

What does the ethnographic record tell us about social learning among hunter-gatherers?

A Cross-Cultural Analysis of Hunter-Gatherer Social Learning

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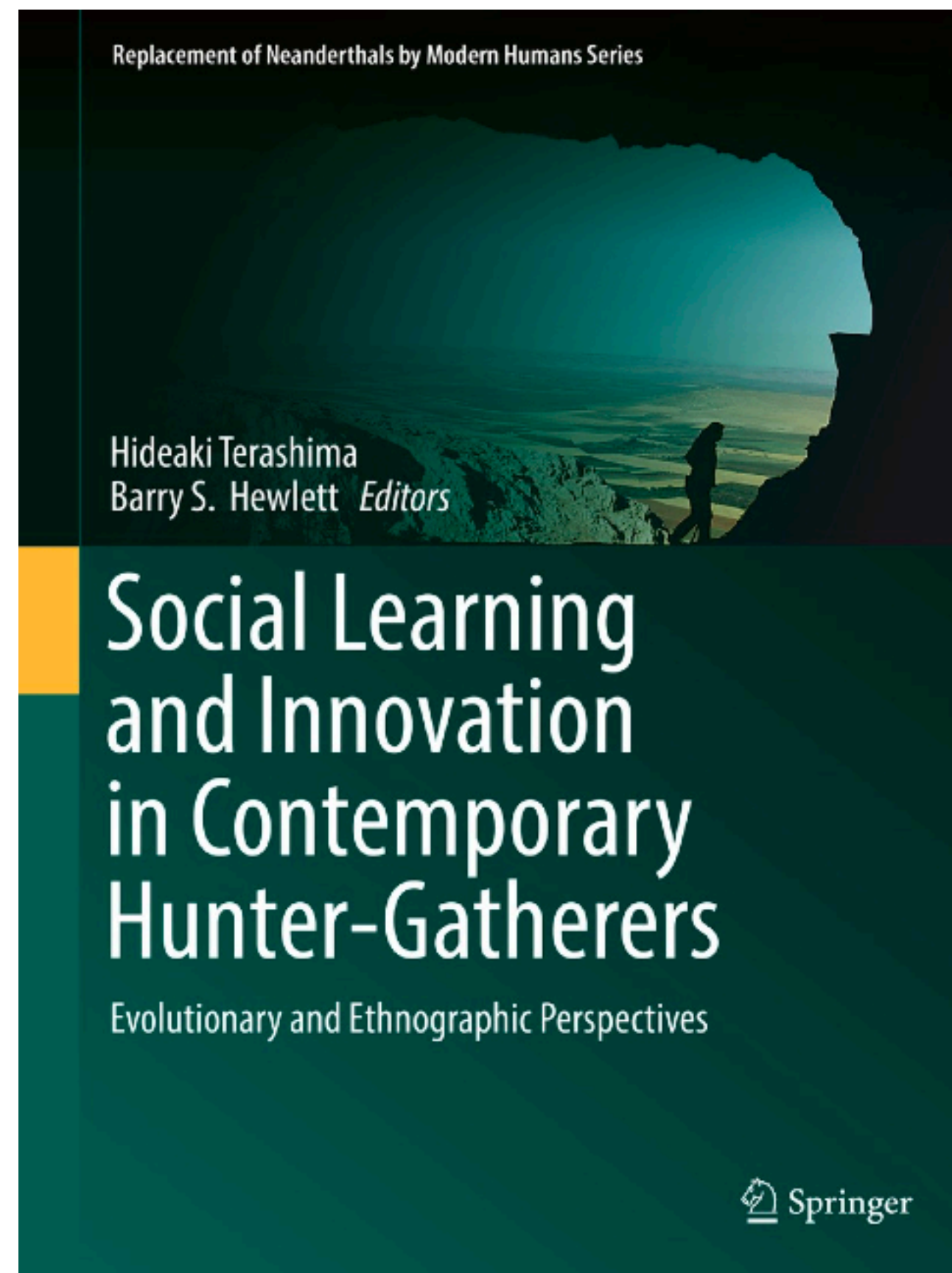
Zachary H. Garfield, Melissa J. Garfield, and Barry S. Hewlett

Abstract

Social learning among hunter-gatherers has been widely discussed in the literature and authors often draw on ethnographic cases to support theoretical models. In this study we report on the cross-cultural occurrence of various modes and processes of social learning in distinct cultural domains from the ethnographic record. To our knowledge this is the first systematic, cross-cultural study of hunter-gatherer social learning. We rely on the sample of hunter-gatherers in the electronic Human Relations Area Files (eHRAF) to generate our source of ethnographic texts. We have coded and analyzed 982 ethnographic texts from 23 diverse societies. Oblique and vertical transmission appear at similar rates. Various forms of teaching are the most common processes of social learning and account for more than half of all coded texts. Vertical and oblique social learning are predominantly characterized by teaching, whereas horizontal social learning is primarily through collaborative learning. Approximations of age reveal a general developmental pattern in which social learning of miscellaneous skills characterizes infancy, subsistence skills dominate early and middle childhood, and the social learning of religious beliefs are most frequent during adolescence. Across development we identify a reduction in the importance of vertical transmission in favor of oblique transmission, for subsistence skills in particular. These results highlight the importance of teaching in the ethnographic record of hunter-gatherer social learning and provide a systematic, cross-cultural, framework for theoretical models to rely on.

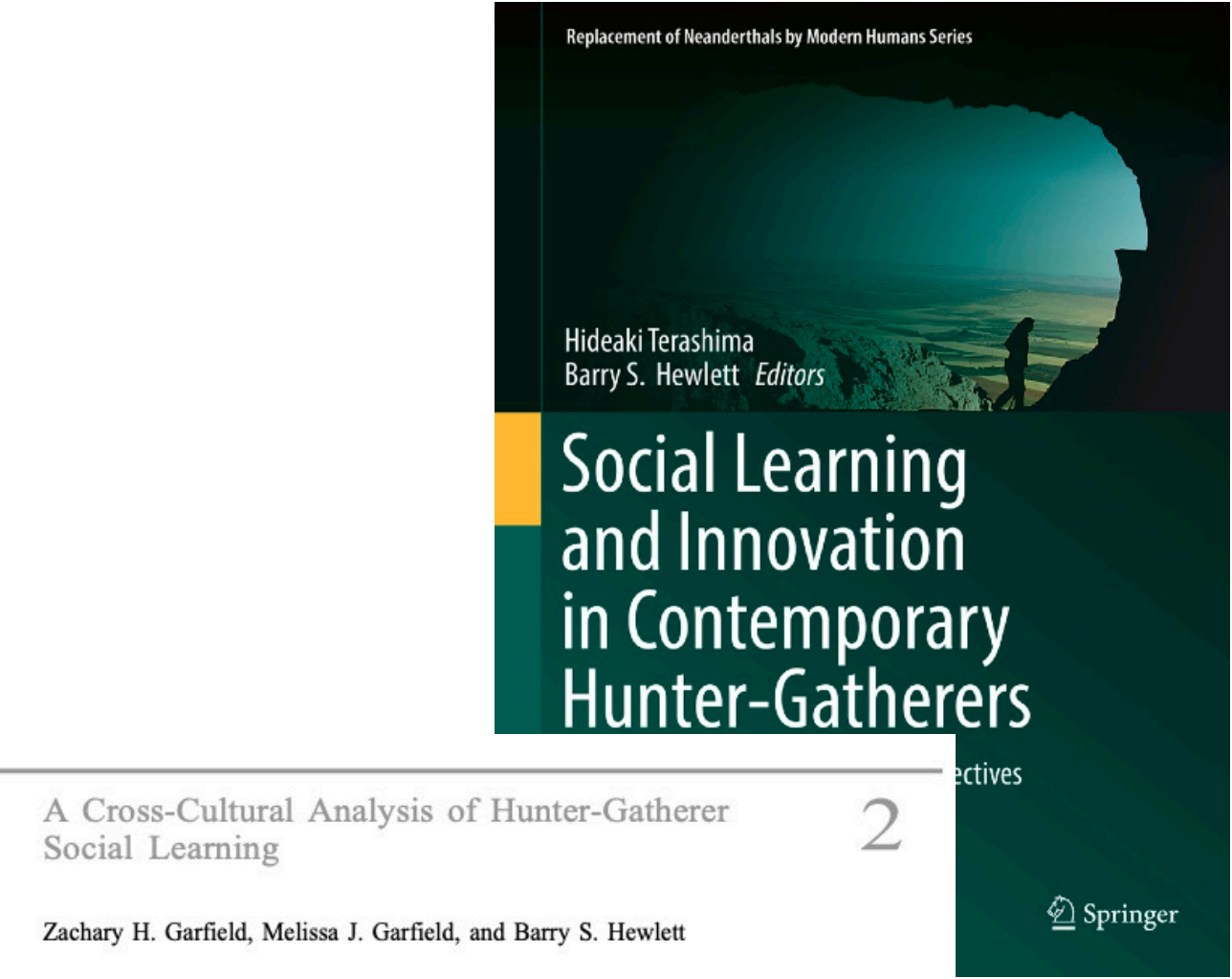
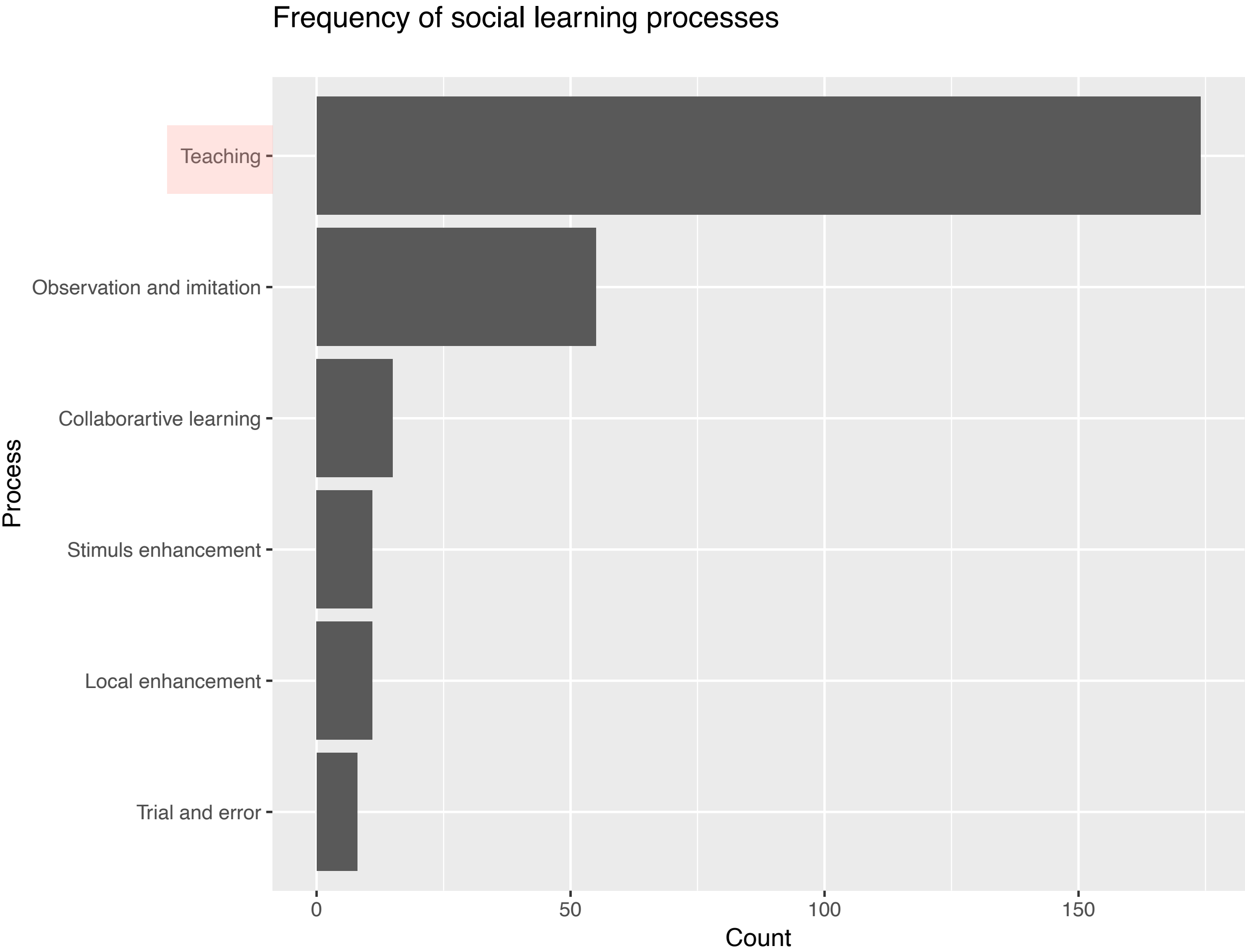
Keywords

Hunter-gatherers · Human Relations Area Files · Social learning · Cultural transmission · Teaching



Garfield et al. (2016)

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