Introduction

“Children should be seen, and not heard”

The above maxim, though representing a Victorian value, was commonly pronounced in family homes up until a half century ago. It is based on the principle that a well-behaved child is a child who does not bother adults or disrupt their conversations. While such approaches have evolved considerably since then, in mainstream social science theory, children’s voices usually are not heard. Wallowing as it were in a phase of innocence, immaturity and dependence on adult care and protection, children continue to be largely deemed unfit as sources of scientific inquiry. This notion that children are constantly in a ‘developmental’ stage has its roots in the 19th century; movements contending against child labour in favour of compulsory basic education inspired an interest in children within academic spheres, and research was institutionalised primarily in the pedagogical and paediatric disciplines. In this setting, Freud’s ideas were launched, drawing unprecedented attention to the subjective experience of children and sparking questions of how to best raise a child, how ‘normal’ childhood could be defined, and what developmental stages children
have to pass through in order to become responsible adults (LeVine 2007; cf. Hardman 2001). Followed by the influential cognitive theories of Piaget and the socio-cognitive formulations of Vygotsky in the 1960s, Western-based psychological approaches to the study of children and childhoods, albeit subject to fundamental internal critique and revision, continue to influence academic and public discussion today (Hardman 2001; LeVine 2007; cf. Woodhead & Faulkner 2008).

The 1920s marked an increased anthropological interest in the cultural variations of childhood across the globe. Notably Margaret Mead (1928) and Bronislaw Malinowski (1929) set the stage for an unremitting critique of universalist, psychological explanations of childhood, drawing on evidence of wide cross-cultural variations in experiences of childhood. Throughout the twentieth century, but particularly in the 1990s, this uneasy relationship between anthropology and psychology evolved. LeVine (2007) offers an important anthropological critique of psychologists’ scant empirical base for generalising and interpreting childhood; he notes that, according to the UN Population Division (2005, in *ibid.* 2007, 250), in 2000, 88 percent of primary school-aged children globally lived in less developed regions of the world. Despite this claim, most psychological studies of children are conducted in the United States and a few other Western countries; as LeVine argues: the “resulting knowledge deficit has not been recognised by the child development research field” (*ibid.* 2007, 250). Resolving this crucial knowledge disparity through the study of children in non-Western contexts only became an impetus for research in the last two decades. In this regard, the current volume contributes to this project by offering extensive ethnographic analysis of children in various African contexts.

Over the course of the 20th century, anthropologists have devoted their attention to such diverse child-related subjects as initiation rituals, parent-child relationships, infancy, play, education and learning, parental care, language, social relationships and participation, migration, illness and disability, child abuse, and violence (for extensive literature reviews see Lancy 2008; LeVine 2007; Montgomery 2008). While anthropological interest in children’s perspectives can be traced back to Hardman in 1973, such an approach intensified in the 1990s following the work of sociologists James and Prout (1990) and Stephens (1995), amongst others. However, many authors agree that anthropol-