

Letters

Dear Editor,

I appreciate Dr. Andrea Rugh's thoughtful review of my book, *Children of Deh Koh* (in *Iranian Studies* 33: 1-2 212-14). If not her kind praise, then a few other issues she raises prompt me to respond.

The first issue is a misunderstanding, I think; nowhere in the book do I deny the value of either analysis or cross-cultural comparison in ethnography—I only defer them to a later stage of my writing about children (xxi). In the scant literature on children, authors now usually choose between psychoanalytic or other psychological concepts, and concepts borrowed from sociology and education, such as children and schools, or children's acquisition of language (see Elizabeth Fernea, *Children in the Muslim East* [Austin, 1995]). These easily reduce children to "objects" in the old, objectionable sense (see my forthcoming "The Case of the Children Missing in Textbooks," *Anthropology News*, 2002). Given the near absence of ethnographic literature on children in Iran, and thereby given the precarious situation of my book, both methodologically and thematically, I chose to adopt a theoretical frame around the dictum that culture is learned, with the guiding question, what do children learn from their growing-up experiences? (xvi) Thereby, I optimistically thought that I could steer clear of value judgments inherent in our essentialist analytic and comparative concepts. As this cognitive frame for an ethnography of children is new, I would have benefited greatly from a discussion of it.

A further issue is the thorny one of self-reflexivity. I wrote this book in the mid-1990s, when a great many ethnographies told us more about their authors than the people they intended to describe, which I found as problematic as the earlier fake-"objective" ones. Of course, I too think that professional honesty requires an ethnographer to 'fess up to having been there as a real person relating to real people for better or for worse, and I actually do so in the book several times. Trying to avoid the trap of ego-foregrounding, I probably have fallen into the one of detachment, but this just highlights the necessity to experiment with different styles. On principle, I welcome all attempts to find new ways of writing in ethnography and "condemn" none (see review p. 212).

Finally, as to this book potentially contributing "to the pressing needs of today's world" (which I take to mean contributing to the fulfillment of these needs), the book is circulating as a sourcebook in Iran—the only one avail-

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able—among officials who address the pressing problems children face there, and I know from various reactions to the book that these problems are apparent in the text to Western readers as well as to Iranians without my pointing them out. Maybe this small success can offset the book's academic shortcomings which Dr. Rugh points out.

Yours,

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