

Reynolds, Pamela. Childhood in Crossroads. Cognition and Society in South Africa. 1989. David Philip (Cape Town and Johannesburg) and Wm. B. Eerdmans, (Grand Rapids, Michigan, USA). n.p. paper.

Childhood in Crossroads assesses the mental and emotional life of Xhosa children and families living in Crossroads, a squatter settlement near Cape Town, South Africa. The book presents the results of a lengthy series of cognitive tests and procedures done with 14 seven year old children (10 in school, 4 not) Reynolds came to know intimately, as well as a random sample of 25 other children administered many of the same tests. Reynolds' study provides a social-historical outline of the appalling conditions facing these children, along with ethnographic understanding of their everyday lives.

The introduction outlines the situation at Crossroads in 1980. Political oppression pervades these childrens' lives. Most residents are illegally living there; families are separated and fragmented due to the racial policies of the country; about 20,000 blacks, nearly all Xhosa, live in some 3000 shacks made of sheet iron and cardboard or wood. The life is dangerous and insecure, police raids and violence are ever-present, money is scarce, work, when available, is far away and badly-paid, and school conditions are difficult. A revisit in 1988 to the children shows the instability of their lives: one child killed in an auto accident; several with serious and preventable diseases; many having moved and/or experienced rioting and the loss of family. The community experienced violence resulting in perhaps a 100 deaths in 1986. At age 14, the children had only completed a fifth of the school grades that they would have passed had 100% of them remained in school and passed every year. The book situates these children and their families in this political and racial context, and Reynolds is deeply and openly their advocate.

Reynolds works within the psychological tradition founded by Piaget, and the anthropological one of Monica Hunter in her pioneering urban research with Xhosa. Reynolds admires Piaget's theory [although Vygotsky and Foucault (who is quoted) would

seem much more appropriate to her theory and methods)) yet devotes much of her book to critiquing Piagetian-derived tests and procedures. Reynolds has taken seriously Michael Cole's perspective on the need to reverse testers' and subjects' roles. It is the "tester" (in this case, Reynolds the fieldworker and psychological anthropologist) who works to produce the competent performance in the child, or to understand why the performance which is produced by the child has arisen.

Each chapter explores a topic relevant to children's lives: their births and life histories; self-image; play, songs, and games; concepts of physical space, mapping, size, and the body; children's concepts of kinship; dreams and children's ideas about them; and "order", by which Reynolds means tests, derived from Piaget, of conservation, relational concepts such as seriation, class inclusion tests, and projective imagery.

Her chapter on children's understandings of kinship relationships illustrates her critique of conventional procedures. She tried out several standardized procedures for collecting information on children's kinship knowledge; these measures showed considerable "confusion" and inconsistency in the children's responses to questions regarding the meaning of referential kin terms. Reynolds points out that Crossroads households shift and change a great deal, that most Crossroads children live in "blended" families with step-fathers, or other kin with multiple and complex connections to the household, that English and Afrikaans terms, and slang terms, blend with traditional Xhosa ones, and that work and marriage arrangements lead to constant changes in households. Even knowing who does "live" in the child's household is not easy to define for adults, much less children. Hence procedures requiring matching referential kin terms to particular individuals in a child's household are not the best way to reliably assess the emotional salience of kin categories, children's working knowledge of a kinship system, or their understandings of their family membership.

Some of the material is presented in a fragmentary style, with multiple purposes in mind. In some sections, children's responses to tests are presented in the context of accounting for "low" scores on a particular test, so that the data presentation is organized around the theme of critiquing the test or experimental procedure. In other sections, the results of a test procedure are presented apparently for informational completeness, without any rationale or interpretation. In other sections overall summaries of children's responses are used to describe how the children generally viewed Crossroads, or how they felt about a particular subject. The organizing rationale for those sections is to present the thoughts and feelings of the children and relate those to their experience in their everyday lives.

It is surprising that there is little analysis in the text of results by child or family, across all the procedures, regardless of topic or domain. This certainly could be done, since one of the real strengths of this study is the close, intimate, relatively long-term relationships Reynolds established with each child and family, as well as her ethnographic knowledge of the community. Reynolds' points regarding the importance of context and the need for ethnographic, person-centered knowledge in understanding children's thought, would have been better made with the child and family as the unit of analysis for presentation and interpretation of more of the material, rather than switching between the test or experiment as the organizing unit, particular topics, such as kinship or spatial knowledge, and general community-level descriptions.

Reynolds' different organizing frames for the book (critiquing formal procedural methods, and presenting the rich and complex mental life of Crossroads children in holistic context), thus sometimes work against each other. Yet these children's lives and minds, and their humanity, comes through regardless. The book succeeds in presenting what clearly is its real heart -- giving a voice to the lives of these children and their circumstances in South Africa. What makes this book a unique and original contribution

are the data presented from such an important and difficult place to study, and Reynolds' consistent focus on how the world is viewed by young children. Reynolds' honest witness and relentless effort to understand the modes of thought of these South African children makes this a rich and important report.

Thomas S. Weisner  
Professor of Anthropology  
Departments of Psychiatry and Anthropology  
University of California, Los Angeles