
The Bioarchaeology of Childhood

Theoretical Development in the Field

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Over the past two decades there has been a rapid increase in the amount of research on children and childhood in the past from anthropological, archaeological, and bioarchaeological perspectives. In previous decades underrepresentation of children in the archaeological record was often cited as being the result of poor preservation, lack of recovery, and small sample size. However, it is now acknowledged that this was more of a perception than the reality (e.g., Lewis, 2007; Halcrow, Tayles, and Livingstone, 2008). Feminist archaeologists noted that prior to the 1970s, many archaeologists were more interested in analyzing the “important” male skeletal remains than those of women and children. After Grete Lillehammer published her landmark paper “A Child Is Born” in 1989, researchers answered her pleas to recognize the presence of children in the archaeological record, and since then there has been a substantial increase in archaeological and anthropological research about children and childhood from a diversity of approaches within anthropology (Baxter, 2005, 2008; Crawford and Lewis, 2008; Gowland, 2015; Hadley and Hemer, 2014; Halcrow and Tayles, 2008, 2011; Kamp, 2001b; Lancy, 2008; Lally and Moore, 2011; Lewis, 2007; Lillehammer, 1989, 2015; Schwartzman, 2005; Sofaer Derevenski, 2000; Wilman, 2005).

A key difficulty in studying children in the past is terminological differences in defining a child and measuring and understanding the biological, cultural, and social meanings of the stages of childhood. Research among the various subfields of biological anthropology, archaeology, and anthropology continues to be hampered by the number of disparate theoretical approaches to childhood in the past, leaving a feeling that Lillehammer’s

“child” is taking just a bit too long to “grow up.” David Lancy’s (2012b) analogy of the field of the anthropology of childhood as a house of disconnected separate rooms aptly describes the state of childhood studies at times, which has consequently had a negative impact on achieving coherence in the research approaches. In addition, the lack of theoretical development around how to interpret the nuances of childhood within their fluid and socially dynamic contexts has also impeded research on the bioarchaeology of children.

With the recent proliferation in research of childhood within anthropology from diverse perspectives, it is important to situate the bioarchaeology of childhood within this growing body of work. Therefore, this chapter reviews the development of the bioarchaeological study of childhood and offers suggestions for the development of approaches that “speak” between the different theoretical perspectives in the study of childhood in the past. We start by placing the bioarchaeological approach to the study of childhood within the historical context of the development of childhood social archaeology, gender archaeology, and biological anthropology of children. We discuss the theoretical issues of age in the bioarchaeology of children and problems that arise from this endeavor. Suggested future research directions include the integration of biological aspects into the social life course approach by incorporating aspects of the life-history theoretical approach. Another suggestion is to critically evaluate the attribution and meaning of “agency” in bioarchaeological studies of childhood.

WHAT IS CHILDHOOD, AND WHEN DID WE START TAKING NOTICE?

Although fields such as social anthropology and sociology have been directly observing and writing about societies with children for decades (e.g., Mead, 1930), it wasn’t until the 1960s that serious attention began to focus on the nature of children in the past. French philosopher and historian Philippe Ariès is often credited with starting the development of the study of childhood and was arguably the most influential in the field with his assertion that the idea of childhood did not exist in medieval society (Clarke, 2004; Crawford and Lewis, 2008; Halcrow and Tayles, 2011; James and Prout, 1997; Lancy 2008; Orme, 2008). Ariès based his research on an analysis of figurative art (painting), sourced mainly from French culture and society, although he extrapolates his conclusions for the rest of Western culture (Pollock, 1983). Ariès (1962) argued in his book *L'enfant et la vie familiale sous l'Ancien Régime* (1960) (translated into English in 1962 as

Centuries of Childhood) that medieval society did not recognize childhood (despite the difference between the worlds of children and adults having been recognized in ancient society), although he offered no explanation why adults stopped regarding children as children (Pollock, 1983).

Ariès' claims were widely debated, and although many supported his ideas, others were quick to counter with evidence that childhood has been seen in some societies as a separate life stage from the Egyptians onward (Lancy, 2008; Lyman, cited in Pollock, 1983; McLaughlin, cited in Pollock, 1983). Despite the contentious nature of Ariès' claims, his work was very influential in making people aware that concepts about childhood had changed over time, and he focused attention on an area that had previously been somewhat neglected. *Centuries of Childhood* was seminal because it recognized that childhood is a social construct rather than a biologically determined part of the life course. This work remains the main reference text for childhood studies today.

In the 1980s Viviana Zelizer, a historical sociologist, also published an influential book on the study of childhood in the past, *Pricing the Priceless Child*. This work tracks the changing social perception of the child from the end of the 19th century through the 20th century. Zelizer (1985) argues that in the 19th century, children were regarded as an economic asset to the family, but by the end of the 20th century, they were seen as “economically useless,” again highlighting the changing notion of childhood.

Other social factors were responsible for the increased interest in children at this time, including international social and economic changes in the late 20th century resulting in poverty and exploitation that disproportionately affected children (*Encyclopedia of Children and Childhood in History and Society*, n.d.). Recently there has been a development of child-focused education, health, and parenting in the West. We argue later that the development of the search for childhood “agency” has developed in the context of the “overparenting” style of caregiving where children are often hypermonitored with all activities from birth. Here children are afforded large amounts of efficacy with responding to their wants in social interactions and therefore have a lot of social autonomy, while having little freedom to carry out activities by themselves (Lancy, 2012a).

ARCHAEOLOGY AND GENDER

Gender archaeology in the 1970s drew attention to the prejudices and biases prevalent within archaeology. This was a time when archaeologists

queried the lack of representations of women in the past (Conkey and Spector, 1984). There was a particular focus on “finding” women in the paleoanthropological context and the criticism of gender models for human evolution, such as the “man the hunter” hypothesis (Conkey and Spector, 1984). With a growing recognition that at least half of the population were obscured in accounts of past societies, archaeologists began at first to “find” women and then later to recognize their contributions to past societies, although there remained a tendency to associate them with domestic spheres of activity (Baxter, 2005; Nelson and Rosen-Ayalon, 2002; Sofaer Derevenski, 1997). However, this incorporation of gender concepts into archaeology was neither universal nor undisputed, and the reception that feminist archaeology received varied across the globe and within the discipline. For example, many archaeologists in Australia up until the 1990s and later were extremely reluctant to incorporate gender into archaeological research at all (De Leuien, 2013). In the case of Australia, the field was androcentric, where women were faced with gender inequality in the workforce and were often delegated to “lesser” tasks than men, and was influenced by a tradition of “do” theory, where field archaeology was the main focus of the discipline (Bowdler and Clune, 2000; Smith and O’Donnel, 2006). The gendered association of women with domesticity and the household—and therefore links to children and childcare—may in part explain the reluctance of many archaeologists to undertake research on children. Although the study of gender did not automatically lead to the study of children and childhood, it did create the context for researchers such as Lillehammer (1989), Kamp (2001b), and Sofaer Derevenski (1994) to query where the children were in archaeological sites.

In 1989, Sir Keith Thomas wrote, “children, like women, are what anthropologists like to call a muted group,” thus recognizing that the relative invisibility of women in archaeological research was also true for children, most likely because of the relationship between them (Halcrow and Tayles, 2011; Thomas, cited in Crawford and Lewis, 2008: 10). When Pamela Geller (2009b: 70) warns that “children are the new women,” she is cautioning that researchers in childhood studies should not repeat past mistakes in treating children like researchers used to treat women—emphasizing their in/visibility, which Geller argues overlooks how dynamic identity is and eclipses how an individual acquires personhood in a given cultural and social context.

Analyzing sex and gender in skeletal remains is typically the starting point (along with age) in determining how people in past societies lived.

At present, researchers are still hindered by the difficulty in making reliable sex estimations in children due to the absence of secondary sex characteristics evident on the adult skull and pelvis (Buikstra and Ubelaker, 1994; Saunders, 2000; Lewis, 2007). This makes any interpretations of gender in a shortened period of life very challenging. Even though infants and children may well have lived gendered lives, discovering the evidence of who they were has so far proven to be demanding.

BIOCULTURAL APPROACH

The development of a biocultural approach within bioarchaeology was formed in part by the increased interest in gender archaeology and interactions between humans and their social, cultural, and physical environments. Although bioarchaeologists were already aware of such interactions, it was the development of the biocultural approach that really began to emphasize their dynamic nature and how the different environmental and social contexts in which they occurred could have a significant influence in shaping the skeletal body (Armelagos, Carlson, and Van Gerven, 1982; Armelagos and Van Gerven, 2003; Schutkowski, 2008; Sofaer, 2013; Zuckerman and Armelagos, 2011). To make sense of the patterns of disease from skeletal remains, an understanding of the multitude of environmental factors that contribute to health is imperative.

EARLY INFANT AND CHILD BIOARCHAEOLOGICAL RESEARCH

The infant and child portion of archaeological remains were largely overlooked until the 1960s (Johnston 1961, 1962, 1968, 1969; Johnston, Smith, Yu, and Deiss, 1968). This can be understood in the context of the research interest at that time of classification, description, and metrics (Washburn, 1951). Physical anthropologists were mainly interested in comparative craniometry, which required the analysis of adult crania (Gould, 1996; Hooton, 1930). Hooton (1930: 15) typifies the disinterest in the analysis of infants at the time:

In the case of infants and immature individuals, the cartilaginous state of epiphyses and the incomplete ossification of sutures, as well as the fragility of the bones themselves usually results in crushing and disarticulation. In any event, the skeletons of young subjects are of comparatively little anthropological value.