

Review for “Man”
Childhood in Contemporary Cultures
By Margaret Lowenfeld
The University of Chicago Press 1955. P. 473

This book is a collection of papers by 14 different writers under the editorship of Dr Margaret Mead and Martha Wolfenstein. The aim of the book is to do two things: to present work on direct observation of children, literature about and for children, and the results of studies of certain aspects of parental relationships on the one hand, to set all these in a framework of general theory, with an apologies reviewing the value and the consequences of insight on the other.

It opens with three papers by Margaret Mead, Ruth Benedict (written in 1938) and Geoffrey Gorer respectively, setting out the theoretical background to the book. This is followed by twenty-one papers grouped into six parts – two of these (Parts II and V) and one paper in Part VII report on direct observation of children in Bali, in France, in U.S.A. and in orthodox Jewish families. Three papers (21 and 22 in Part VI and 24 in Part VII) are contrasted studies of families in a common setting and discussion of the different modes of child rearing in different culture. Two entire sections (Parts III and IV) deal with literature about children, or about phantasies which in different cultures are produced for or about children in story or film. A short bibliography follows each paper.

At the end (Part VIII) each of the two editors sums up the position at the time of writing (1954), and the implications of the insight gained in the study.

In her introduction Dr. Mead writes that the design of the book is methodological rather than documentary ‘to give the student and interested reader some idea of the kinds of research which may fruitfully be explored from the standpoint of method and of results’, and in as far as it does this the book marks a step forward. The studies included are described by Dr. Mead as ‘all studies of pattern, of the stylistic

interrelationship of different aspects of childhood and of the way in which in a given culture' the possible aspects of child study, which she enumerates 'are all systematically related to one another'.

In the selection of papers of inclusion the authors have used materials reporting on primitive societies – as in the excellent papers on Bali children's relation to ritual drawing and music which include six pages of fine photographs and a good bibliography and material with permanent application to European life as in Mark Iboronski's study of the place of book learning in traditional Jewish culture.

In contrast with these, the material on France children is slight, and the paper on moral judgements of German children is marred by absence of information on the background of the children as to whether, for example, they come from North to South, from Catholic or Protestant families.

Inevitably a large part of the book is concerned with American experience. The most interesting paper in this group, a long study of Martha Wolfenstein, of comparative types of moral training of children, arose out of material gathered in the Columbia University Research in Contemporary Culture, and presents the different attitudes of parents and children as gathered from interviews in America with Czech, pre-soviet Russia, Jewish and Chinese informants. Margaret Mead and Elena Calas contribute a paper on Child Training Ideals in Pre-Soviet Russia which form an involuntary comment on the previous study; this uses material drawn almost exclusively from Russian sources and contains a useful bibliography.

Looking at it from the point of view of source material, the value of the book will be considerably affected by the attitude of the reader to psycho-analysis; since most of the papers – which are not strictly documentary, as for example those on Bali or Ruth Benedict's illuminating introduction in Part I – are written from a psychoanalytic standpoint. The results of this bias is sometimes peculiar as in the treatment given to the Chinese classic monkey.

The epilogue contains a wholesomely astringent estimate of the present situation and the lack of success which has so far attended attempts to make use of the insight which studies of the kind reported in the book have brought us.

The book is well produced, the print is clear, and there is an adequate index.