

# The developmental origins of cultural learning

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A new special section of the journal *Child Development* features studies that explore the ways children learn about their cultures, examining the strategies through which children begin to understand and adopt the practices, beliefs, and values of their societies. This research investigates how, in an increasingly diverse global community, specific skills and behaviors are transmitted across generations.

The introduction to the special section by researchers Legare and Harris emphasizes the need to build an understanding of children's development on research conducted with children from the full range of cultural contexts. Instead, Legare and Harris note a very restricted range of participants in such research. For example, they summarize an analysis by Nielsen of papers published in 2013 in three major psychology journals focusing on [child development](#) research. Of 424 papers published in these journals, 58% focused on participants from the U.S., 16% from English-speaking countries outside the U.S., and a further 16% from Non-English speaking European countries. Only 9% came from Central and South America, Africa, Asia, the Middle East and Israel combined. The cross-cultural research featured in this special section of *Child Development* helps to address this imbalance, focusing on children's development across a wide range of cultural contexts and caregiving settings.

The articles in this special section indicate that children draw upon a common repertoire of cultural learning strategies in order to learn the varying social norms across different cultures. As one example of this

variation, children learn differing norms about distributing resources fairly. A study by Zeidler and colleagues in the special section looked at strategies for resource distribution and turn taking among German and Kenyan 5- to 10-year-olds. They found that while pairs of children in Germany quickly adopt a strategy of taking turns to share resources, among the groups of Kenyan children, other strategies are used. For example, resource distribution may occur over longer periods of time, with one child monopolizing the resources for a while but eventually yielding to allow the other child to monopolize.

While there is considerable variation in the practices, beliefs and values of different cultures children appear to draw upon a consistent set of tools in learning the norms of their cultures. For example, as described in papers in the special section by Chudek, Nielsen and Bannard, children are exceedingly attentive in imitating behavior of older children and adults who can serve as models of culturally appropriate behavior. Legare and Harris note that while animals also observe and imitate in order to achieve goals, they only imitate the components of actions that are necessary to achieve these goals. Children "overimitate," copying both the necessary and unnecessary components of behavior, and this is the case across multiple cultural settings.

Children learn about the appropriate expression of emotion in their cultures through [social interaction](#) with caregivers from their earliest years. As one example, of "emotion learning," a study in the special section conducted by Kärtner and colleagues observed the forms of social interaction that mothers viewed as desirable or appropriate. In their research, they found that mothers in Germany place greater emphasis on a child's autonomous experience, whereas mothers in India emphasize children's relationships with others. Mothers transmit which forms of social interaction they prefer through emotional and verbal signals to their very young children. These forms of social interaction are then incorporated into their children's emotional repertoires.

According to Legare and Harris, young children are often referred to as "little scientists" or "budding psychologists." They encourage us instead to think about them also as "gifted anthropologists." "Like anthropologists, but without the benefit of any formal training, [children](#) deploy a repertoire of strategies for reproducing and deciphering the distinctive set of phenomena that make up a culture—any human culture."

Provided by Society for Research in Child Development

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