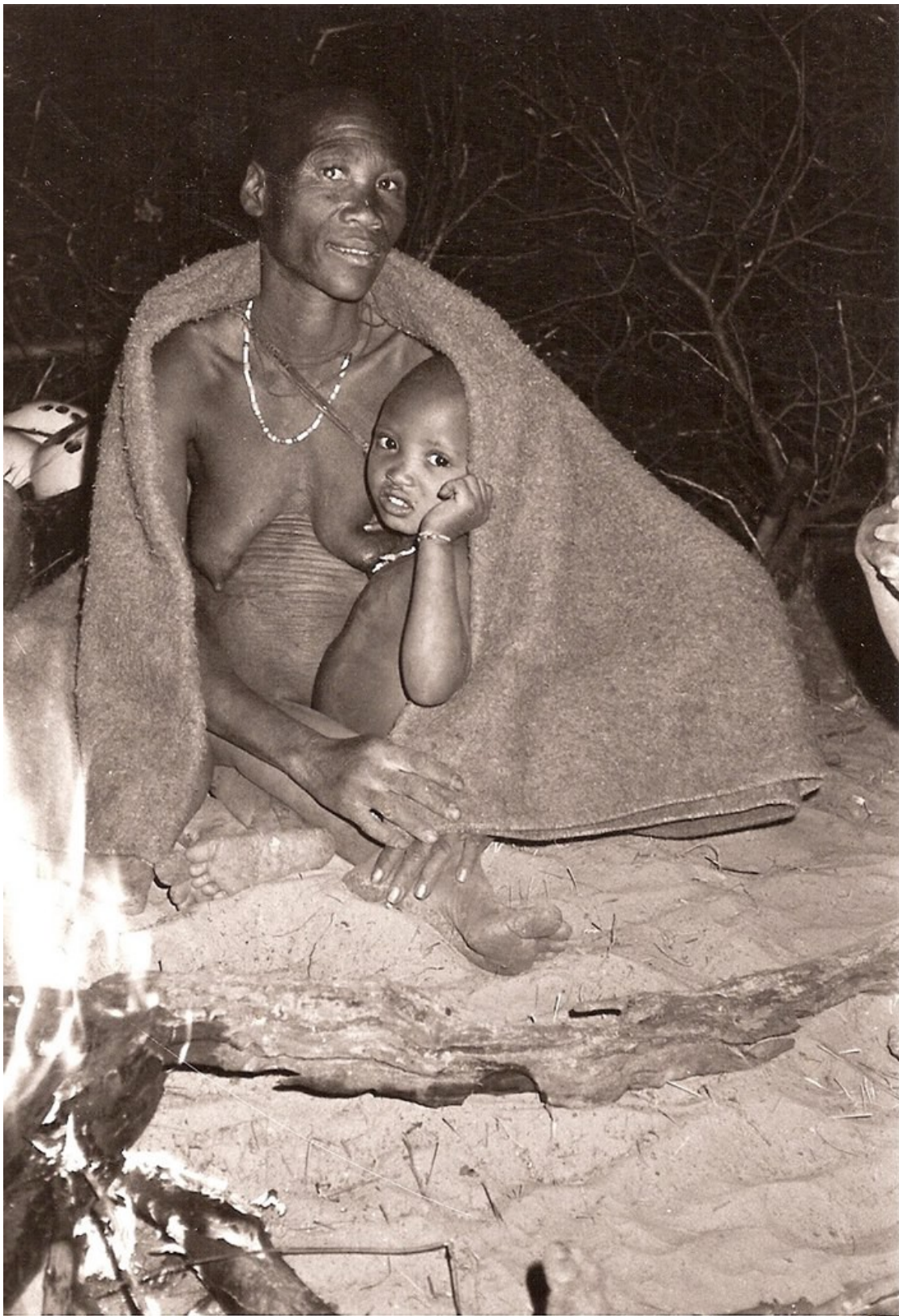


Culture, Play, and Parenting

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Based on a couple of talks with neuroscientist Dr. Kwame M. Brown in February of 2015



Kua woman with her two year old daughter

I spent three years in Botswana, doing research on the lives and languages and history of the hunter-gatherer people who lived in the SE Kalahari. I got to know a group calling themselves Kua, the “best”/“real” people . These are observations of children and parenting behaviour were made in camps where I was no longer a novelty. In campsites [I visited] less frequently my presence

interfered, I think, with spontaneous child play behavior, since older children became shy at first, while the toddlers would, during my early visits, all be watching me avidly, or else be trying to sit close enough to feel my hair.

In camps where my presence was of no great interest to anyone anymore, I remember a relaxed but constant interaction and supervision between adults and children. There was no concept of play as a timed event as in “let us play now”; still less “you go play now” where kids were encouraged to be out of adult earshot. During the day there was a lot of very active running around and in the evening children gathered around older adults who told stories about imaginary events featuring animals, people, and mischevious spiritual beings: such stories came alive in the telling, briming with humour, tragedy, sudden heroics, and a lot of surprising twists and turns.

Play

Play and learning were the same thing: There seemed to be a lot of “pretend” play where children were imitating adult activities like building fires, tanning skins, gathering, learning to use bows and arrows, and cooking, but there was also a lot of dancing and prancing — pretending to be various animals. A lot of this involved grandparents watching and making suggestions. People often made their camp sites near known stands of wild fruit, especially the small sweet berries growing on low shrubs. There is even some evidence that adult women deliberately spread seeds of these plants throughout the localities favoured for making campsites. What this means is that there are very often places for groups of children can forage within a few hundred yards of a the camp. I frequently saw mixed groups of children and teenagers setting off to pick berries. Some of the girls, in imitation of their mothers, gathered enough to bring back. I could hear them laughing in the distance, and if I wandered over, they would encourage me to join them, smiling with lips red from berry juices. They were of course gobbling handfulls as they went along. Such are, in fact, the joyful memories of my own childhood: at age four I regularly joined other neighbourhood children gorging on wild raspberries and blue berries near a beaver pond. Each of us returned home with a tin full of berries — and hopes of berry pie.

Childhood friendships loomed very large. Attachments to other children seemed to become more and more important to each child as they grew older. These were attachments to unrelated children in about equal proportions to consanguines — your best friends were not necessarily your siblings or first cousins: they were as likely to be children of your mother's oldest friend — or people born in another language group altogether. I recall being told by a young girl that she always longed to see a best friend who was the daughter of a G/wi woman, one of two daughters she brought with her, after their father died and the widow then remarried a Kua man. This was to clear up my initial confusion, because the new stepfather was the uncle of the girl, so I kept calling this friend of hers by the term for “cousin” until I learned the full history.

Friendships among children were often fraught with the tearful absences while their parents lived for a time in different camps — whether these were five or a hundred miles apart. So children's friendships kept getting interrupted and renewed over time, as families moved from camp site to camp site. I remember being struck, as our group trekked to the next campsite (I followed with my truck, and the kids would all crowd into my cab), that children would be eagerly anticipating seeing again those friends they had missed “*because our places were too far*”).

It was especially hard for children to be parted from friends they had made during the times in the yearly round when camps from different language groups shared a water point. These tended to entail larger clusters of camps, located close together, and for as much as a few months duration. At these times, much larger groups of children formed play groups, and Kua children interacted with G/wi, and “Tsassi” and H!ua speaking youngsters, perfecting multilingualism, and hearing and translating all sorts of new stories, jokes, games, and dances. Older children in their teens would set off to travel together overnight (segregated by sex), just to spend time with companions in other camps. They visited cousins frequently, and unrelated friends as well. There would be mixed language play-groups around the larger camps. *This is how we learn we are all one people, we are all BaSarwa*, one man told me. (BaSarwa is the common term in SeTswana language, meaning “Bushmen”.) It seems thus that a kind of larger culture-group or “ethnic” identity was forged in these childhood playgroups.

Forms of Play

There was a lot of emphasis on taking turns and on sharing everything. Children were usually loud, laughing, and shrieking, and most play involved a lot of racing around the camp. At no time did I witness bullying or fighting. Given all the knives and potentially dangerous tools around most camps, any display of aggression was firmly discouraged by being ignored, or even, in extreme cases, mocked and laughed at.

Competitive play was almost nonexistent: I never saw anything involving any sort of peer group teams, although by age ten, boys played more often with other boys, and girls with other girls. Older children monitored younger ones and looked out for danger. Children were permitted to play with knives and fire, so they learned not to cut or burn themselves or others. Play games often involved things like taking turns being “the one with the ball”, or “the one who got to go hide”, or “the one” who had to demonstrate an animal call or behavior for everyone to guess. The most popular games involved the girls doing a clapping and singing routine, while boys danced. This was in imitation of the major ritual activity during larger community events like trance dances (healing ceremonies).*

I rarely heard a small child cry. Tiny babies woke up, made a few whimpers and got swift and unceremonious attention. Young children slept with their parents or grandparents when small, but older adolescents sometimes built their own small huts behind the adult’s camp area and spent much of the night talking and laughing and telling stories.

From toddler-stage, children were not coerced or shouted at or physically punished, nor were they permitted to coerce each other, to bully, or to be mean. There was never a “lord of the flies” scenario of gangs and exclusion of certain kids, and no instances of kids beating each other up.



West Africa

Childhood among Tribal Peoples

When I worked in West Africa, and saw play among children in the villages of horticultural people in West Africa, and among the Fulani pastoralists, I realized I was seeing saw more peer group play. There was also more peer-organized learning of joint activities, at least for boys. Boys over age 12 tended to be organized in age grades and assigned joint tasks. They did things like singing together while they all went and scared birds away from ripening crops, or while they looked after chickens or goats together, or went out collecting firewood together, or while their little group were doing cleanups of corrals or gardens. Girls, when older, were generally *not* in peer groups, but were usually helping, or at least hanging around, their mothers and their grandmothers. Girls as young as ten were often “in charge” of younger siblings while their mothers went to work in the gardens or to get water.

The main difference I observed in the West African horticultural and pastoral groups was that children were expected to obey adult authority. Some adults were clearly not to be played with, let alone joked with. Play time was more structured, and , since children were expected to do certain chores, play was only for reward for good work. But there were certainly still the massive outbreaks of joint gesturing, clapping, and dancing — of group play.

Structured competitive games.

Wrestling competitions, seen among boys, were organized as fun and played according to strict rules. Men did wrestling competitions as well, organized between teams representing different lineages or even villages.

Competitive games were most often seen among children in the farming villages, whereas dancing competitions and singing games were more common among teenagers in the Fulani pastoral groups. Teenage boys wore make-up to be more beautiful and did special “slow” dancing to traditional songs and flutes, while girls watched and made jokes or shouted compliments and even sometimes loudly discussed who was the most desirable fellow (which usually led to a lot of playful and mutually mocking arguments among girlfriends).

Contrasts with my Childhood

These examples from my African fieldwork were in contrast to the interactions I experienced while I was growing up. In kindergarden other children stole my lunch. In the early grades of school, other children occasionally excluded me from cliques, tried to intimidate me, or even ganged up to assault me. These kinds of interaction gave me nightmares when I was a child: there were bullies at my kindergarten in Germany, and at my primary school in Canada, and even many adults I met while I was a child were scary — they had little time for children. You did not feel all that welcome in the world, except for your own parents and grandparents.

I turned early to fantasy in which I was an animal like Bambi just dancing in the meadow, or a monkey climbing trees, or a bear digging a den in a hillside or a snow pile.

There were always other children to play with, but often they were trying to exert authority over smaller children. I recall spending a lot of my time defending other kids from mean little gangs and then getting pelted with stones or snowballs on the way home. I had to learn to fight.



Mama and me with my baby brother; Canada, 1961

Fear and pain, therefore, were very often the dark side of seeking fun and adventure. This may have been harder for me as an immigrant; worse, a person easily identified with a recently dehumanized “enemy”: many of my classmates identified me as a member of the nation recently humiliated in WWII — and referred to as “Huns” or “Krauts”. I was ambushed by gangs of older boys who pelted me with snowballs for being a “Nazi”. In grade 6, I was trapped, along with my cousin Trudy, by the two biggest of the class bullies. We were on a forest trail on the way home. They took away our books. I had seen the cigarette burns all over the legs and arms of another girl they had tortured, and was determined to fight them. By sheer luck I managed to bite one of them severely on his hand and that ended the fracas. He nearly lost his thumb, and came to class the next day with a cast.

I admit, this was extreme. But little girls surely should not have to go to such lengths!

This all kept replaying in my mind as I sat quietly in camp and watched the children of foragers. They seemed to have a much bigger network of positive relationships with other children, and of networks of adults who knew them. They seemed to me to live in a vast **bubble of safety**. My own bubble had been very small compared to theirs.

What children Learn when they are Safe

There many Kua adults, besides the parents, who extended around themselves a kind of “safety zone” for others, especially children. The positive role modeling among adult foragers was about being a gentle, humorous, fair, generous, and articulate person. All the most admired people exemplified these qualities, and, furthermore, they could stop dangerous situations because they were gifted with “*seeing into the far hearts*” (not that I have ever quite been satisfied with my translation of this important phrase). It was around such people that camps were formed, it was often their names that were the tags identifying camps. It was not any primacy of rights to particular localities that made them the focal point for gathering of household, it was the quality of their character.

This was something children picked up on. The Kua could name these people even if they were in distant places, and even if they had never met them. I suspect this is a kind of pan-human thing: in every society there are those persons who appear to be hubs where social networks converge. A young person can strive to become such a symbol of everything good; the personified center of a place of emotional rallying, creators of a zone of reassuring safety.

Perhaps this can be linked to our modern cults of celebrity? I wonder...but all celebrity is about gossip too: even when it extolls the hero it can just as quickly spread a scandal. Among foragers, even a child inclined to be greedy and mean soon learns to control these impulses, especially as the child grows into an adolescent and becomes aware of the fact that every major slip-up would be gossiped about over thousands of square miles. Bad behaviour would influence how hundreds of other people would talk about you! And who wanted to be excluded from play activities? Later, who wants this to interfere with the yearning hearts of youthful romance?

I have wondered at the differences on the role played by adults, which varied with the kind of economy. These definitely affect parenting and thus their children’s experiences of childhood. In some more complex economies, with more authoritarian social hierarchies, parenting must prepare children for lives of obedience and conformity. Specialized skills and job categories can make parents unequal to the task of teach their children all they will need to know to participate in the work and political life of the community. Also social

stratification and inequality seems to reduce the range of friendships children are permitted to have, and the degree of trust they can experience among the children of strangers, especially of widely different classes.

I strongly suspect too that is why little girls [in Western cultures] go crazy to have a pony or a horse — or at least a big dog. Such animals can they make their human companion feel safe. When you are riding on a horse, you are in a much safer zone than just walking alone or among other little kids.



Helga with her mare Penny

Social status also affects the kind of roles demonstrated by parents and other adults. If status is based on ideals like generosity, kindness, gentleness, patience, fairness, and willingness to cooperate, then children will strive to become very different people than they do when status is based on named roles and qualifications, especially when they see their parents either in authority over others, or being obedient to the authority of those with higher status. Being a member of a group that is seen as less important or worthy of respect is very scary and hard for children. It unleashes a lot of fear and resentment.

When childhood is treated as status, and young children are treated as a group less worthy of respect and equal treatment than adults, it can be scary for children. They might react with anxiety and even defiance. “Rites of passage” then mark rises in status, rather than altered states of being with age and new skills.

Higher status, in many societies, implies the right to *disrespect* — you can now treat those with lower status as you were formerly treated. In a social system where this means younger kids are now under your authority and must give way to your bullying, it can set up a self-affirmation fallacy that makes older children feel superior to those “beneath” them.

I think differences in how children play are significant and serve as a warning — about potential dehumanization and normalization of warfare.

Children in industrialized societies are socialized into peer groups in schools and cannot escape the relentless emphasis on competitive activities within such peer groups. This creates different forms of play and creates a very different kind of social world. Everything children do in our industrial societies, from playing snakes-and-ladders to winning places at university, is about beating out their competitors. Children’s friendships are as often about excluding others as about inclusion, and the emergence of in-group vs out-group sentiments and resulting competitive activities is encouraged by numerous team sports as well as mutual bullying associations at playtime.

Is any of this optimal for cognitive development? I don’t think a childhood lived in fear of bullies is optimal. Nor is a childhood where your value rises as you win out over others. Children who build up their self-esteem by literally beating up other children are not learning values compatible with an egalitarian or peaceful co-existence, anymore than are the children who spend their energies beating others at algebra, or at basketball, or by getting voted “most likely to succeed”, or winning scholarships or prizes. Thinking that life is all about “who you are better than” seems rather sad. That doesn’t end well very often, either for the kids who get the prize, the ones who are often “second best” or “losers”... or the ones who wind up in a prison of self-doubt and despair.



Bullying can be a life long aspect of hierarchical societies

The structure of our whole social and economic system is dangerously conducive to top down authority and coercion, as well as potential abuse and corruption. We have all the same resentments and emotional stress caused by injustices, greed, dishonesty, and bullying as I saw among hunter-gatherers; except in our society it is perpetrated rather than curtailed. And, unfortunately, in our “modern” societies, the class structure makes certain people far more likely to get away with such bad behaviour. The kid who runs the most powerful gang is even rewarded with followers. You hear statements like “that’s just the way life is — nobody said life was fair” and “deal with reality, not fantasy” and “grow up and learn to roll with the punches” and many people think this is normal.

I don’t think it is “normal”.

I think it runs up against some very strong aspects of human nature. What does it do to a child’s heart, to be made to feel that they must prove they are good enough to be loved or admired by *rising above the crowd, rather than getting along with others?*

Human behavior is very plastic. But I think the evidence is pouring in that there are limits. When we get past these limits, we wind up with people who are not able to sustain relationships, who are capable of great harm to themselves and

others. Do we really want societies where conformity is based on fear, and “group-think” can be used to generate massive injustices and cruelty to humans as well as to other creatures?



Callousness manifests as denial of the stress caused by what we might call “moral injury” in many such cases. But it leaks out of individuals and whole populations in the form of high levels of stress hormones. This in turn causes a host of other behavioral consequences: hyper vigilance (often manifest as insomnia or panic attacks), depression, sudden attacks of uncontrollable rage, self-medication with sedative or disinhibiting substances, overeating or other eating disorders, self-isolation, suicide, infanticide, and even, outbreaks of mass murder.

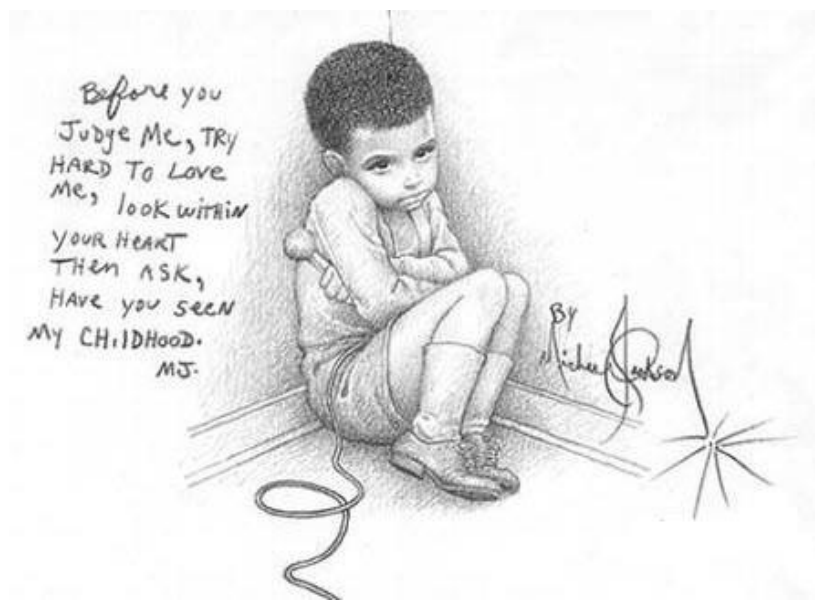


Man amuses laughing companions by “humping” the bronze statue of the defiant girl facing up to the Wall Street Bull

These are indicative of changes in the phenotype that can affect epigenetic gene regulation, and even be heritable over generations as long as the stressful environmental conditions continue. The fact that this stress response is widely recognized as a problematic aspect of human “nature” is an understatement.

What is not widely accepted, or even recognized, is that these stress responses illuminate, not the weak aspects of human nature, but the best. Perhaps humans do not react well to the stress of inequality and bullying — is this a bad thing? Is the manipulation of behavioural plasticity to the point of widespread mental illness, within cultural systems, not a warning sign? They tell us that specific cultural systems can be very successful in competition with others, but that the biological fallout can be very damaging.

Systems of socio-economic stratification concentrate the most damage on those who are powerless. Poverty, awareness of inferior status, and powerlessness leads to inescapable stress, and this in turn can result in higher rates of diseases, to reproductive failure, to lowered life expectancy, and to lower IQ.



Victims of stress may not know how to defend themselves but seek relief in painkillers or self-harm.

I have often wondered if this is one of the reasons why people who are wealthy enough to consider themselves winners at life, “respectable”, and closer to the centres of the power structure, sometimes fail to see the benefits of a “war on poverty”. There is a sentiment that it only encourages laziness and freeloading to use tax revenues to support the poor with food, charity, health care, housing and so on. It makes me wonder if there might actually be an element of callous indifference that goes along with the self- affirming status justifications that seem to afflict many wealthier and more powerful people.

Can it be possible that there are political and corporate “leaders” today, consider poor, ill, disabled, or elderly persons to be so extraneous, to the “economic progress of society”, that their welfare constitutes a burden? Is that why the response to the current COVID pandemic has been so inadequate?

One need not imagine the effects this kind of structural violence has on human beings, particularly children. It is in the news every day. I am not saying that it all begins with how our children play, or how people parent. But I do suggest that children’s play tells us what is going wrong — and that is not child’s play.

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*It is not ideal, but this video has some nice impressions.

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