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978-0-521-88043-5 - Cultural Transmission: Psychological, Developmental, Social, and Methodological Aspects

Edited by Ute Schonpflug

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## CULTURAL TRANSMISSION

*Cultural Transmission* discusses psychological, developmental, social, and methodological research on how cultural information is socially transmitted from one generation to the next within families. Studying processes of cultural transmission may help analyze the continuity or change of cultures, including those that have to cope with migration or the collapse of a political system. An evolutionary perspective is elaborated in the first part of the book; the second part takes a cross-cultural perspective by presenting international research on development and intergenerational relations in the family; and the third part provides intracultural analyses of mechanisms and methodological aspects of cultural transmission. Consisting of contributions by experts in the field, this state-of-the-art source book is intended for anyone with interests in cultural maintenance and change – especially researchers and teachers in disciplines such as psychology, social and behavioral sciences, and education – and for applied professionals in culture management and family counseling, as well as professionals involved with migrants.

Ute Schönplflug teaches at Free University of Berlin's Department of Psychology and is an adjunct member of the Institute of Cognitive Science at the University of Colorado. She is also Associate Editor of the *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology* and author and co-author of several textbooks on psychology.

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Frontmatter

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# Cultural Transmission

PSYCHOLOGICAL, DEVELOPMENTAL, SOCIAL,  
AND METHODOLOGICAL ASPECTS

Edited by

Ute Schönplflug

*Free University of Berlin*



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978-0-521-88043-5 - Cultural Transmission: Psychological, Developmental, Social, and  
Methodological Aspects

Edited by Ute Schonpflug

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

## CONTENTS

<i>Foreword</i>	<i>page xi</i>
<i>David Matsumoto</i>	
<i>Contributors</i>	xv
1. Introduction to Cultural Transmission: Psychological, Developmental, Social, and Methodological Aspects	1
2. Theory and Research in Cultural Transmission: A Short History	9
<i>Ute Schönplflug</i>	
PART ONE: EVOLUTIONARY PERSPECTIVE	
3. Cultural Transmission: A View from Chimpanzees and Human Infants	33
<i>Michael Tomasello</i>	
4. Transmission, Self-Organization, and the Emergence of Language: A Dynamic Systems Point of View	48
<i>Paul van Geert</i>	
5. Relationship-Specific Intergenerational Family Ties: An Evolutionary Approach to the Structure of Cultural Transmission	70
<i>Harald A. Euler, Sabine Hoier, and Percy A. Rohde</i>	
PART TWO: CROSS-CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE	
6. An Ecocultural Perspective on Cultural Transmission: The Family across Cultures	95
<i>John W. Berry and James Georgas</i>	

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-88043-5 - Cultural Transmission: Psychological, Developmental, Social, and Methodological Aspects

Edited by Ute Schonpflug

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

viii	<i>Contents</i>	
7.	Intergenerational Relations and Cultural Transmission <i>Gisela Trommsdorff</i>	126
8.	Intergenerational Transmission, Social Capital, and Interethnic Contact in Immigrant Families <i>Bernhard Nauck</i>	161
9.	Developmental Processes Related to Intergenerational Transmission of Culture: Growing Up with Two Cultures <i>Amado M. Padilla</i>	185
10.	The Transmission Process: Mechanisms and Contexts <i>Ute Schönplflug and Ludwig Bilz</i>	212
11.	Accounting for Parent–Child Value Congruence: Theoretical Considerations and Empirical Evidence <i>Ariel Knafo and Shalom H. Schwartz</i>	240
12.	Culture, Migration, and Family-Value Socialization: A Theoretical Model and Empirical Investigation with Russian-Immigrant Youth in Israel <i>Ariel Knafo, Avi Assor, Shalom H. Schwartz, and Limor David</i>	269
13.	Immigrant Parents' Age Expectations for the Development of Their Adolescent Offspring: Transmission Effects and Changes after Immigration <i>Eva Schmitt-Rodermund and Rainer K. Silbereisen</i>	297
PART THREE: INTRACULTURAL VARIATIONS		
14.	Intergenerational Transmission of Moral Capital across the Family Life Course <i>Merril Silverstein and Stephen J. Conroy</i>	317
15.	Similarity of Life Goals in the Family: A Three-Generation Study <i>Alexander Grob, Wibke Weisheit, and Veronica Gomez</i>	338
16.	The Intergenerational Transmission of Xenophobia and Rightism in East Germany <i>Bernd Six, Kristina Geppert, and Ute Schönplflug</i>	370
17.	Intergenerational Transmission of Violence <i>Haci-Halil Uslucan and Urs Fuhrer</i>	391
18.	“Don't Trust Anyone over 25”: Youth Centrism, Intergenerational Transmission of Political Orientations, and Cultural Change <i>Tom F. M. ter Bogt, Wim M. J. Meeus, Quinten A. W. Raaijmakers, Frits van Wel, and Wilma A. M. Vollebergh</i>	419

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-88043-5 - Cultural Transmission: Psychological, Developmental, Social, and Methodological Aspects

Edited by Ute Schonpflug

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

---

<i>Contents</i>	ix
19. Value Transmission and <i>Zeitgeist</i> Revisited <i>Klaus Boehnke, Andreas Hadjar, and Dirk Baier</i>	441
20. Epilogue: Toward a Model of Cultural Transmission <i>Ute Schönplflug</i>	460
<i>Index</i>	479

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-88043-5 - Cultural Transmission: Psychological, Developmental, Social, and Methodological Aspects

Edited by Ute Schonpflug

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

---

## FOREWORD

Although cross-cultural studies in psychology have existed for more than 100 years, it has only been in the past decade or two that contemporary, mainstream psychology has embraced the importance of culture as a significant influence on psychological processes. In the past two decades, we have gained much knowledge and improved our understanding of the nature, contents, and functions of culture as a macrosocial variable and of its relationship to behavior on the individual level. At a time when more and more of psychology is looking inward and at the micro-level building blocks of behavior in neurons, neurochemicals, and brain processes, the study of culture and its relationship with psychology is refreshing as it looks outward, beyond the individual, into groups and contexts to find frameworks and platforms for understanding human behavior.

This work is still in process, however, and one of the major problems that psychologists doing work involving cultures face entails how to link individual-level human behavior with cultural-level phenomena. Indeed, the field is still plagued by studies dominated by quasi-experimental designs, in which differences are observed across supposed cultural groups and researchers interpret the source of these differences as cultural with little or no empirical justification (Matsumoto & Yoo, 2006). In fact, many researchers go beyond making these ecological fallacies (Campbell, 1961) and even attribute causal mechanisms to culture from such data, interpreting that culture “caused” the differences observed or that their data highlighted “cultural influences on” psychological processes. (Matsumoto and Yoo [2006] called these kinds of mistaken attributions “cultural attribution fallacies.”)

It is in this important gap in our theoretical conceptualizations and empirical approaches that work on cultural transmission makes a strong contribution. Examining the ways in which the contents of culture – explicit and implicit, objective and subjective – are transmitted to members of a cultural group, studies of cultural transmission ultimately aim to forge those linkages between culture as a macro-level, social construct and individual-level psychological processes



Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-88043-5 - Cultural Transmission: Psychological, Developmental, Social, and Methodological Aspects

Edited by Ute Schonpflug

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

that many researchers take for granted or blatantly ignore. By understanding those linkages, cultural-transmission researchers are able to highlight how the contents of culture are translated and communicated, highlighting the close bonds that are formed between individuals and the societies and cultures in which they live.

This edited book, *Cultural Transmission: Psychological, Developmental, Social, and Methodological Aspects*, is the first volume published in the series titled “Psychology and Culture.” The focus of this series is the impact of culture on a wide variety of psychological processes. This book highlights the major contributions that this effort has made to date. Schönplflug has assembled the world’s foremost researchers in the area of cultural transmission, each of whom has brought to bear the state-of-the-art thinking and research in his or her respective area. Collectively, this volume amasses the amazing amount of work that has been accomplished in the field and highlights many of the significant contributions to our understanding of this important topic to date. This work describes the contents and processes of culture as a uniquely human product; the direction in which transmission occurs – vertically, horizontally, and obliquely; and its manifold ways of spreading out. Because of this work, we can discard primitive notions of cultural transmission as being primarily vertical and unidirectional (e.g., parent to child) and understand transmission as occurring within families, peers, and institutions – and going in both directions.

The work in this volume also shows that cultural transmission is selective: not all of the contents of culture are transmitted to all cultural members. This important concept provides the basis for understanding individual differences as well as cultural fluidity, both clearly important topics in the study of culture and psychology. The work emphasizes not only what is being transmitted but also how and why – that is, allowing for survival mechanisms and ways of being to “ratchet up” in each successive generation, ensuring not only the survival of the human species but also its flourishing.

By presenting the major contributions that this work on cultural transmission has made to psychology in recent years, the volume also takes a thorough, objective look at what is missing – the gaps in our knowledge – and the limitations in current research approaches to transmission. The final chapter provides readers with a road map of the future, one that should forge new ways to understand transmission as well as new ways to study it.

In my opinion, no serious student of culture and its relationship with psychological processes should be without a strong, solid foundation in understanding the nature of cultural transmission, because this is precisely the work that allows us to make those precious links between culture and psychology. Without those links, our understanding of the relationship between culture and psychology is doomed to be confined by the inherent limitations of doing research without incorporating cultural-context variables (Poortinga, 1990) or understanding the

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-88043-5 - Cultural Transmission: Psychological, Developmental, Social, and Methodological Aspects

Edited by Ute Schonpflug

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

*Foreword*

xiii

nature, processes, and mechanisms of cultural transmission. This volume should be read by all serious students of culture.

David Matsumoto  
San Francisco, CA, USA  
July 2008

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Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-88043-5 - Cultural Transmission: Psychological, Developmental, Social, and Methodological Aspects

Edited by Ute Schonpflug

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

## CONTRIBUTORS

AVI ASSOR is Associate Professor and head of the educational psychology program at Ben Gurion University (Israel). His research focuses on processes affecting children's autonomous internalization of values endorsed by parents and educators. He is also involved in the development and assessment of school reforms based mainly on self-determination theory.

DIRK BAIER is currently Research Associate at the Criminological Research Institute in Hannover (Germany), where he organizes a large youth survey on violence. His main interests are in deviance, right-wing extremism, and youth sociology.

JOHN W. BERRY is Professor Emeritus of Psychology at Queen's University (Canada). He obtained his Ph.D. at the University of Edinburgh (Scotland) and has received honorary doctorates from the University of Athens (Greece) and Université de Genève (Switzerland). He has published more than 30 books in the areas of cross-cultural, social, and cognitive psychology. His main research interests are in the areas of acculturation and intercultural relationships, with an emphasis on applications to immigration, educational, and health policy.

LUDWIG BILZ is Assistant Professor at the Faculty of Educational Science of the Technical University of Dresden (Germany). His research interests are in health psychology and educational psychology.

KLAUS BOEHNKE is Professor of Social Science Methodology at the International University, Bremen (Germany). He is the current Secretary General of the International Association for Cross-Cultural Psychology. His research interests are youth research and methodology. He also actively pursues activities in peace psychology.

STEPHEN J. CONROY is currently Associate Professor of Economics at the University of San Diego (United States). He also completed a National Institute on Aging postdoctoral research traineeship in gerontology. His multidisciplinary research has appeared in a variety of well-known venues.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-88043-5 - Cultural Transmission: Psychological, Developmental, Social, and Methodological Aspects

Edited by Ute Schonpflug

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

xvi

*Contributors*

LIMOR DAVID was a student at the Open University (Israel). Her research focuses on cross-cultural psychological aspects of migration. She is now engaged in educational activities.

HARALD A. EULER received his Ph.D. from Washington State University. Since 1974, he has been Professor of Psychology at the University of Kassel (Germany). His current research interests include the evolutionary psychology of family relations, children, and women from nontraditional families.

URS FUHRER is Professor of Developmental and Educational Psychology at the Otto-von-Guericke-University, Magdeburg (Germany). His main research focuses on the relationship between parenting and child development within the family and cultural context. In addition, his research involves mediational theories of mind, with a special interest in identity formation.

JAMES GEORGAS is Emeritus Professor of Psychology at the University of Athens (Greece). He is President of the International Association for Cross-Cultural Psychology and a member of the executive boards of several international psychological associations. His current research interests are in family across cultures, theory and methodology in cross-cultural research, construction of psychometric tests, and attitudes and values.

KRISTINA GEPPERT received her M.A. in psychology from Martin Luther University, Halle-Wittenberg (Germany). Her interests are in workplace, organizational, and educational psychology.

VERONICA GOMEZ is a Ph.D. student in personality and developmental psychology at the University of Basel (Switzerland). Her research interests involve self-regulation across the life span with a focus on cohort-specific personality processes and subjective well-being across cultures.

ALEXANDER GROB is trained in developmental and clinical psychology. Since 2005, he has been Professor of Personality and Developmental Psychology at the University of Basel (Switzerland). His research interests focus on transgenerational processes in the family and personality development across the life span, as well as structure and antecedents of life events.

ANDREAS HADJAR is research associate in an internationally comparative project on dominance ideologies among youth and lecturer at the Department of Sociology of Chemnitz University of Technology (Germany), where he also received his Ph.D. in sociology in 2003. His research interests encompass a broad range of topics in political sociology, family sociology, and sociology of education.

SABINE HOIER received her M.A. in biology and sociology from the University of Kassel (Germany) and is now Assistant Professor at the same university. Her research interests include human sperm competition, family relations, children, and women from nontraditional families.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-88043-5 - Cultural Transmission: Psychological, Developmental, Social, and Methodological Aspects

Edited by Ute Schonpflug

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

*Contributors*

xvii

ARIEL KNAFO is Assistant Professor of Psychology at The Hebrew University of Jerusalem (Israel). He completed his Ph.D. in intergenerational value transmission at The Hebrew University of Jerusalem. His research projects focus on adolescents' values and behaviors (e.g., aggression and substance abuse) and on the influence of genetics and the environment on the development of prosocial behavior and values in adults and children.

WIM M. J. MEEUS is Professor of Adolescent Psychology at Utrecht University (the Netherlands). He has published on adolescent moral development, political attitudes, and missing-data treatment.

BERNHARD NAUCK is Professor of Sociology at Chemnitz University of Technology (Germany). His main areas of interest are family population, life course, and migration, with special emphasis on cross-cultural comparisons. He is the author of some of the reports for the German government regarding the situation of families and migrants in Germany.

AMADO M. PADILLA is currently Professor of Educational Psychology at Stanford University and a Fellow of the American Psychological Association (United States). He has published extensively on ethnic identity, acculturation, bilingualism, and education of immigrant students. He is the founding editor of the *Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences*.

QUINTEN A. W. RAAIJMAKERS is Senior Researcher at Utrecht University (the Netherlands). He has published on adolescent moral development, political attitudes, and missing-data treatment.

PERCY A. ROHDE received his Ph.D. in biology from the University of Kassel (Germany). He published in the field of sexual selection and parental care in birds and has more recently turned to human evolutionary psychology. His research interests include sexual selection, family relations, and parental care.

EVA SCHMITT-RODERMUND is Director of the Division for Academic and Student Affairs at the University of Jena (Germany). Her research interests concern human development across the life span, with an emphasis on adolescence. Her main research interests focus on the acculturation of immigrants and career development.

UTE SCHÖNPFLUG was Professor of Developmental Psychology at Martin Luther University, Halle-Wittenberg (Germany), until 2002. She is an adjunct member of the Institute of Cognitive Science in Boulder, Colorado (United States) and teaches at Free University of Berlin (Germany). Her research interests are in the areas of cultural transmission, bilingual language development, and text processing.

SHALOM H. SCHWARTZ is Emeritus Professor of the Leon and Clara Snyderman Chair of Psychology at The Hebrew University of Jerusalem (Israel). He started

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978-0-521-88043-5 - Cultural Transmission: Psychological, Developmental, Social, and Methodological Aspects

Edited by Ute Schonpflug

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

xviii

*Contributors*

his academic career in the United States. Since 1979, he has taught in Israel, where his research interests have included helping behavior, intergroup conflict, and basic human values. He coordinates an international project in more than 60 countries that is studying the antecedents and consequences of individual differences in value priorities and the relations of cultural dimensions of values to societal policies and characteristics.

**RAINER K. SILBEREISEN** is Professor and Chair of Developmental Psychology at the University of Jena (Germany) and Adjunct Professor of Human Development and Family Studies at Pennsylvania State University (United States). He is Director of the Center for Applied Developmental Science in Jena. His research is mainly on behavioral development across the life span, with emphasis on cross-national differences and the role of social change.

**MERRIL SILVERSTEIN** is Professor of Gerontology and Sociology at the University of Southern California (United States). His research focuses on aging within the context of family life, including such issues as intergenerational transfers and transmission, grandparenting, migration, and public policy toward caregiving families. He currently serves as Principal Investigator of the Longitudinal Study of Generations and Mental Health. International projects include a study of aging families in rural China.

**BERND SIX** is Professor of Social and Organizational Psychology at Martin Luther University in Halle-Wittenberg (Germany). His research interests in social psychology involve the relationship of attitudes and behaviors, conditional analysis of organ donation in Germany and Japan, stereotypes and prejudices targeting minorities, differences between groups of foreigners, and East–West differences in Germany.

**TOM F. M. TER BOGT** is Professor of Pop Music and Popular Culture at the University of Amsterdam (the Netherlands). He has published on Protestant work ethic, leisure time, substance use, pop music, and popular culture. He produced a television series on the history of youth culture in the Netherlands.

**MICHAEL TOMASELLO** taught at Emory University and worked at the Yerkes Primate Center in the United States for several years. He is now Codirector of the Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology in Leipzig (Germany). His research interests focus on the processes of social cognition, social learning, and communication in human children and great apes.

**GISELA TROMMSDORFF** is Professor of Developmental Psychology and Cross-Cultural Psychology at the University of Konstanz (Germany). Among her many international positions in scientific organizations, she holds the position of vice president of the German-Japanese Society for Social Sciences. Her main interests involve child–parent relationships, values of children, development of emotions, prosocial behavior, and control orientations.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-88043-5 - Cultural Transmission: Psychological, Developmental, Social, and Methodological Aspects

Edited by Ute Schonpflug

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

*Contributors*

xix

HACI-HALIL USLUCAN is Assistant Professor in the Department of Developmental and Educational Psychology at Otto-von-Guericke-University, Magdeburg (Germany). His main research focuses on juvenile violence, acculturation problems of migrants, and child–parent relationships in cultural contexts. He teaches developmental psychology, educational psychology, and applied cultural psychology.

PAUL VAN GEERT is Professor of Developmental Psychology at the University of Groningen (the Netherlands) and former Fellow of the Center of Advanced Studies in the Behavioral Sciences. His main interest lies in the application of dynamic systems thinking to modeling and studying development. Originally working in the field of early language development, he has recently extended his interest to a dynamic approach of social development and learning in childhood and adolescence.

FRITS VAN WEL is Senior Researcher at Utrecht University (the Netherlands). His publications are in the field of culture, care, and welfare, in general, and parent centrism and adolescent media use, in particular.

WILMA A. M. VOLLEBERGH is Professor of Pedagogy at the University of Nijmegen (the Netherlands) and Director of the research program on developmental psychopathology at the Trimbos Institute, the Netherlands Institute on Mental Health and Addiction. She has published on political attitudes and adolescent mental health.

WIBKE WEISHEIT completed her Ph.D. at the Department of Personality Psychology, Individual Differences and Assessment at the University of Bern (Switzerland). Her research interests focus on transgenerational processes in the family, especially with respect to life goals, subjective well-being, and personality traits, as well as on personality development across the life span.