



A FIELD GUIDE TO CROSS-CULTURAL RESEARCH ON CHILDHOOD LEARNING

Theoretical, Methodological, Practical, and Ethical
Considerations for an Interdisciplinary Field

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1. Studying childhood learning across cultures

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This opening chapter outlines this book's agenda: to promote a comprehensive, culturally informed approach to studying childhood, and to critically examine the predominance of western-centric methodologies in developmental research. By integrating insights from evolutionary, anthropological, and psychological viewpoints, this chapter underscores the importance of investigating the cultural factors that influence child development and learning processes during childhood. Emphasizing the significance of incorporating Indigenous and local perspectives, we advocate for a more inclusive and culturally attuned approach. Finally, we support a mixed-methods approach as a means to enhance the credibility and ecological applicability of research outcomes, paving the way for a more comprehensive understanding of childhood in diverse cultural contexts.

1.1. Introduction

This chapter introduces the main themes of this volume. We start by discussing the importance of studying childhood development and learning across cultures by posing questions such as what childhood entails and why a developmental approach is necessary

to understand it. We then explore the concept of culture, addressing different theoretical perspectives. We emphasize the need for a working definition of culture and highlight that culture need not be far from home. Next, we provide an overview of different disciplinary and theoretical perspectives, ranging from biological and evolutionary anthropology to cultural anthropology and psychology.

We argue that the interdisciplinary study of childhood learning across cultures is essential to understanding human ecological diversity and behavioral flexibility. We go on to explain the significance of studying childhood learning, emphasizing that practitioners, educators, and policymakers need to understand cultural differences to create effective policies and educational practices. Ultimately, we emphasize the need to address epistemological, ethical, and political biases, especially western-centric thinking, in our understanding of child development. We also advocate for interdisciplinary research, incorporating naturalistic and ethnographic research at every stage, and collaborative team science to avoid extractive research.

1.2. Why study childhood?

Human childhood is unique. Unlike our primate cousins, human children continue to depend on caretakers for an extended period of time after weaning, taking nearly twice as long as chimpanzees to reach adulthood (Gibbons, 2008). Fossil records suggest that the elongated period of development we call *childhood* slowly emerged with the rise of our genus *Homo*, fundamentally altering the life histories and social structures of our species. For researchers interested in understanding our species, the study of childhood offers an undeniably important window into the origins of our minds, bodies, and cultures.

But why did childhood emerge at all? A closer look into human evolution may reveal clues. Examinations of fossil remains, such as hominin teeth and pelvises, suggest that *Homo erectus*, our ancestor from nearly 2 million years ago, was already experiencing shifts in

its development (Gibbons, 2008). A widening pelvis and a larger skull suggest that *H. erectus* brains were increasing in capacity, accompanied by other shifts in morphology and behavior, such as bipedalism and tool use. Early human culture was emerging. As cultural complexity increased with time, so did skull sizes—and so, too, did indicators of a long childhood. *Homo antecessor*, who lived about 1 million years ago, had dental development on track with, but not identical to, that of modern humans (Bermúdez de Castro et al., 1999). By the time we reach the fossil teeth of *Homo sapiens* from 160,000 years ago, dental development is nearly indistinguishable from that of modern children of the same age (Smith et al., 2007). Concurrent with these developmental changes were other dramatic morphological and behavioral changes, namely: the emergence of a large and metabolically hungry brain, the extension of post-reproductive life, and importantly, the rise of more complex social and cultural products. These features co-evolved in tandem, strengthening and reinforcing each other.

Functionally, many have argued that an extended period of development—scaffolded by increased care from *alloparents*, or non-parents who provide childcare—evolved to support the immense amount of learning human children must engage in. Given that our species speaks thousands of languages, and lives across every habitable environment on the planet in a huge diversity of social and cultural structures, none of which are accessible before birth, an extended period of development evolved to allow children the time, resources, and energy to learn the complex cultural skill set of their society. An influential theory posited by anthropologist Hillard Kaplan and colleagues (2000) suggests that the unique trajectory of human life histories—including an extended period of childhood—is a result of co-evolved responses to a dietary shift toward high-quality, nutrient-dense, and difficult-to-acquire resources. That is, as early hominids began to target foods like meat that required high levels of knowledge, skill, and strength—otherwise known as *embodied capital*—the attainment of those abilities began to require longer and longer periods of investment. This led to an extension not just of early development but also of post-reproductive life

and the human lifespan, more generally. Recent analyses of child foraging patterns lend support to this hypothesis, demonstrating that foraging returns increase slowly for more skill-intensive resources, with peak productivity in adulthood, underscoring that long childhoods do indeed allow us time to perfect the extraction of complex resources from the environment (Pretelli et al., 2022).

More recently, psychologist Alison Gopnik (2020) has proposed that the evolution of our life history, with its distinctively long childhood, emerged to allow an early period of broad hypothesis search and exploration. In other words, childhood evolved not just to facilitate the acquisition of existing cultural products, but to encourage the genesis and exploration of novel cultural products, as well. Other hypotheses also exist which do not view childhood as emerging through a direct adaptation, but rather as something like a *spandrel*—or, an evolutionary side effect (Bjorklund, 2009; Remmel, 2008) with enormous consequences for our species (Bjorklund, 2020). Though debates continue regarding the exact evolutionary forces that led to our long childhoods, scholars agree that understanding development is critical for understanding our success as a species.

In addition to its length, human development is also marked by its remarkable degree of *phenotypic plasticity*—the ability of an organism to tailor development to environmental conditions (Frankenhuis & Amir, 2022). As anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1973, p. 45) argued, “we all begin with the natural equipment to live a thousand kinds of life, but end in the end having lived only one.” How does this calibration process play out? One school of thought has focused relatively more on the role that individual experiences of various environmental inputs—such as extrinsic mortality—play in shaping later life outcomes—such as time preferences (Frankenhuis & Panchanathan, 2011) and health behaviors (Nettle et al., 2011; Amir & McAuliffe, 2020). Through this lens, childhood serves the important function of providing a ‘weather forecast’ of environmental conditions, allowing individuals to develop phenotypes that are adaptive for those conditions (Bateson et al., 2004; Nettle & Bateson, 2015). A related

but distinct school of thought focuses on cultural learning, as opposed to individual experience. This perspective, stemming from *culture-gene coevolutionary theory* (Richerson & Boyd, 2005), offers a view of development as a time for intense and selective social learning, such as of local cultural norms. Empirical research in this field has largely focused on children's learning biases—toward prestigious members of the group, for instance (Chudek et al., 2012)—and the ways in which social learning interacts with more universal psychological mechanisms to produce divergent phenotypes (House et al., 2020). Studies of human development, and in particular those that take cultural context into account, are invaluable in testing the predictions of current theories and informing the genesis of new ones.

The value of developmental work, more broadly, has long been appreciated in the evolutionary sciences. The study of *ontogeny*—or, the development of an organism—was one of biologist Nikolaas Tinbergen's (1963) famous 'four questions', which sought to explain animal behavior. He argued that a complete understanding of behavior requires understanding its ontogeny, and that developmental experiments are critical for teasing apart the relative weights of influence that 'nature' and 'nurture' exert on human behavior. An ontogenetic perspective, and in particular one that takes culture into account, does indeed enable us to evaluate the degree to which cultural and environmental influence can penetrate aspects of cognition, allowing us to extract valuable information about the stability, flexibility, heritability, and structure of behaviors (Amir & McAuliffe, 2020; Liebal & Haun, 2018; Nielsen & Haun, 2016).

1.3. Why study learning in childhood?

While both human and non-human species engage in learning, humans are unique in the complexity and sophistication of their learning. By examining the interplay between biological, cognitive, and socio-cultural factors, we gain a more complete understanding of why learning in childhood is uniquely human. Humans

possess early-developing capacities for language acquisition (Tomasello, 2005), cognitive flexibility (Gopnik et al., 2017), and knowledge transmission (Boyd et al., 2011; Csibra & Gergely, 2011), distinguishing them from other species. Moreover, through the use of cultural tools, such as language, writing schemes, and educational institutions, humans can rapidly acquire and innovate upon knowledge, information, and skill sets across generations (Bjorklund, 2000).

But what does it mean to study learning in childhood? This involves a multidisciplinary examination of the cognitive, social, emotional, and cultural processes underpinning both the acquisition and transmission of information and skills across human development. This interdisciplinary approach is not straightforward as the theoretical frameworks, techniques, and methodologies vary greatly by discipline. Throughout this book, we will explore these factors and advocate for an interdisciplinary study of childhood learning as best practice.

The scope of studying learning in childhood extends beyond studying children alone. Parents are under a lot of pressure to guide children's learning and future outcomes. Particularly, in western society, parents face increasing pressures to carefully cultivate their children's developmental and academic outcomes (Nomaguchi & Milkie, 2020). However, most research on parenting has been conducted exclusively in western contexts. Understanding parenting in non-western contexts is crucial to gaining a comprehensive understanding of childhood learning (Super & Harkness, 1986). Parenting practices and ethnotheories vary across diverse cultural environments, and this shapes child socialization and learning experiences (Keller et al., 2006).

Investing in children is investing in our future. It is imperative to prioritize how children will shape our world—how they will solve its many problems and overcome its greatest challenges. Through a comprehensive understanding of childhood learning processes, practitioners, educators, policymakers, and stakeholders can implement evidence-based practices to optimize children's developmental trajectories. It is also critical for practitioners, educators, and policymakers to incorporate

culture into policies and programs that are created, to promote inclusive learning environments and provide culturally informed support for families and children. This approach will ensure that children are equipped with the necessary skill set to thrive in an increasingly complex world.

1.4. Why study children's learning across cultures?

Almost fifteen years ago, researchers powerfully showcased that the vast majority of research in the social sciences is based on affluent, western participants—samples that are unrepresentative of most of humanity today and in the past (Henrich, Heine, et al., 2010). Since then, the volume of global, often multi-population, research has rapidly accelerated. Two central yet somewhat contrasting consequences of this expansion are that (1) studies of cognitive and social development have reached numerous and diverse cultural contexts, but (2) there are increasing conversations surrounding cross-cultural research practices, and what it means for our understanding of how culture shapes development.

On face value, conducting developmental research in all parts of the globe can surely only be a good thing, right? It addresses the overreliance on WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic) samples and broadens our understanding of human behavior (Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010). We now know, for example, that culture influences a wide range of cognitive domains, including social information-use (Broesch et al., 2017; van Leeuwen et al., 2018), imitation (Clegg & Legare, 2016; Stengelin et al., 2020), prosocial behavior (House et al., 2013), tool use (German & Barrett, 2005), fairness (Blake et al., 2015; Henrich, Ensminger, et al., 2010), tool innovation (Lew-Levy et al., 2021; Neldner et al., 2019), numerical and other abstract conceptual reasoning (Haun et al., 2011; Pica et al., 2004; Pitt et al., 2021), executive functioning (de Fockert et al., 2011; Legare et al., 2018), risk-taking (Amir et al., 2020), cognitive flexibility (Pope et al., 2019; Vieira et al., Under review), categorization (Ji et al., 2004), and even perceptual biases (Caparos et al., 2013; Nisbett & Miyamoto, 2005).

Yet, diversifying samples alone does not solve all our problems. One issue surrounds what, exactly, we mean by *culture*. Culture is fluid, it is inherently social, it is multifaceted and multileveled. Membership into one culture does not automatically prevent membership in another. Even within seemingly homogenous groups, subcultures and countercultures thrive. The exact definition of culture has been a topic of controversy (see Minkov, 2012: The Concept of Culture). In psychology, culture is thought of as the cognitive inputs and behavioral outputs of a society, including “the values, beliefs, language, rituals, traditions, and other behaviors that are passed from one generation to another within any social group” (American Psychological Association, 2023). While in anthropology, the concept of culture has focused on the material manifestations of a group’s “patterned ways of thinking, feeling and reacting, acquired and transmitted mainly by symbols” (Kluckhohn, 1961, p. 73). Throughout this book, we challenge researchers to consider that culture is not only, or necessarily, a group identifier. It is ubiquitous and multidimensional. As a result, cross-cultural research does not require the comparison of widely differing groups. We need only identify and measure variation along dimensions of culture that are relevant to our research topics, even (and arguably especially) when that variation occurs within communities (Barrett, 2020).

Further, as a result of the drive to conduct research in non-western populations, a new wave of concerns has been raised, concerning epistemological, ethical, and political biases—most of which ultimately result from western-centric approaches to theoretical and methodological development (Burger et al., 2023; Kline et al., 2018; Urassa et al., 2021). At their core, these issues stem from the fact that most international research is conducted by western researchers, based and trained in western institutions, who constitute the vast majority of journal authors, with findings disseminated in English. The problem extends beyond manuscript authorship. Editors of flagship journals, scientific body membership, and award recipients are dominated by western researchers (IJzerman et al., 2021).

The direct result of all of this is that our methodology and subsequent conclusions are likely to be inaccurate. As articulately described by Kline et al. (2018), this model can produce a range of biases and problematic assumptions, which include the tendency to use western populations as the standard benchmark for comparison, and that using identical (typically western-derived) methods across cultures will produce valid and reliable data. These are well-founded concerns, with several researchers documenting such biases empirically and theoretically (Holding et al., 2018; Hruschka et al., 2018; Zuilkowski et al., 2016). These biases impede progress on developing generalizable theories. Children growing up in western environments may have significantly different norms, frames of reference, perceptions, and relationships with others than those in different cultural contexts. If we want to study the development of memory or learning, for example, we need to do so in the context of children's lived experiences (Rogoff et al., 2018). How are we meant to truly understand how culture shapes ontogeny if our theories are grounded in western literature?

Solving this issue is not easy and requires introspection, reflection, and moving away from western-centric theories and methods. Rightly so, the replication crisis has encouraged researchers to produce replicable studies. However, an unintended result of this may be that methods are becoming less diverse, and thus less appropriate for diverse populations (de Oliveira & Baggs, 2023). As we continue to expand our samples, it is critical that we develop culturally grounded and appropriate theory, and design and implement appropriate methodology. It may well mean that in doing so, we cannot always make direct comparisons across populations. If that allows us to draw more accurate conclusions from our research, it is a trade-off we must consider.

1.5. How to study childhood in diverse settings

The study of learning in childhood is expansive, with questions shaped by particular disciplines and varying by age ranges as well. These questions pair with research techniques, which span from highly controlled experimental work in developmental psychology,

to quantitative or mixed-method observational research more common in field-based psychology and evolutionary/biological anthropology, to qualitative thick description in social/cultural anthropology. Throughout this book, we do not advocate for a single method or field, but instead argue that mixed methods, selected to fit the research question, are the strongest approach *both* for accurately describing learning in childhood and for robustly testing hypotheses about those phenomena.

There are several reasons we advocate for a mixed-methods approach. First, most if not all the methods that currently dominate the academic study of childhood and learning have been developed by western researchers, in western institutions, studying western children. Acknowledging the role of cultural context in child learning and development means re-evaluating if and when these methods are appropriate when taken out of the western cultural contexts in which they were first minted (Chaudhary & Sriram, 2020; Kline et al., 2018). Otherwise, researchers risk offering a poor description of how childhood learning works by ignoring culturally variable but interesting features (Dahl, 2017) and sometimes asking questions that do not fit the context or way of life being studied (Medin & Bang, 2014). Mixed methods can help researchers to question their assumptions (about their own and others' cultural contexts) in a process that will ultimately improve their research design and methodological choices. As argued by Medin et al. (2010), failing to question these assumptions puts the researcher at a disadvantage.

Broesch et al. (2023) argue that a starting point is to begin with open-ended observational and interview methods to map out contextual and conceptual categories. These methods have low levels of control by the researcher, but provide rich context and high ecological validity—meaning they correspond with participants' real-world experiences. See Figure 1.1 for examples of methods that span this continuum.

These observations can be paired with higher-control experimental or quantitative methods to good effect, and can play a role in improving those methods by raising questions about the culture-bound nature of high control methods, informing ecologically valid measurements, and providing meaningful background for the

interpretation of high-control methods. For example, Gervais (2017) demonstrates the important influence of real-world relationship norms on participant interpretation and subsequent behavior in supposedly ‘neutral’ economic games. This approach is illustrated by a case study of teaching, in which Kline (Section 4.2) combines participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and highly structured quantitative observations to construct and implement different definitions of ‘teaching’ along with different measurements of each. The conclusion yielded by this combination of methods is that while teaching is rare in the Yasawan context when defined as the type of direct, active instruction found in western classrooms, it is important both in the eyes of Yasawan adults (Kline et al., 2013) and as a more subtle set of behaviors woven into everyday interactions with children (Kline, 2017).

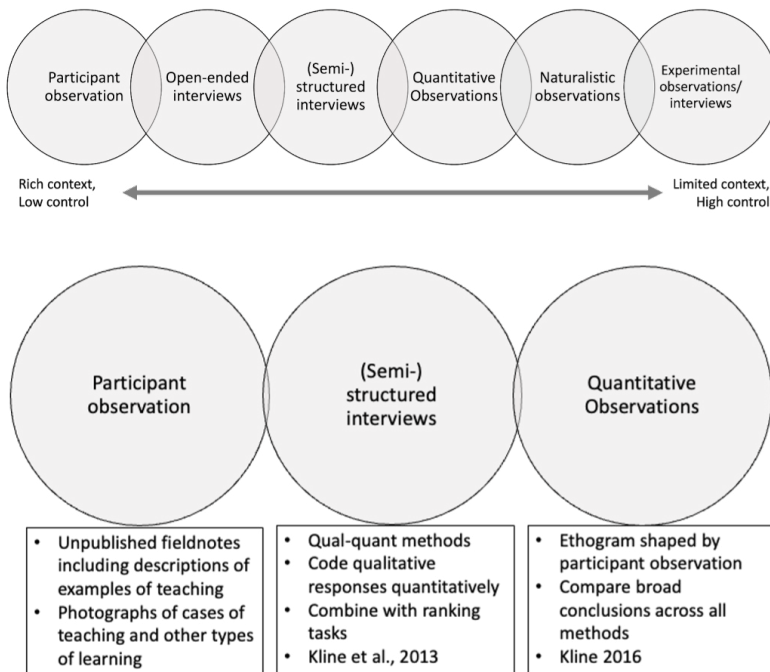


Fig. 1.1 A selection of methods that range from rich context, low control to limited context, high control. These methods can be combined to reconcile the trade-offs between control and ecological validity, improving both the robustness and validity of research.

1.6. Indigenous methodology and prioritizing Indigenous knowledge

Beyond methodology, one key way to address the lack of inclusivity of historically understudied communities in our work is to employ methodologies that prioritize sources of knowledge from historically marginalized communities in ways that also upend power dynamics and produce scholarly work that resonates with understudied communities. Indigenous methodology has been defined as research by and for Indigenous peoples that incorporates Indigenous knowledge(s), cultures, values, and beliefs (Denzin et al., 2008; Ryen, 2019). Indigenous methods are part of broader Indigenous peoples' movements that emphasize decolonization and self-determination through the promotion of Indigenous histories, languages, worldviews, knowledge, value systems, and broader Indigenous experiences in a post-colonial lived experience (Chilisa, 2019; Ryen, 2019). The creation of Indigenous scholarship requires confronting centuries of literature written by outsiders, as well as the need to address the "dominance of Euro-Western languages in the construction of knowledge" (Chilisa, 2019, p. 106). Understanding another culture's worldview is no simple task, and Indigenous scholars face the added hurdles of 'academic imperialism' and 'methodological imperialism', where western methodologies have historically failed to articulate Indigenous ways of knowing in a manner that is meaningful to these communities.

In reflecting on this challenge of prioritizing Indigenous knowledge in the legacy of a western academia, we are reminded of the Audre Lorde (1979) phrase "The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house." The lengthy bodies of literature written by cultural outsiders on Indigenous groups present an uphill battle for Indigenous scholars to infiltrate western academia (master's house) without relying on tools (research processes, ethics, methodologies) that historically have only valued western knowledge production (Chilisa, 2019; Lorde, 1979; Smith, 2021).

Power and perspective

Indigenous research seeks to bring power to historically oppressed perspectives, which is also a common goal of many schools of feminism. For example, Feminist Standpoint Theory (FST) has an overarching goal of challenging historical systems of oppression, prioritizing culturally situated knowledge, and focusing on self-definition and self-valuation (Collins, 1986; Harding, 1991; Intemann, 2019). Forces of oppression influence the lived experiences of marginalized communities, which creates a shared knowledge system across epistemic communities (Harding, 1991; Intemann, 2019). The lived experience and worldview of many Indigenous peoples are bound up in the history of traditions persisting and outliving the systems of oppression that worked to assimilate them with the ultimate goal of destroying and erasing their culture.

When it comes to research on a historically marginalized population, there is an inescapable question of whose reality counts. Western research methodologies often have inherent epistemological imbalances that hold western knowledge systems as more valid than other perspectives (Hayward et al., 2021; Smith, 2021; Wilson, 2008). As researchers we can make efforts to conduct socially and culturally relevant research with local participation, but ultimately the power resides with the researcher to frame and compile their conclusions for publication (Chilisa, 2019). Without further incorporating Indigenous ethics, knowledge, and perspective into our research processes, academic research will continue to be “tainted with a clandestine history of colonialism and neocolonialism” (Hayward et al., 2021, p. 412; Smith, 2021).

Academic imperialism is both an issue of inherited literature and methods as well as a contemporary issue of power, where there is still a challenge regarding whose perspective is prioritized in knowledge production, the researcher, or the researched (Chilisa, 2019). In contemporary research, it becomes critical to position Indigenous communities in a way that gives them a seat at the table because the issue of silencing their perspective is one that’s still ongoing in many different parts of the world. For many

Indigenous communities, their lived reality, experience, and history were related on their behalf because of the inherent relationship with power favoring those with resources, while excluding and othering Indigenous peoples' perspectives (Smith, 2021). The history of oppression and subjugation faced by Indigenous and other marginalized communities excluded these communities from accessing education, resulting in many scientific inquiries carried out by those from dominant groups. Subaltern theory offers one way of deconstructing how critical, post-colonial inquiries into marginalized perspectives may continue to fail to allow the marginalized to speak (Spivak, 2023). Many inquiries by cultural outsiders unintentionally speak on behalf of the populations being studied, drawing conclusions built on western knowledge systems for western audiences.

Western methodologies produce knowledge that is valuable to western audiences but has left marginalized and Indigenous cultures othered, so there is a need for both deconstructing the academic systems that have created these misrepresentations and constructing new approaches to research that prioritize and value knowledge and perspectives with consideration for Indigenous cultural values and ethics. There are considerations related to challenging western-centric thinking to be made at every step of the research process, which complicates the question of how to meaningfully tease apart fundamental differences in how the world is perceived. To gain the greatest depth of understanding on topics in dire need of decolonization like child development, Indigenous scholars have drawn from several philosophical approaches, including epistemology (knowledge), ontology (nature of reality), and axiology (values) (Chilisa, 2019).

Epistemology

Indigenous research in child development typically seeks to understand a specific aspect of contemporary Indigenous parenting, which can be described as a window into Indigenous knowledge systems. Epistemology includes belief systems, ways of knowing, or general knowledge systems. Chilisa (2019, p. 105) describes African

knowledge systems as relational because we come to understand ourselves and our place in the world through others; our knowledge systems and self-identity are derived through our ties to others. Chilisa (2019, p. 105) defines the relational epistemology found in African cultures as “well-established general beliefs, concepts, and theories of any particular people, which are stored in their language, practices, rituals, proverbs, revered traditions, myths, and folktales.”

Epistemology further relates to the formation of ways of knowing, which is important to consider both within the culture and cross-culturally. In considering relational epistemology, knowledge about kinship, parenting practices, and culturally defined developmental milestones needs to be considered as socially constructed, which means that the ‘knowers’ of Indigenous knowledge come to understand their world through their ties to their family, and the world around them (Chilisa, 2019). When working cross-culturally, western-trained researchers need to consider whether their methods, approach, and positionality have only strengthened their ability to generate western knowledge, and more attention needs to be paid to how Indigenous knowledge is conceived, perceived, and experienced within the culture.

Ontology

One challenge with empirically studying another culture’s knowledge system is that many Indigenous knowledge systems are built upon ontological beliefs about the nature of reality that may be shared beyond ethno-linguistic groupings (e.g., Zulu, Nguni, Bantu). In the context of child development, ontological considerations include investigating what kinds of age-sets exist (e.g., developmental age groupings), what cultural traditions and rituals are deemed to be integral to a child’s development and their sense of self (e.g., coming of age ceremonies, socialization practices related to an interdependent self), as well as how relationships exist within the broader community (Chilisa, 2019; Mbiti, 1969; Pemunta & Tabenyang, 2021; Wallace, 2015).

Chilisa (2019) describes this as the I/We obligation, relations with the living and non-living, and spirituality, love, and harmony. The I/We obligation relates to the construct of the African self, where one derives personhood through their relations to others, both living and non-living, and this personhood is a process that holds health and illness as contingent on the maintenance of harmony in our interconnected networks (Mkhize, 2004). The ontological concept of an interdependent self in the African cosmos is integral to understanding our culture's conception of family, parenting responsibilities, and developmental milestones from one's worldview. Moreover, concepts like alloparenting and child-headed households need to be understood both within Indigenous values as well as practical socio-economic realities.

Axiology

Often related to ethics, axiology refers to the focus on values and their meaning, characteristics, origins, purpose, and influence on people's choices (Chilisa, 2019). There are axiological considerations regarding how Indigenous knowledge is valued in academic research and whose perspective is prioritized (researcher versus researched). One of the great challenges in Indigenous and decolonized scholarship is the issue of academic and methodological imperialism, which has left Indigenous knowledge systems with long histories of misrepresentation by cultural outsiders. There are axiological considerations in whether the western interpretation of data is valued over the participant's lived experiences, as well as axiological considerations about how a participant perceives their own values while navigating a post-colonial worldview that many contemporary Indigenous cultures find themselves straddling in a post-colonial context.

For instance, Zulu traditions and family values center on traditional African spirituality, which emphasizes honoring the ancestors (Berg, 2003; Viljoen, 1994). Core Zulu family values typically center on respect, obedience, and family connectedness (Ndlovu, 2019; Raum, 1973; Viljoen, 1994). The Zulu concept of *ubuntu* (humanness) sheds light on the ethical principles embedded

in what Chilisa (2019, p. 106) calls a “relational axiology.” *Ubuntu* is an ontological construct about interconnectedness, which is often paraphrased as ‘I am because we are.’ In combination with another construct, *hlonipha* (reciprocal respect), *ubuntu* is conceived as a way of prioritizing others, particularly one’s family, over the individual, with the ultimate value placed on harmony and community building (Chilisa, 2019). These principles become critical when studying and observing parent-child interactions in child development research and are important to understanding the context of Zulu socialization as well as how a cultural outsider may need to reflexively approach their positionality. It is axiomatic that, when working cross-culturally, researchers need to problematize their power over their participants, while recognizing the innate expertise of their participants’ lived experiences.

1.7. What we advocate for

Throughout this book, we strongly advocate for an expanded dialogue on the intricate interplay between childhood development and cultural diversity. Our central thesis argues for a multidimensional approach, integrating various social sciences, other disciplines, and local and/or Indigenous perspectives to enrich our understanding of childhood across diverse cultures. This comprehensive approach is key to understanding the myriad ways in which growing up is experienced and influenced by different social, cultural, and ecological environments. Because the complexities of childhood development cannot be fully comprehended through a single lens, we argue that interdisciplinary work is necessary to further these fields of study.

This work, however, cannot be approached lightly, and researchers focusing on cross-cultural and interdisciplinary investigations into childhood must do so thoughtfully. We argue against extractive research methodologies, which often take more from communities than they give back. Instead, we champion the integration of naturalistic and ethnographic methods at every stage. Such approaches allow for a deeper immersion into the lives of children across cultures, offering a more authentic and

respectful portrayal of their experiences. This method not only enriches the quality of our data but also ensures that the research process itself is ethical and sensitive to the cultural contexts being studied.

Furthermore, we strongly oppose ‘helicopter research’, a term used to describe studies where researchers briefly enter a community, collect data, and leave without any meaningful engagement or lasting impact. Instead, we promote models of research that commit to authentic partnering and support economic, social, and cultural well-being (Norris-Tirrell et al., 2010). Such approaches involve building collaborative research teams that include local researchers, community leaders, and stakeholders. We argue that such an approach better enables our understanding and interpretation of the cultural nuances and ethical considerations unique to each community. This collaborative approach ensures that the research process is not just about data collection but also about building relationships and trust, fostering a deeper understanding of the communities we study.

This book is a call to action for a more ethical, respectful, and holistic approach to studying childhood across cultures. Our hope is that this collection stimulates more research on the evolutionary, developmental, and practical implications associated with studying teaching, learning, and child development among humans. This enriched understanding is not just academically beneficial; it has profound implications for educators, policymakers, and all who work with children, ensuring that their practices are culturally informed and responsive to the diverse needs of children around the world.

1.8. Book structure

This book is structured to take readers through the entire life cycle of cross-cultural developmental research. Each chapter features the perspectives of many contributors from diverse disciplines, continents, career stages, and theoretical orientations.

Theoretical and methodological considerations

Chapter 2 reviews the history of cross-cultural childhood learning by describing the traditions, perspectives, methods, and philosophies from anthropology, psychology, and archaeology, thus helping readers understand the origins and waves of thinking within this interdisciplinary field. Chapter 3 contrasts universalist and culturalist approaches to cross-cultural research, ultimately arguing that, to understand child development, we must navigate a middle course which draws on the best of both viewpoints. Chapter 4 offers a collage of methodologies, in order to demonstrate common practices and explore their theoretical, ethical, and practical implications.

Learning and growing in ‘the field’

Chapter 5 discusses the practicalities of preparing for ‘the field’, emphasizing the development of trusting relationships with the community as critical to ethical research practice and essential for good science. Drawing from the main narrative device of personal storytelling, Chapter 6 offers a personal account of lessons, challenges, and power relations experienced while conducting research with children in diverse cultural contexts.

Making an impact

Chapter 7 outlines the best practices for sharing research on childhood learning in an ethical and impactful way. Chapter 8 offers a series of case studies reflecting on local adaptation to global educational change, ultimately arguing that educational policy must better account for local cultural context, while also more proactively driving participatory means of valued school improvement. Chapter 9 offers a practical guide to engaging policymakers, in order to ensure that our research can ultimately benefit children across the globe. Finally, in Chapter 10, we look to the future of the field by reflecting on the lessons we have learned throughout our careers.

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