

# What is the role of teaching in human evolution?

## Teaching deemphasized

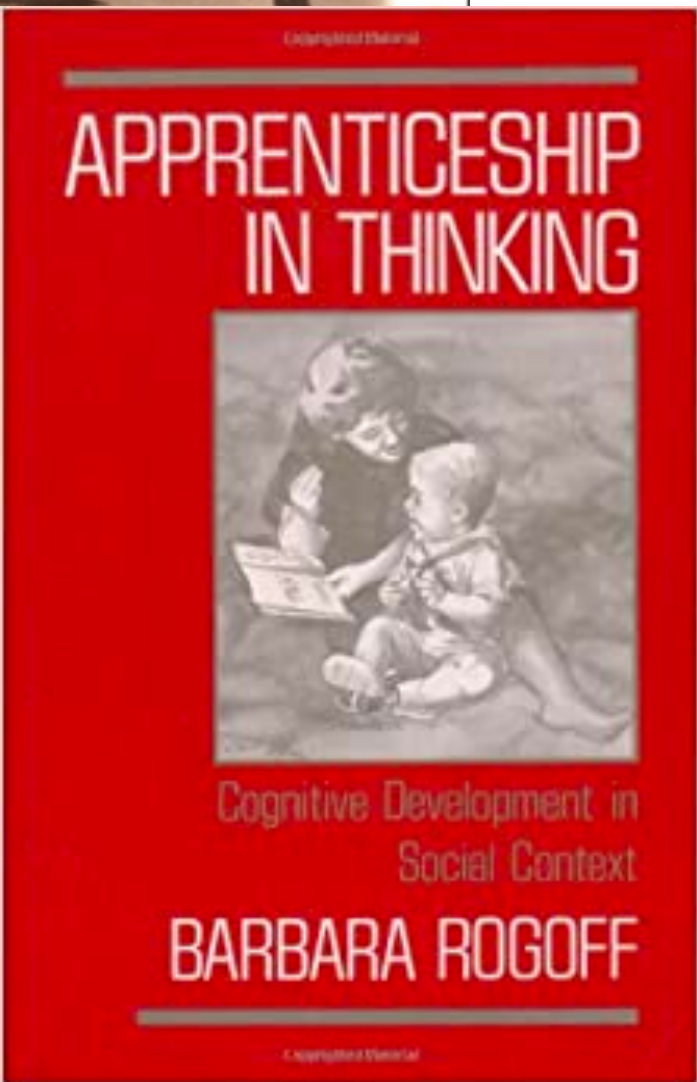
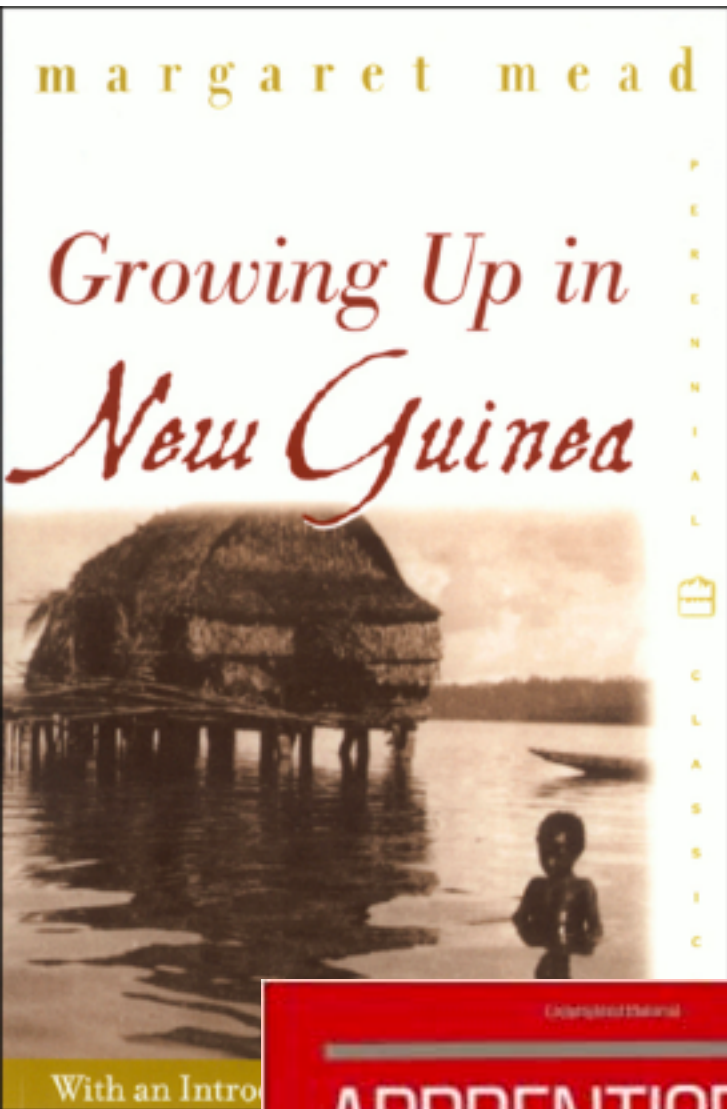
### THE ROLE OF ADULTS IN CHILDREN'S LEARNING

David F. Lancy and M. Annette Grove

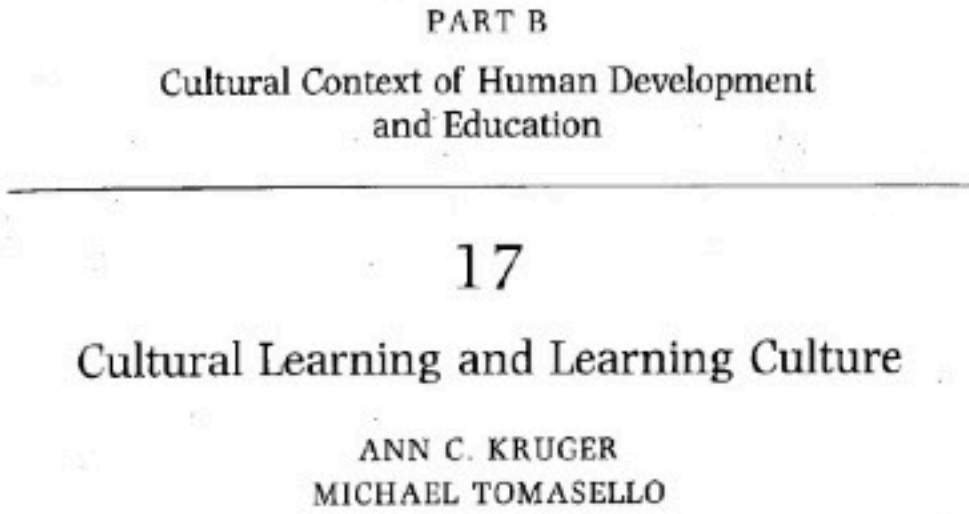
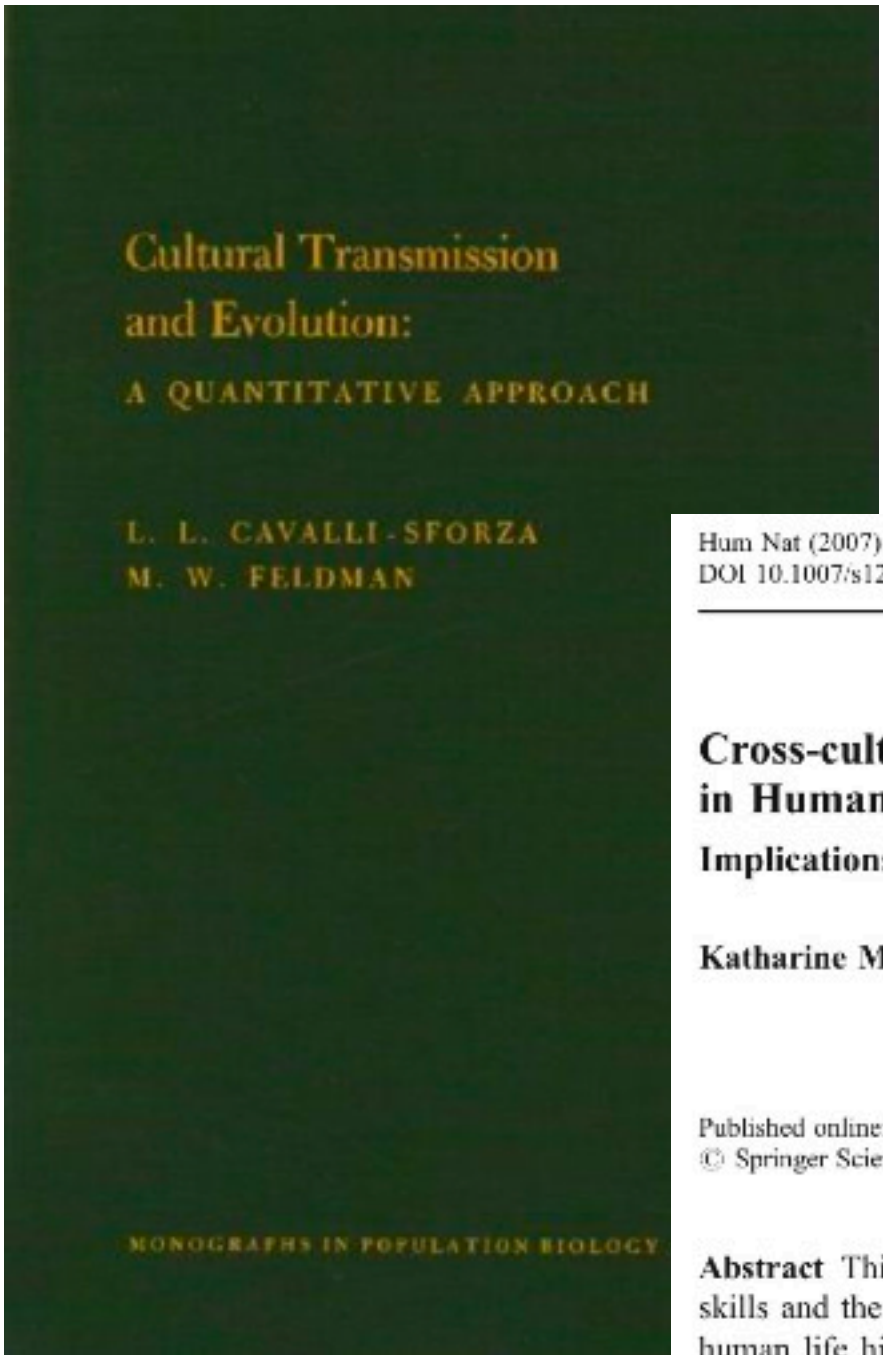
Anthropologists who study children in traditional societies universally note the absence or great rarity of adults teaching children in the village setting. Children are encouraged to learn on their own. This chapter teases out those instances where, in the absence of adults, independent learning is not sufficient. In some situations, adult intervention—usually falling short of “teaching”—is deemed necessary. The chapter focuses on four very general issues. At what age is a child targeted for a course correction or intervention to facilitate her development and socialization? What is the substance or goal of the intervention? What should the child be doing that he or she isn't already? As we shall see, two very broad goals are to socialize children to “fit in” and to facilitate the child's becoming a contributor to the family, providing a return on the family's investment. How does the adult intervene? What strategies are used to change the child's behavior? Lastly, what general principle or theory guides these course corrections in the individual's path through childhood? These themes are woven throughout the chapter, which is organized to follow the child from infancy through adolescence.

### The Absence of Teaching

Early ethnographic studies of childhood (Fortes 1938; Raum 1940) noted, with some degree of wonder, the near total absence of children



## Teaching emphasized



The universals and cultural variations of human development have been the focus of fruitful study by anthropologists for decades. In recent years psychologists also have directed their attention, long overdue, to understanding development in cultural context. There are striking differences among psychologists, however, in the approaches they take to culture and development. Most markedly, Cole (1989) distinguishes two very different theoretical perspectives on cultural psychology and its approach to human development. In one perspective the focus is on culture as a collective enterprise (e.g., Gauvain, in press; Shweder, 1990; Super and Harkness, 1986). There is no need in this view for focusing on the individual development of individual children since all important forms of learning are socially distributed; children simply become more skillful over time at participating in various collective activities (Lave and Wenger, 1991). Indeed, in some versions of this more sociological view of cultural psychology the focus on the cultural

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### Cross-cultural Comparison of Learning in Human Hunting Implications for Life History Evolution

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**Abstract** This paper is a cross-cultural examination of the development of hunting skills and the implications for the debate on the role of learning in the evolution of human life history patterns. While life history theory has proven to be a powerful tool for understanding the evolution of the human life course, other schools, such as cultural transmission and social learning theory, also provide theoretical insights. These disparate theories are reviewed, and alternative and exclusive predictions are identified. This study of cross-cultural regularities in how children learn hunting skills, based on the ethnographic literature on traditional hunters, complements existing empirical work and highlights future areas for investigation.

**Keywords** Cultural transmission · Human evolution · Hunting · Learning · Life history

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Lancy & Grove (2010), Mead (1930), Rogoff (1990)

Kruger & Tomasello (1996), MacDonald (2007), Cavalli-Sforza & Feldman (1981)



# The evolution of teaching and social learning

A current issue in the bio-social sciences:

## The Life History of Learning Subsistence Skills among Hadza and BaYaka Foragers from Tanzania and the Republic of Congo

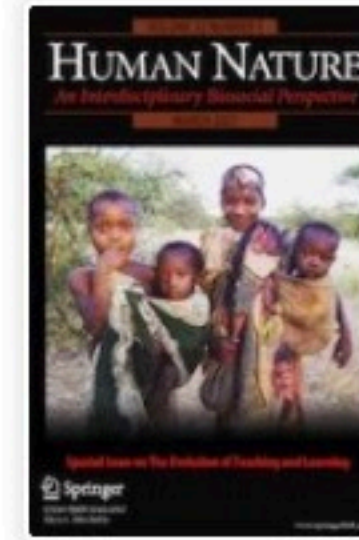
[Sheina Lew-Levy](#), [Erik J. Ringen](#), [Alyssa N. Crittenden](#), [Ibrahim A. Mabulla](#), [Tanya Broesch](#) & [Michelle A. Kline](#) 

[Human Nature](#) **32**, 16–47 (2021) | [Cite this article](#)

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### Abstract

Aspects of human life history and cognition, such as our long childhoods and extensive use of teaching, theoretically evolved to facilitate the acquisition of complex tasks. The present paper empirically examines the relationship between subsistence task difficulty and age of acquisition, rates of teaching, and rates of oblique transmission among Hadza and BaYaka foragers from Tanzania and the Republic of Congo. We further examine cross-cultural variation in how and from whom learning occurred. Learning patterns and community perceptions of task difficulty were assessed through interviews. We found no relationship between task difficulty, age of acquisition, and oblique transmission, and a weak but positive relationship between task difficulty and rates of teaching. While same-sex transmission was normative in both societies, tasks ranked as more difficult were more likely to be transmitted by men among the BaYaka, but not among the Hadza, potentially reflecting cross-cultural differences in the sexual division of subsistence and teaching labor. Further, the BaYaka were more likely to report learning via teaching, and less likely to report learning via observation, than the Hadza, possibly owing to differences in socialization practices.



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13 articles in this issue

## Childhood Teaching and Learning among Savanna Pumé Hunter-Gatherers

Mismatch between Foraging and Postindustrial Societies

[Karen L. Kramer](#) 

[Human Nature](#) **32**, 87–114 (2021) | [Cite this article](#)

**375** Accesses | **6** Citations | **22** Altmetric | [Metrics](#)

### Abstract

Research in nonindustrial small-scale societies challenges the common perception that human childhood is universally characterized by a long period of intensive adult investment and dedicated instruction. Using return rate and time allocation data for the Savanna Pumé, a group of South American hunter-gatherers, age patterns in how children learn to become productive foragers and from whom they learn are observed across the transition from childhood to adolescence. Results show that Savanna Pumé children care for their siblings, are important economic contributors, learn by doing rather than by instruction, and spend their time principally in the company of other children. This developmental experience contrasts with that of children in postindustrial societies, who are dependent on adults, often well past maturity; learn in formal settings; and spend much of their time in the company of adults. These differences raise questions about whether normative behaviors observed in postindustrial societies are representative of human children. This comparison also identifies