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# Anthropology Book Forum

Open Access Book Reviews

## A CLOSER LOOK AT THE LIVELIHOODS OF CHILDREN IN THE PAST

*Review by Christopher E. Nicosia*

**BOOK REVIEW:** Edited by Patrick Beauchesne & Sabrina C. Agarwal (2018). *Children and Childhood in Bioarchaeology*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida.

**KEYWORDS:** Mortuary Analysis, Children, Childhood, Biocultural, Bioarchaeology

Over the last two decades, archaeologists and bioarchaeologists have been paying increasing attention to infants and children. Earlier views of children within the discipline have often portrayed them as being irrelevant to socioeconomic life in past societies. In addition to other contributing factors, such as poor skeletal preservation, adult-focused studies, and culturally-specific funerary practices influencing appearance rates in mortuary spaces, has often led towards their exclusion when investigating past cultures (e.g., Halcrow and Tayles 2011; Lewis 2007; Mays et al. 2017). However, with shifting views since the 1970's and recent materializations of bringing nonadult-based research to forefront, it is progressively being recognized that children are active agents within their communities and that their funerary treatments can provide significant information towards biosocial contexts. They can inform a great deal about the cultures that they're a part of by extending interpretations of socio-cultural perceptions of age, gender, ideologies, and identities, and overall aid in the social reconstructions of ancient civilizations. The *Children and Childhood in Bioarchaeology* volume edited by Patrick Beauchesne and Sabrina Agarwal highlights the importance of nonadult studies by bringing together a wide-range of bioarchaeological scholars who discuss biocultural, life history, and life-course approaches towards enriching children and childhood studies in antiquity that integrate socio-cultural, biological, and archaeological lines of evidence.

The first part of the volume discusses the foundations of biocultural theory (i.e., the relationship between biological adaptations and cultural constructions that can affect human behavior) involving the concept of "childhood" – the life phase between birth and

adolescence. Bioarchaeologists Inglis and Halcrow open the first chapter with a review that explores life history and life-course theory towards social paleopathological and cultural factors that can influence a child's life, past and current theoretical positions on the study of children in bioarchaeology and the complexities of aging due to various social and biological components. They also highlight fields, such as sociology and social anthropology that are assisting in fostering studies of infants and children in past communities. The second and third chapters concentrate on mother-infant interface and feeding practices, such as breastfeeding and weaning. In the second chapter Pearson's impressive biocultural meta-analysis concentrates on the reconstruction of breastfeeding and weaning patterns in the archaeological records of 22 case studies from Europe, Eurasia, Southwest Asia, and Southeast Asia over the last 10,000 years to investigate the cultural plasticity of the weaning period. She discusses the biology of lactation to explore if humans have followed a fairly narrow "biological footprint" over the past 10,000 years or if culture had a greater effect on the variability of breastfeeding practices and fertility. Also, she discusses the incorporation of stable isotopes towards studying weaning practices. In Chapter 3, Moffat and Prowse compellingly advocate for expanding roles toward the study of children and infant feeding practices. They demonstrate how the investigation of feeding practices can illustrate social attitudes towards women and children, relationships with fertility and effects on populational health.

The fourth and fifth chapters examine nonadult remains in the archaeological record of the Peruvian north coast to explore cultural constructions of childhood and their involvements during incidents of violence. In Chapter 4, Klaus provides an important synthesis of the cultural construction of childhood in the Lambayeque region of Peru's north coast from 1000 BC to AD 1750 by integrating bioarchaeological, funerary pattern and contextual data derived from a sample of nearly 900 subadults. His findings provide insight into cultural practices (e.g., ritual offerings or sacrifice) that shaped cultural constructions of childhood and how childhood perceptions in the Lambayeque area may have changed following Spanish colonization. In Chapter 5, Toyne offers a look into understanding episodes of violence against children of pre-Hispanic Peru by conducting detailed comparative reviews of three populations each exhibiting over 100 individuals (nonadults = 50–60%). Overall, the author's theoretical approach presented a valuable examination on the intersections of traces of violence and biological age to explore social age (i.e., the embodiment of socially constructed norms concerning appropriate behavior and attitudes for an age group) and personhood at sites Túcume, Punta Lobos, and Kuelap.

The second part of the volume focuses on life history (i.e., series of changes undergone during an individual's lifetime) and life-course (i.e., a multi-disciplinary approach for the conceptualization and representation of age-related changes in an individual's life) approaches for examining human history and developmental stages through the analyses of human skeletal remains. In Chapter 6, Gosman, Raichlen, and Ryan review the current state of fundamental knowledge on skeletal development to examine possible relationships with childhood behavioral development and skeletal microstructure, specifically trabecular and cortical bone. They present a convincing argument where having a more refined understanding of skeletal developmental variations can aid in

identifying deviations from expected patterns of growth in the past. The piece unpacks useful strategies for researchers interested in skeletal development and refinement of life-course approaches towards biological and cross-cultural variability. Chapter 7 by Temple focuses on the transition between infancy and childhood of prehistoric foragers of the late/final Jomon period in Japan through a paleopathological dental examination of linear enamel hypoplasia (LEH) and mortuary practices. Despite a small sample size (n=32) of individuals with observable perikymata due to unavoidable taphonomic factors, the biocultural analysis illustrates that LEH developed the most between the period of socially determined childhood and ecologically determined childhood and provided an important discussion of physiological stress and its effects over the life-course of a nonadult.

Chapter 8 by Miller, Agarwal, and Langebaek provide a life-course study on stable isotopic food consumption of the pre-Colonial Muisca culture of Colombia. They conduct a comparative analysis by sampling multiple bone and dental tissues in the same individuals to reflect different formation stages of diet across the life cycle. From this, they track food consumption from childhood into adulthood and connections with "gendered" food consumption. Their data suggest that "gendered" maize consumption began in early childhood and persisted into adulthood. In Chapter 9, Gowland and Newman examine the eighteenth and nineteenth-century industrial revolution in Britain to see how children embodied inequalities and how these experiences early in life can shape health and well-being. This is done through the analysis of four-centimeter longitudinal bone growth, nonspecific stress indicators, LEH, and the application of developmental plasticity models and epigenetics for new alternative interpretations. The chapter demonstrates the value of multiple methods and theoretical approaches.

In the last chapter, Wheeler, Williams, and Dupras study the nature of shifting Egyptian ideologies and social attitudes toward children during a period of transition to Christian beliefs. They explore these shifts through burial practices and health reconstructions done with multiple lines of evidence (e.g., nonspecific stress indicators, trauma, and stable isotopes) involving a nonadult skeletal sample from the Egyptian Kellis 2 township population located in Dakhleh Oasis, Egypt. This cogent chapter highlights the roles mortuary archaeology can have on childhood reconstructions in bioarchaeology when combining bioarchaeological techniques with ethnohistorical contexts. The one issue in the chapter involves the comparison of stress marker relationships between nonadults to adults as it can present difficulties since nonadults exhibit higher pathological cell turnover rates that can occur during periods of growth.

In sum, the editors of *Children and Childhood in Bioarchaeology* deserve praise for crafting a vital multidisciplinary volume that provides essential information on the study of nonadults in past cultures. They brought together an excellent and well-rounded group of researchers from different bioarchaeological backgrounds that have contributed greatly towards the discussions of nonadult research. High quality figures, graphs, and tables throughout help in the presentation of data. The volume should be on the list of archaeologists, historians, and biological anthropologists interested in child studies. It will surely prove useful for upper-division courses as it not only demonstrates various

approaches towards researching children in the past but also presents temporal, cultural, and global perspectives on the human experience.

## References

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**Christopher Nicosia** is a Ph.D. student in Anthropology at Louisiana State University. His dissertation topic currently involves looking at Peruvian subadult mortuary treatments (e.g., grave goods, body placement, body orientation, etc.) with biological components, such as biological sex and pathologies, to piece together aspects of their social identity (e.g., personhood, sex-roles, gender) and to better understand their roles in past communities. He has an interest in the topics of looking at societal aspects of social identity (e.g., personhood, adulthood, gender) and care regarding perceptions of cared individuals and paleopathological influences on mortuary treatments emphasized through funerary practices. This is an outgrowth of his interests in aspects of mortuary practices, violence, paleopathology, diet, and social landscapes.



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