a promotion (Whiting 1941: 70). Koori boys are not permitted to touch “real” hunting weapons (toy or scaled-down are OK) as that would demean the adult hunters who have earned the privilege (Basedow 1925: 86).

Chores also play a major role in the differentiation of gender—especially before the appearance of secondary sex characteristics.² Among the Kel Ewey Tuareg, goats are tended by boys and girls, but only boys tend camels (Spittler 1998). In West Africa, weaving is the province of women among Akwete Igbo, and 3-year-old girls pretend to weave, eventually picking up the skill through watching and helping their mothers. For the Baulè, males weave and boys acquire the skill through a lengthy, formal apprenticeship (Aronson 1989). Stereotypically, among Hadza foragers girls forage and boys hunt (Marlowe 2010). Almost universally girls are preferred as caretakers for younger siblings and sons are conscripted for this chore only when a daughter is unavailable (Ember 1973: 425-6).³ Indeed, it is common to see two clusters of children in open areas of the village or farm. Girls gather together in a corner with their young charges playing in a subdued fashion. Boys, on the other hand, roam more widely, engage

² Iris Köhler has written (personal communication 25/7/11): “Within the society I explored, I can validate the connection between chore curriculum and identity building: Very small children are allowed to play and 'work' tasks of both sexes. People say that they ‘don't know yet who they are’ and how to act their age.”

³ A significant exception to this generalization occurs in a few, highly egalitarian, foraging societies, the Central African foragers known as pygmies in particular (Henry, Morelli, and Tronick 2005: 200).

in a panoply of games, some quite noisy and boisterous, and seem generally carefree (Read 1960: 82).

The Kerkenneh Islands are typical in transitioning girls into responsible roles well before boys. “By the age of four most little girls have some real responsibility in the household. Little boys are babied longer and are discouraged from imitating their mothers because that is women’s work” (Platt 1988: 282). Indeed, boys in many societies are defined as much by their freedom from work—relative to girls—as by the specific work they do (Pope-Edwards 2005: 87). In many cases, a boy or man doing “women’s work” would be the object of ridicule.

The onset of middle childhood marks an important transition in the child’s identity. As Edel describes, Chiga children have been busy play/working and learning to do a variety of useful things. But by around seven or eight (earlier in some societies) the child falls into a routine of predictable, competent, essential work. Earlier, “any assumption of adult ways and attempts at adult skills or responsibilities is praised and applauded” (Edel 1957/1996: 178). Now they can be relied upon to do their chores without guidance, instruction, scolding or praise. Girls, in particular, can largely replicate and substitute for their mothers.

The child has reached a point in its development where he or she starts to “get noticed” (Lancy and Grove 2011) due to their evident intelligence or common sense, referred to among the Kipsigis as *ng’omnotet* (Harkness and Super 1985: 223); *wijima* among the Sisala (Grindal 1972: 28). “Intelligence in the village is associated with qualities like self-sufficiency, obedience, respect towards elders, attention to detail, willingness to work and effective management of younger siblings and livestock” (Lancy 2008: 168; see also, Wober 1972). Most, if not all, of these signs of maturity, relate to the child as worker.

The transition from child to adult is often marked by a rite of passage or initiation, seen as a precursor to marriage and adult standing. However, work may play a critical role in this transition. “Fully adult Hadzamen are referred to as *epeme* men. When a male is in his early 20s and kills a big-game animal, he becomes an *epeme* or fully adult male” (Marlowe 2010: 57). Among the Warao, a prospective bridegroom is judged on his ability to garden, hunt, fish and above all, make a canoe: any deficit is a bar to marriage and adult status (Wilbert 1976: 327). Contemporary anthropological accounts describe many cases of a breakdown in the chore curriculum resulting in a failure to marry and establish an adult persona. Among the Bumbita, a breakdown in traditional socialization practices due to missionary interference and temporary out-migration of youths has denied them knowledge of how to cultivate yams. A young man, who cannot grow yams, cannot support a family (Leavitt 1998: 178). For many, the obligation to attend school pulls them out of the chore curriculum. Youth from foraging societies may be particularly vulnerable as they miss out on hunting and gathering expeditions and fail to learn the local ecology. For Cree children:

By the time they finished their schooling, they had become foreigners to Cree tradition, not only by failing to acquire skills and knowledge of the land but also by lacking an appropriate attitude for life on the land. Thus, formal schooling led to the weakening of the existing social system (Ohmagari and Berkes 1997: 207).

The linkage between social structure and chores is also founded on the idea that “work builds character”. In a Nahua village, the elders see children working less and showing, as a result, diminished vigour and toughness (Sánchez 2007: 94); while Russian peasants believed that if children are not put to work early, they will never develop into responsible adults (Gorshkov 2009: 14). Zelizer describes the battle that unfolded during the first quarter of the 20th century between those who felt that labour was harmful to children and interfered with their schooling, and those who thought that work built the child’s character and that early employment staved off idleness and deviance (1985: 57, 72).

Role Models

If I were discussing contemporary bourgeois society this section might be labelled “Teachers”. But as analysis reveals (Lancy 2010a), active, child-centred *instruction* is quite rare outside the contemporary elite. Rather, children assume responsibility for learning their culture, chores in particular, while relying on those more expert to serve largely in the capacity of models. Again, contrary to contemporary views on what is “natural” (Lancy 2010b), the model, especially for boys, is as likely to be an older sibling or peer as a parent. As examples, I cite Amhara boys who are said to trail after young males “like retainers follow a feudal lord” (Messing 1985: 213). Hadza boys “almost never go hunting with their fathers, at... 8 or 9 years old, they go hunting for small animals, usually in twos” (Marlowe 2010: 157). By imitating their sib-caretakers Marquesan “toddlers learn to run, feed and dress themselves, go outside to urinate and defecate, and help with household chores” (Martini and Kirkpatrick 1992: 124).

There are several reasons for the choice of peers as role models. From an early age, children are placed under the care of older siblings who introduce them into the neighbourhood playgroup e.g. “Mayan toddlers learn primarily by observing and interacting with their sibling caretakers...” (Maynard 2002: 978). At the threshold of the chore curriculum, children are far more likely to be in the company of peers than parents. Weisner notes that Abaluyia “children care for other children (under a mother’s or other adults’ management) within *indirect chains of support*” (1996: 308, emphasis added). That is, toddlers are managed by slightly older siblings who are in turn guided by adolescents, while adults serve as rather distant “foremen” for the activity, concentrating primarily on their own more productive or profitable activity. This phenomenon is well illustrated in Polak’s study of Bamana families engaged in bean cultivation (Polak 2003, 2011).

There is considerable evidence that siblings are more patient and sympathetic mentors than adults (Maynard 2002). A contrasting pair of anecdotes is very revealing. Raum

observed a Chaga mother and her little daughter cutting grass to take home to feed the cattle. Tying the stalks into a bundle is difficult but the “mother refuses requests for help by saying: ‘Haven’t you got hands like me?’”(1940: 199). Now consider a vignette of Pushtun children gathering and bundling shrubs (*buti*) to bring home.

Khodaydad, aged about ten years, showed and explained to his younger brother Walidad (two and a half) how to put *buti* together: He made up a small pile while Walidad squatted next to him and watched. Tying them together, he explained how to do it. Then he untied the bundle and bound it up again to show how it was done. Walidad then wanted to carry it home. His elder brother helped him shoulder it and his sister guided him home, and it was obvious that little Walidad was very proud of being able to accomplish the work (Casimir 2010: 54).

To be sure, adults may intervene strategically in the learning process. For example, the “knowledge gained from [Meriam] adults about the reef and how to forage remains limited mainly to what is edible and what is dangerous” (Bird and Bird 2002: 291). Bamana children may “want to participate in the work done in the compound and the fields to a greater extent than they are able... they risk causing damage, for instance by using a hoe the wrong way or losing seeds” (Polak 2003: 126). Hence, parents must tactfully intervene to guide them to tasks that are within their grasp (Polak 2011: 104-5). For Warao boys learning to make canoes, the *sine qua non* of survival, “there is not much verbal instruction... but the father does correct the hand of his son [and demonstrates] how to overcome the pain in his wrist from working with the adze” (Wilbert 1976: 323).

Girls may find that their freedom and opportunity to play is curtailed by their mother’s need for a “helper at the nest”. The mother becomes the model and supervisor of the girl’s progress through the chore curriculum. As Riesman notes, by the time a young woman is pregnant, she has had years of watching her mother and others care for infants and she has herself logged many hours of child care under the watchful (and critical) eye of her mother and other senior female relatives (1992: 111). A Kpelle girl will accompany her mother to the garden, carrying a pail containing their lunch. At the field, she will watch as her mother hoes until given her own small hoe to try. She will match her mother’s behaviour, learning the moves through repeated practice and observation (Lancy 1996: 144). If a Mazahua mother has a market stall, her daughter will “pitch in” to assist her by trimming onions and tying them into bundles, using her mother’s bundles as a model. She is eager to set up “her” stand and once the mother’s stand is established, does so using an abandoned piece of cardboard (Paradise and Rogoff 2009: 113).

It is rarer to find boys paired so closely with their fathers. Children are often considered too boisterous to serve as companions on fishing and hunting expeditions (Broch 1990:85; Puri 2005, 233). A Yanomami boy will not be welcomed on the hunt by his father until he is in his mid-teens and has already developed considerable expertise at tracking and knows the forest and its inhabitants intimately (Peters 1998: 90). Fathers are often absent from the homestead or the nature of their work, felling trees to clear land for a farm, precludes a youngster from “pitching in”. However, there are a few cases where

adult males (not necessarily the father) serve as critical role models. The boy or youth will be moved from the home to the exclusive company of men.

“When FulBeMare’en boys... are old enough to herd... they no longer eat with their mother and sisters but with the men. Through explicit instruction, listening to conversations, and observation they learn about the general dietary needs of cattle, which types of grasses appeal most to cattle, the characteristics of each animal, the dominance hierarchy in the herd, and the genealogy of the herd” (Moritz 2008: 111).

As girls move out of the realm of everyday chores into more complex tasks, they may continue in the same mentoring relationship they have established with their mothers. Conambo mothers are very supportive of their daughter’s fledgling efforts at ceramics, which is a chore in the sense that all women are expected to make pots. They sometimes give the girls well-formed pots and invite them to add minor painted designs or they take the daughter’s ill-formed vessel, re-shape it and hand it back to the child to decorate. However, they do remain focused primarily on their own production (Bowser and Patton 2008). Köhler (2009, this volume) studied mother-daughter transmission of ceramic skills among the Nyarafolo. In her report, we see somewhat less engagement by the mothers, perhaps because pottery-making is optional. The onus is on the girls to take the initiative and mothers offer almost no verbal instruction even when doing so would accelerate the girl’s mastery. In my study of the Kpelle, I found mothers even less involved in the sense that they seemed to take no responsibility for their daughter’s learning to make textiles: at most they were willing to permit the daughter to work alongside and observe and copy their efforts. The attitude seemed to be that the child will learn the skill “when she’s ready” (Lancy 1996: 149). Yet another variation appears in a study of Dii potters: girls must endure a lengthy and demanding apprenticeship with their mother. It is significant that pottery-making is mandatory. In fact, “to have an ungifted apprentice or potter in the family is a disgrace, and every potter is required to reach a certain level of expertise in order not to depart from the rest of the potter families” (Wallaert 2008: 187). The only “teaching” consists in sharp verbal rebukes or directives: “Stop wasting clay,” otherwise the girl learns the way she probably learned her other chores—through observation, imitation and much practice. At age ten, the process becomes even more restrictive.

Initiative and trial and error are now forbidden; every gesture must follow the mother’s pattern. Corporal punishments (spanking, forced eating of clay) are used to ensure that rules are respected, and verbal humiliations are very common (Wallaert 2008: 190-1).

Dii pottery is somewhat unusual in that the child apprentices to a parent. In other societies it is far more usual that the child apprentices to a more distant kinsman or to a stranger. For example, “Gonja believe that familiarity breeds contempt and that sons wouldn’t show sufficient respect towards their fathers to learn from them” (Goody 2006: 254).

I want to conclude this section, however, by stressing, that despite the observed variability in the process of skill acquisition, the onus is on the learner not the model. Hence, Bolin's description of learning to weave in the Andes is probably normative. "Children are not taught to spin or weave. Rather, *they observe family members* who have mastered these crafts and imitate them directly" (2006: 99, emphasis added). In other words, I think that the child likely draws on numerous models for guidance and inspiration not just a single role model (see also Gosselain 2008: 153; Puri 2005: 280).

Progress in the Chore Curriculum

Two central principles of the chore curriculum are the motivation of the child which propels them up the learning gradient, and the nature of the task environment which reduces the severity of that gradient by offering "steps" or stages. In this section, we will examine those stages and also consider what ensues when the child is not making the expected progress.

Herding is perhaps the most evidently staged "chore". The child first learns to care for a single, juvenile animal as a pet. She or he helps cut and gather fodder and mucks out the byre. The child's progress is monitored. "Only after a boy has proved his reliability at herding goats is he preferred to the work of pasturing cattle" (Raum 1940: 200). The Tuareg boy progresses from a single kid (at three-years-old) to a herd of goats (at ten) to a baby camel (at ten) to a herd of camels (fifteen) to managing a caravan on a trek across the Sahara (in their twenties, see Spittler, this volume). The Ngoni boy faces a challenging education in cattle lore.

The Ngoni classified their cattle according to age, sex, coloring, size and shape of horns, whether castrated or not, whether in calf or not. Knowledge of the extensive series of names used for these "classes" of cattle was part of a herd-boy's A.B.C. By the time he was old enough to be told to drive certain cattle out of the kraal, designated by their class, he knew exactly which ones were meant. He could also use the cattle terminology to be precise in telling an owner about a beast which has strayed or one that had a sore hoof, or one that was giving an exceptionally good or poor flow of milk (Read 1960: 133).

Staging in agricultural production ranges from tasks as simple as chasing birds from the ripening crop (Grindal 1972: 29; Lancy 1996: 146) to ploughing behind a team of oxen (Polak 2011: 144). Children may be assigned their own garden plot as a gesture of encouragement, likewise they may given their own scaled-down collecting calabash, hoe or machete. They will shadow an older relative who serves, as we saw, as a role model. They observe the model and emulate their behaviour, but the relative (usually an older sibling) also assists by keeping the child on task and preventing him or her from damaging the work of others (Polak 2011: 104-5). Some tasks are relatively easy to master, while others, such as learning to plant millet seeds, may take a couple of years and require an adult to demonstrate the correct procedure (Polak 2011: 84-6).

In foraging, there is a range of task levels corresponding to the difficulty of the terrain and the elusiveness of the prey. With respect to terrain, we might contrast the Ju/'hoansi(!Kung) with the Huaorani. In the former, the terrain is extremely difficult and foragers face the threat of predation. Children must be left behind in camp and do not begin their foraging careers until their late teens (Hames and Draper 2004; see also Kogel et al. 1983). The terrain, in the second case, is somewhat more benign and “nothing is more cheering for a Huaorani parent than a three-year-old’s decision to join a food gathering expedition” (Rival 2000: 116). Children on the island of Mer in the Torres Straits can collect edible marine life from the shoreline and shallows. They can be seen “spearfishing with toddler-sized spears as soon as they begin walking, using them at first to spear sardines along the foreshore for bait” (Bird and Bird 2002: 262). However while some types of collecting can be mastered quickly at an early age, shellfish collecting takes more strength and mature production levels are achieved later in childhood (Bird and Bird 2002: 245).⁴

A précis of hunting development is available for the Western Apache. Children were kept from roaming beyond the camp until eight-years-old but then quickly learned to shoot small game with sling or bow and arrow. They joined enthusiastically in communal quail drives. At twelve their tracking and hunting prowess yielded prey that they were proud to bring back to camp. For his first deer hunt, at fifteen or sixteen, a boy would be permitted to accompany an older male relative who acted as role model. One earned the right to tag along (and observe) by fetching wood and water for the temporary hunting camp (Goodwin and Goodwin 1942: 475). The pattern with hunting seems to be one where boys may get an early start on using weapons, tracking and capturing small prey, but nevertheless, take many years to reach adult levels of competence (MacDonald 2007: 391). Despite this, the larger pattern is quite clear, children master most of the skills needed to function in their society at an early age.

The chore curriculum is remarkably successful in moving children from a state of dependency to one where they are both self-sufficient and contributors to the domestic economy. And, this is accomplished with little intervention from an adult “teacher”. What happens when a “student” pursuing the chore curriculum “fails”? Families vary in imposing sanctions on “laggards,” with foraging societies being the most *laissez faire*. Penalties range from the very mild, as when Mayan family members speak critically of a child who is cast in the role of “overhearer”, listening to his or her behaviour being described critically (de León ND) to more severe variations. An Amhara adult may encourage a child to do its chores “by throwing clods of dirt or manure at him” (Levine 1965: 266). Aka children who evade responsibility are denied food by their mothers (Boyette 2008). Many societies prescribe a beating for children who fail to do chores or do them poorly (Ainsworth 1967). A Sebei mother condemns a “lazy” daughter who is

⁴ For a thorough discussion of the interaction of physical size and dexterity versus experience and learning in the child’s movement through the chore curriculum, see Bock (2001).

not upto the mark by saying “I hope that you have stomach pains and dysentery” (Goldschmidt 1976: 259).

Overall, however, accounts of children eagerly doing chores are far more frequent than accounts of laggards,⁵ but significant change in the chore curriculum can be anticipated.

The Waning of the Chore Curriculum

Earlier we touched on the breakdown of the chore curriculum due to forces affecting village youth. Among these, schooling stands out. In the 1930s and 1940s, schools were first introduced to Sisala villages and the emphasis was on preparing a new elite to lead and staff the colonial and then later the post-colonial administration. This meant “a relatively small body of educated Sisala gained easy access to a large number of prestigious government positions” (Grindal 1972: 92). The majority of children, however, continued to pursue the chore curriculum (for a parallel case in Papua New Guinea, see Pomponio and Lancy 1986). The increasing monetization of the village economy and the consequent press to use schooling as a pathway to greater earning potential has, in recent years, forced parents to re-evaluate their dismissal of schooling (see Spittler, this volume). Government mandated universal schooling and the competition for scarce jobs has raised the bar in terms of the minimum level of education required to enter the labour force (Lord 2011: 102). Hence, schooling competes directly with the domestic economy for children’s time and allegiance.

There are indirect threats to the chore curriculum as well. Chief among these is the loss of sibling caretakers or their transformation into “teachers”. Mayan “children who had been to school often tried the school model of teaching from a distance with much verbal discourse until they realized that that model was not resulting in the younger child’s compliance in doing the task” (Maynard 2004: 530). Many villagers may remain ambivalent about the value of schooling. In Fez, where there are a range of craft traditions that are still economically viable, schooling is seen as waste of time, or worse, that a schooled child will not follow the strict dictates of his/her role model in learning the craft (Schlemmer 2007: 114). The children are also ambivalent and anthropologists report cases of children eager to abandon what are seen as arduous and unpleasant chores for the relative ease of the classroom (Anderson-Levitt 2005: 988), as well as cases where “Staying at home or in the fields is preferable to the despotic, sometimes boring, and often a bit cruel school reality... (Alber, this volume, p X).” However, most communities try to strike a balance, “Family decisions in rural West Africa are based on the notion that it might be wise to send some of the children going to school and others to continue peasant’s work” (Alber, this volume, p Y).

⁵ Just as a boy may be forced to do “girl’s work” if sisters are unavailable, children may be forced to remain at a very menial level in the chore curriculum because that is the level at which their contribution is most critical.

While the chore curriculum has retained its viability in many villages, in another sector of society, it has disappeared altogether. There has been a flood of studies recently of children's chores or contributions to the household among middle-class families.

- In West Berlin “parents alone are responsible for... the reproduction of daily life... the child is the recipient of care and services” (Zeiher 2001: 43; see also Wihstutz 2007: 80).
- In case studies from Los Angeles, a parent spends a lot of time cajoling/guiding a five-year-old into making her bed. It becomes a big dramatic production after she initially refuses, claiming incompetence. In a case from Rome, the father does not even bother trying to get his eight-year-old daughter to make her bed, he does it himself, while complaining that her large collection of stuffed animals and decision to move to the top bunk make his task much harder (Fasulo, et al. 2007: 16-18).
- In a related study in Los Angeles of 30 families “no child routinely assumed responsibility for household tasks without being asked... the overall picture was one of effortful appeals by parents for help [who often] backtracked and did the task themselves... [a father becoming, in effect] a valet for the child” (Ochs and Izquierdo 2009: 399-400).
- Genevan children “use the *vociferous defeat* strategy. They comply with what is asked of them but... cry, scream, bang doors, lock themselves up in their rooms to sulk and so on... Some... agree to submit if their parents can prove their demands are well-founded... [some] agree to render a service to their parents in exchange for permission to go out... One boy mentioned employing a kind of ‘terrorism’” (Montandon 2001: 62).

In contrast to these cases, Orellana's research on Central American migrant families in Los Angeles shows children—in particular girls—making a large contribution to the care and well-being of the household (and attending school). Not only do they do household chores, they do odd jobs and bring in needed cash, unlike middle class white children whose earnings are not shared with the family (Bachman, et al. 2003: 301), and assist their parents and older relatives around the barriers of culture and language (Orellana 2001).

Contemporary society is not supportive of the chore curriculum. When children become cherubs, rather than chattel (Lancy 2008: 77, 99) parents and society at large no longer view them as helpers, contributing significantly to the domestic economy. And children absorb these values trading a willingness to emulate and assist for an eagerness to express needs and preferences. The culture is no longer an open book; much of what is important to learn is hidden, because it is valuable, dangerous or complex. Teaching has all but replaced observation and imitation as the primary means of transmitting culture to the

descending generation. School learning is highly staged but it is extremely difficult for the child to proceed from level to level at her own pace, without explicit instruction. The immediate feedback afforded by mastering the small steps leading to competent work is now very elusive. The child must be content with often meaningless (“Good Job!”) praise, grades and smiley faces. The role model is unable to instruct via demonstration alone. Indeed, when the child tries to emulate a desired activity (cooking, carpentering, driving) it may be rebuffed because the possibility of damage to the child, the materials, the project or the tools is great. Toy tools are unsatisfactory because you cannot make anything truly useful. Where the chore curriculum thrives, it is a thing of beauty fitting the maturing child into its society like a key into a lock.

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