

## William James Book Award

# The Cultural Nature of Human Development

by Barbara Rogoff

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Dr. Rogoff was the winner of the William James Book Award for 2005 for *The Cultural Nature of Human Development* (Oxford University Press, 2003). This article is based on her award address, which was delivered at the 2006 APA Convention in New Orleans. The Award is intended to honor and publicize a recent book that best serves to further the goals of the Society by providing an outstanding example of an effort to bring together diverse subfields of psychology and related disciplines.

For the children and adults of current and future generations, it is essential to increase understanding of the cultural basis of our own lives as well as those of neighbors and distant people. It is also crucial for improving the scientific basis of research on human development. I hope that *The Cultural Nature of Human Development* contributes to greater understanding among scholars, practitioners, and the public in this area.

It was a great honor to receive the William James Book Award for my book, *The Cultural Nature of Human Development* (Oxford, 2003) at the last APA meeting. The award honors a book that "integrates material across psychology subfields or provides coherence to the diverse subject matter of psychology." I am also very gratified that it has been translated into Portuguese, Japanese, Chinese, and Italian, and that it was selected as Choice Outstanding Academic Title for 2004. I especially like the review of the book by Carol Lee, of Northwestern University:

The book is absolutely refreshing and revolutionary. I know of no other work that has accomplished what Rogoff has in this book. I have underlined so much that the book reeks of magic marker colors. It is a brave effort on her part and one is sorely needed in the field. Rogoff clearly breaks new ground here.

It is customary for the winner of the award to give an invited talk at APA and to write about the book and the talk in this publication. After giving an overview of the book and its major themes, I will focus on two of the cultural patterns that the book addresses. These patterns were the focus of my APA talk:

- A pattern that appears to be common in middle-class European-American communities—age-grading and segregation of children from their communities, with

learning through lessons out of the context of target activities; and

- A pattern that appears to be common in many Indigenous American communities—inclusion of children in the range of community events, with learning through observing and pitching in to the ongoing activities of their cultural community.

*The Cultural Nature of Human Development* provides a view of human development informed by research focusing on cultural processes. It begins with a puzzle.

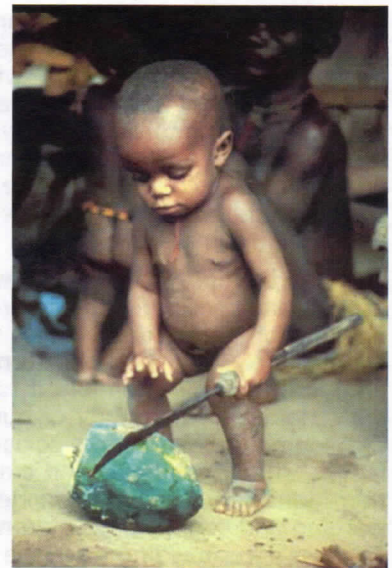
Three-year-old children in Oceania take care of younger children. But in the US, babysitters are expected to be at least 10 years older than that. And Efe infants safely use machetes, but American middle-class adults often do not trust 5-year-olds with knives.

What accounts for such marked differences across cultural communities?

Of course, the answer is—"It depends." Age expectations are based on many features of the organization of a community, such as whether adults are nearby supervising and whether children have opportunities to observe and begin to participate in such activities at earlier ages.

The organization of a community and other cultural features are often taken for granted by people who have experience in only one community—which has characterized many researchers of child development. Hence a great deal of the research on human development (and in psychology in general) has been blind to cultural aspects of human functioning.

*The Cultural Nature of Human Development* builds from the



An Efe 11-month-old skillfully uses a machete, with his grandmother monitoring in the background. (In the Ituri Forest of the Democratic Republic of Congo.) Photo courtesy of David Wilkie.

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premise that "culture matters." The aim of the book is to advance our knowledge of *how* it matters. To address this, the book develops a theoretical perspective and integrates a broad literature documenting cultural variations and similarities in human development.

The theoretical perspective that I put forward focuses on both the cultural and the individual processes involved in human development. I argue that individuals develop as participants in their cultural communities, engaging with others in shared endeavors and building on cultural practices of prior generations. Understanding these cultural practices, in turn, needs a historical view of the contributions of individuals and generations in dynamic communities.

This perspective contrasts with the commonplace approach to culture, which treats it as essentially equivalent to ethnicity or race—a "social address" characterizing individuals. The social address approach applies a one- or two-word label to individuals, or categorizes them in a box. It treats culture as a static, individual characteristic, and often pits the "effects" of being in a particular box against the "effects" of other individual characteristics. Further, individuals in the same box or with the same social address are *presumed* to share many other characteristics.

I emphasize the dynamic nature of culture, as cultural practices change across generations and vary within communities. Individuals participating in the same community both vary and share similarities—it is a matter for empirical research to determine the common patterns as well as the variations within communities.

After developing these theoretical notions, and considering the interconnections of biological processes with cultural processes, the book turns to empirical topics. The empirical topics are canonical in the study of human development: childrearing, social relations, interdependence and autonomy, developmental transitions across the lifespan, gender roles, attachment, learning and cognitive development, and social identity. The research providing evidence on these topics comes from a number of subfields in psychology, in addition to anthropology, history, education, linguistics, and sociology.

The book concludes with research examining cultural change and relations among communities. These are features of children's lives that are increasingly common for children in the U.S. and worldwide.

One aim of the book is to bring to awareness the cultural aspects of everyday practices that seem "natural" to those whose upbringing is limited to the dominant European-American middle-class culture. Rather than being "normal," they are closely tied to cultural traditions of this community. For example, comparing children's rate of development is a cultural practice that has accompanied bureaucratic organization of children's progress through compulsory schooling. This practice has developed over a little more than a century, in the U.S. and Europe. The rush to teach babies *in utero* and toddlers in academic preschools is based on a cultural metaphor for development—a racetrack—that is based on the institutions and practices of the cultural community of the majority of researchers publishing in psychology.

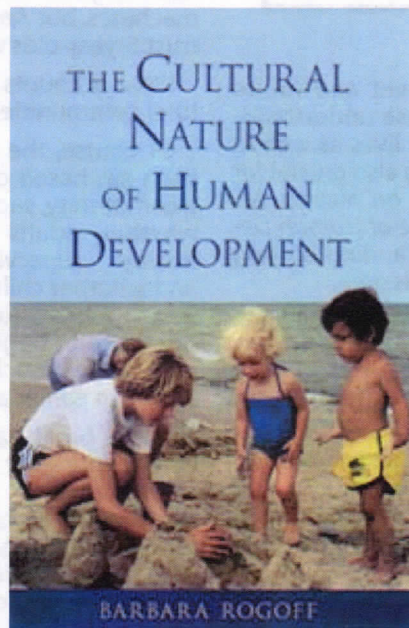
It is clear that there is not just one way for children to develop. At the same time, there are regularities. The variations that become apparent with a cultural lens are not infinite and random. The work that is cut out for upcoming research is to determine what some of the major patterns and regularities are. How are the myriad of important cultural practices related to many others in constellations of cultural features?

An important cultural pattern involves segregating children from the endeavors of their community and organizing them by tight age-grades. Children are excluded from many mature activities of their community, and instead spend much of their time in age-segregated institutions such as schools and in specialized child-focused activities, to prepare them for *later* involvement in the full range of their community's activities. This contrasts with a distinct cultural pattern in which children engage alongside the other members of their community in the broad range of community endeavors, learning through keen attention, collaboration, and the support of others in shared *ongoing* endeavors.

Understanding these and other patterns expands the horizons of our knowledge of human development.

### One Cultural Pattern: Age-grading and Segregation of Children from Community Endeavors

The whole question of ages of onsets of capabilities, so widespread in developmental psychology and in U.S. institutions generally, is a cultural product. Not until the last half of the 1800s in the U.S. and some other nations, did age become a criterion for organizing life (Chudacoff, 1989). Efforts to systematize human services (especially education) accompanied industrialization, and age be-



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came a measure of development and a way to sort people. Developmental psychology and pediatrics arose at this time and schooling became age-graded. Before then in the U.S. (and still, in many places), people rarely knew their chronological age, and instruction was organized around level of understanding rather than age-batches.

Increasing segregation of children from the range of activities of their community came along with age-grading, as schooling became obligatory and ordered by age, and industrialization separated workplace from home. Instead of being part of the community, children spent increasing time in child-focused institutions.

The means of organizing teaching and learning in these specialized institutions became quite different than what was possible when children could learn the skills of life through direct observation and participation. Caroline Pratt, a well-known leader in innovative schooling, at age 80 reflected on the learning structure of her childhood community in the mid-1800s:

When I grew up in Fayetteville, New York, school was not very important to children who could roam the real world freely for their learning.... No one had to tell us where milk came from, or how butter was made. We helped to harvest wheat, saw it ground into flour in the mill on our own stream; I baked bread for the family at thirteen. There was a paper mill, too, on our stream; we could learn the secrets of half a dozen other industries merely by walking through the open door of a neighbor's shop. (Pratt, 1948, pp. xi-xii)

I argue that the childrearing practices of middle-class families of the late 1900s and early 2000s are closely connected with age-grading and segregation of children, and with the organization of school practices. These practices are also reflected in the "norms" that developmental psychology has often promoted as characterizing childhood and parenting, not recognizing the cultural and historical basis of these practices.

My colleagues and I have been examining the cultural practices of middle-class European American families empirically, along with studying another cultural pattern: In communities in which children are integrated in the everyday range of activities, opportunities (and expectations) to observe and begin to pitch in to ongoing activities may promote keen attention to ongoing events and an ease in collaboration that may be less common in middle-class settings.

### Another Cultural Pattern: Learning Through Observation and Collaboration in Ongoing Community Activities

European-heritage and Indigenous-heritage children of North and Central America seem to differ in how they pay attention to and learn from events around them, and collaborate in ongoing endeavors. The children's attention

and learning relates to their families' extent of familiarity with learning traditions that seem to be common in Indigenous communities of the Americas and with cultural practices that derive from European and European-American customs—specifically, Western schooling and related traditions.

Studies in a number of Indigenous communities of the Americas document a way of organizing learning opportunities in which children have wide access to family and community activities in which they are eventually expected to engage (Morelli, Rogoff & Angelillo, 2003; Rogoff, 2003). This form of organization has been called learning by *intent community participation*, and differs in important ways from how learning is commonly organized in Western schooling (Rogoff, Paradise, Mejia Arauz, Correa-Chávez & Angelillo, 2003; Rogoff, Moore, Najafi, Dexter, Correa-Chávez, & Solís, 2007). In many traditional Indigenous communities of the Americas, children are alert for important information even while engaged in another activity (de Haan, 1999; Gaskins, 2000). Children keenly observe and pitch in to ongoing events that are often not designed for them, with a cultural expectation that they will observe ongoing activities and develop keen attention to events around them.

Ethnographic studies in Indigenous communities of the Americas imply that keen attention and collaboration are more frequent than in middle-class Western communities. Middle-class children have restricted opportunities to learn by observing the range of mature activities, as they are often excluded from many of the activities of their communities (Morelli et al., 2003). Instead, they are often involved in lessons or exercises that may not include opportunities to observe, and which often occur outside the context of productively using the skill being taught (Rogoff, Mistry, Göncü, & Mosier, 1993; Ochs & Schieffelin, 1984). Middle-class children's attention may often be managed by adults who attempt to focus them on the adults' lesson.

My colleagues and I have been testing cultural contrasts in children's learning through keen attention and collaboration in our comparative research. The results are consistent with the implicit contrast suggested in ethnographic studies of Indigenous communities of North and Central America. Young children from a Mayan community in Guatemala and



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children whose families have immigrated to the U.S. from Indigenous regions of México (whose mothers had little schooling) more frequently attended to ongoing events with keen attention and more commonly coordinated with others in their group, compared with European heritage children as well as with Guatemalan Mayan or Mexican heritage U.S. children whose mothers had extensive school experience (Chavajay & Rogoff, 1999; Correa-Chávez & Rogoff, 2007; Correa-Chávez, Rogoff, & Mejía Arauz, 2005; Mejía Arauz, Rogoff, & Paradise, 2005; Rogoff et al., 1993; Silva, Correa-Chávez, & Rogoff, 2007).

These contrasts are consistent with the idea that Indigenous-heritage children more often keenly observe and collaborate in ongoing events than middle-class European American children. The differences we found align with the idea that children who participate in communities where they are expected to observe ongoing events do so more, and learn from those observations more than children from communities that do not have such experience.

The differences also suggest that extensive schooling (and related experiences) may provide familiarity with an organization of learning that could compete with the tradition of *intent community participation*. The work underlines the cultural nature of school approaches to teaching and learning, and connects participation in schooling with many other features of middle-class life (Rogoff, Correa-Chávez, & Navichoc Cotuc, 2005).

These two cultural patterns, which were the focus of my William James award talk, are two that receive attention in *The Cultural Nature of Human Development*. Others have to do with the treatment of individual autonomy and issues of authority, and strategies for managing survival.

Efforts to identify the regularities in cultural variations and commonalities are still quite new – I hope that this book prompts research and reflection on human development as a cultural process. I am confident that, in pointing to the changes and continuities of community practices, cultural research can also provide inspiration for changing current practices to be more conducive to children's learning and wellbeing.

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