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Harold L. Odden

The Acquisition of Cultural Knowledge of Hierarchy by Samoan Children

By

Harold L. Odden

Doctor of Philosophy

Department of Anthropology

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Bradd Shore, Ph.D.

Adviser

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Debra Spitulnik, Ph.D.

Committee Member

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Carol M. Worthman, Ph.D.

Committee Member

Accepted:

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Lisa A. Tedesco, Ph.D.

Dean of the Graduate School

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Date

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**by Samoan Children**

**By**

**Harold L. Odden**

**M. A., Emory University, 2003**

**B. A., University of California at San Diego, 1994**

**Advisor: Bradd Shore, Ph.D.**

**An Abstract of a Dissertation submitted to the**

**Faculty of the Graduate School of Emory University**

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**Degree of Doctor of Philosophy**

**Department of Anthropology**

**Abstract**

This doctoral dissertation examines the processes of cultural learning by which Samoan children (0-12 years of age) come to understand local concepts of hierarchy, social rank and respectful behavior. This is a particularly important domain of cultural knowledge in contemporary Samoa as titular chiefs exercise wide-ranging social, political and economic powers in their families and villages, and concerns with relative rank organize social interactions between all members of society. Consequently being able to understand local models of hierarchy is an essential component of children’s developing social and cultural competence.

The dissertation documents how children are socialized to use observational, imitative, and participatory learning as primary modes of social learning, as they adapt to familial demands and practices, prevailing ethnotheories of child development, and other aspects of their developmental niches. The ways in which social learning is structured in this context are compared with predictions from Vygotskian “cultural-historical” activity theory to demonstrate the analytic necessity of attending far more to the socio-cultural context in which children develop to more adequately understand the nature and full range of variation in developmental processes.

Samoan patterns of social learning also have an important influence on the intergenerational transmission of cultural knowledge and practice. Research findings suggest that rather than a simple replication of existing systems of inequality (i.e. with children of higher-ranking households attaining greater cultural competence than children of lower-ranking ones), an emphasis on observational learning means that endogenous factors such as the child’s motivation to learn, and social factors such as positive social relationship with one’s elders moderate the importance of family rank. These findings fit a Samoan cultural emphasis on gaining competence in the chief system through long-term service to chiefs, parents, and senior members of one’s descent group. The research also points to a number of different “leveling mechanisms”, including the village primary school, that serve to widely disseminate opportunities to learn one’s culture that undercut more restrictive forms of intergenerational transmission. The implications of the study’s findings to our understanding of the complex interactions of cultural practices, social organization, and processes of human development over ontogeny are discussed.

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