



A FIELD GUIDE TO CROSS-CULTURAL RESEARCH ON CHILDHOOD LEARNING

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

EDITED BY SHEINA LEW-LEVY
AND STEPHEN ASATSA



<https://www.openbookpublishers.com>

©2025 Sheina Lew-Levy and Stephen Asatsa (eds)
Copyright of individual chapters is maintained by the chapter's authors



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International (CC BY-NC 4.0). This license allows you to share, copy, distribute and transmit the text; to adapt the text for non-commercial purposes of the text providing attribution is made to the author (but not in any way that suggests that they endorse you or your use of the work). Attribution should include the following information:

Sheina Lew-Levy and Stephen Asatsa (eds), *A Field Guide to Cross-Cultural Research on Childhood Learning: Theoretical, Methodological, Practical, and Ethical Considerations for an Interdisciplinary Field*. Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers, 2025, <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0440>

Copyright and permissions for the reuse of the images included in this publication may differ from the above. This information is provided in the captions and in the list of illustrations.

Further details about the CC BY-NC license are available at
<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

All external links were active at the time of publication unless otherwise stated and have been archived via the Internet Archive Wayback Machine at
<https://archive.org/web>

Any digital material and resources associated with this volume will be available at
<https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0440#resources>

Information about any revised edition of this work will be provided at
<https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0440>

ISBN Paperback: 978-1-80511-466-6

ISBN Hardback: 978-1-80511-467-3

ISBN Digital (PDF): 978-1-80511-468-0

ISBN Digital ebook (EPUB): 978-1-80511-469-7

ISBN HTML: 978-1-80511-470-3

DOI: 10.11647/OBP.0440

Cover image: Children playing in front of their home in Kafr Elsheikh, Egypt (2016). Photo by Mona Abo-Abda, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:ART_and_KIDS.jpg. Cover design: Jeevanjot Kaur Nagpal

10. Looking forward, looking back

In this final chapter, we offer emerging scholars in cross-cultural childhood learning research the advice we wish we had received at the start of our careers.

In this book, we have aimed to take you through the entire life cycle of cross-cultural research on childhood learning. We started in Chapter 1 by asking: What is childhood? What is culture? What is learning? And most importantly: Why should you study childhood learning across cultures? We made the case that research on this topic should be ethical, respectful, and holistic—themes that we revisited throughout the book.

In Chapter 2, we reviewed the history of research on cross-cultural childhood learning through an overview of methods and theory from the disciplines of developmental psychology, anthropology, and philosophy from across Africa, China, and Japan. Chapter 3 expanded on universalist and culturalist approaches, ultimately arguing that, to truly understand child development, we must draw on the best of both approaches. Chapter 4 brought together diverse methodologies, and explored their theoretical, ethical, and practical implications.

In Chapter 5, we discussed the practicalities of preparing for ‘the field’, from building trustful relationships with communities and stakeholders, to staying safe and planning a budget. Chapter 6 provides personal narratives ripe with honest descriptions of challenges encountered, and lessons learned by scholars working near and far from home.

Chapter 7 considered research sharing, from design to publication. Chapter 8 provided a series of case studies on global education, demonstrating that educational policy can better account for local cultural contexts through direct participation

of communities. Finally, Chapter 9 tells us about the policy cycle, offering practical advice about how to engage policymakers, so that our research ultimately benefits children from around the world.

This volume represents the book we wish we had had when we started studying children's learning across cultures. And while, normally, books like these end by telling you, the reader, what we hope the field will look like in the future, ultimately, if you're reading this book, you are the future of our field. Thus, rather than tell you what we think, we want to end by providing you with advice we wish we had had at the start of our research journeys. We hope the advice below, and the book more generally, helps you on your path.

"Two bits of advice given to me by mentors early in my career continue to resonate. First, it's better to come home with no data and good relations, than the reverse. And second, it's OK to come home early from fieldwork if you need to." –Sheina Lew-Levy

"Everything will take much longer than you think. And you will find out much more than you were trying to learn. Expand your timelines, expectations—and supply of digestive aids." –Ivan Kroupin

"Life is larger than work." –Jing Xu

"Things take time, things go well, and things go badly. That's completely normal. Try your hardest to learn as much from what goes wrong as you do from what goes right." –Bruce Rawlings

"Expect the unexpected—always. Expect things to break you never thought would break. Your health is more important than data. Have a good supply of comfort food."—Patricia Kanngiesser

"You've probably heard the expression that 'anything worth doing isn't worth doing perfectly'. That's even more true if you have dengue fever. Also, if you don't frequently push yourself outside your comfort zone, you won't learn as much as you could, nor will others learn as much about you." –Michael Gurven

“The core ingredients of good science are curiosity, serendipity, and respect. Respect for the knowledge and perspectives of your colleagues, coworkers and informants—they are all co-creators of whatever final results you end up with.” –Felix Riede

“Do not follow best career options when you are not passionate about the topic. Develop awareness about your own biases. Question taken-for-granted assumptions. Be courageous and enjoy what you are doing.” –Heidi Keller

“If you are planning ethnographic fieldwork, you should know that you will have plenty of idle time in the field! Don’t try to optimize everything or always obtain useful information—it’s impossible. Instead, prioritize fitting into the local routine and building good relationships with people. ‘Dead time’ is absolutely part of an ethnographer’s work. And a very practical piece of advice: if your field site is far from where you live, plan your fieldwork in stages, if possible. Spend a few months in the field, then some time back at the university, and afterward, return to the field. The time back at the university is very useful for processing your material, realizing what is missing, and better preparing for your final stay.” –Chantal Medaets

“Learn to live with pending tasks without getting stressed out: that’s the life of a researcher. And don’t forget to have fun and make friends along the way.” –Julia Hermida

“I found that at the start of my fieldwork in Yasawa, I recognized many familiar things: families living together, feeding their kids, looking after their elders, doing daily chores. It all felt quite ‘normal’ to me, despite being far from my culture of origin. The longer I spent living in the villages there, the more I found deeper ways in which day-to-day experience, meaning-making, and relationships varied from what I was used to. I suppose the takeaway is to remain humble, and spend a lot of time just living where you study and trying to understand how others are living in a qualitative way, even if your research demands quantitative outputs.” –Michelle Kline

“It is helpful to be prepared, but many plans will not work out, and that’s okay. Don’t be too sad about everything; awe and bewilderment can co-exist.” –Gairan Pamei

“This career will test your patience, confidence, and drive. Fieldwork will be unpredictable, papers will get rejected, and feedback will feel brutal. But resilience isn’t just pushing through—it’s adapting. Be open to shifting your research questions, methods, and perspectives. Growth comes from flexibility, not perfection. Keep learning, keep adjusting, and trust that setbacks are just part of the process.” –Nicole Wen

“Is there anyone among this set of authors from around the globe who would not tell a younger self to be more fearless in pursuing his or her passion? Yet, of course, others will have self-guidance that reflects their unique geographies, histories, and personalities. In my case, I would advise Elise to take herself both more and less seriously: Have the confidence to pursue burning questions and act on her deepest values, but accept falling short of her ideals with more equanimity and less self-criticism. I would urge her to be a more assiduous scholar of languages and linguistics—her greatest intellectual passions and the source of much of whatever insight she has been able to bring to research on educational reform, particularly in the arena of student assessment. Finally, I would bolster her belief in collaboration—a natural proclivity of hers and a major reason for her best accomplishments. She would be very fortunate in finding strong, devoted, brilliant, and intellectually generous colleagues, who would also become friends.” –Elise Trumbull

“I try, I fall, I try again, I fall better.” –Barnabas Simatende

“Embrace intellectual curiosity. Some of the most meaningful insights will come from unexpected places. Trust your instincts when a topic or question sparks your interest, even if it doesn’t fit neatly into existing frameworks. Your work will help you understand the power of listening and deep human connection. The most rewarding moments won’t come from publications or accolades, but from the people you meet—colleagues, students,

research participants, and friends. Balancing marriage, children, and an academic career won't be easy. But don't feel guilty for wanting both or at times investing in one more than the other. Academia, or your own guilt, can make you feel like you must choose, but personal experiences will enrich your work and your work will enrich your personal life in ways you never imagined. Finally, be patient with yourself. Your career will evolve in ways you can't foresee. There will be detours, frustrations, and moments of self-doubt. But trust that you're building something meaningful—one conversation, one field season, one page at a time." –Bonnie Hewlett

"Always back up your data and store the two extra copies at different locations." –Katja Liebal

"Things will nearly always somehow go 'wrong' in research, and that's ok. You'll always have something to build on, even if it didn't turn out exactly (or even a little bit!) the way you'd imagined or planned for. Be easy on yourself, be respectful of your colleagues, and don't forget to have fun!" –Annemieke Milks

"Fieldwork is unique among research methods as it's built on genuine interactions with people and their environment. During fieldwork, living alongside children and their families allows you to see the world through their eyes and understand different ways of relating to others and nature. While not always smooth, the process is grounded in everyday moments. You may begin by feeling the breeze, the rain, or the heat of the sun, watching birds fly and clouds drift, hearing children play and laughter, or joining in adults' gossip." –Xiaojie Tian

"That working in the field allows you to immerse yourself in the wisdom of the people, in the simple environment and the depth and spirituality that guides them." –Andrea Taverna

"Be open to learning from others and be ready to learn a lot about yourself. Take breaks and pause from time to time to take in and enjoy the moment—some of the most interesting insights come not

from studying but from experiencing what is around you.” –Marie Schäfer

“Remember that this book is written by ‘survivors’: Fieldwork is not for everyone, and it does not mean someone is weaker if they decide to leave early or not to go back. Even those who go back several times may eventually accumulate difficult (perhaps even traumatic) experiences that make their everyday life harder, and perhaps feel ashamed to share their struggles. So be particularly careful and gentle with your students.” –Anonymous

“Relax and enjoy the process. Try not to lose sight of the beauty and awe of exploring another culture or region of the world for your data-driven and time-sensitive (and career dependent) research goals. Stop, step back, and watch everything. Sit, sit, and sit some more. Make time to do nothing with people. You’ll learn more than you can imagine by just hanging out. Recognize your bias and be explicit about it. You may arrive ready to explore a question in one way but if you open your eyes and ears, you will likely discover there’s much more to the question than you thought. Be prepared to discard your old ideas and follow new leads. And, have fun!” –Tanya MacGillivray

“Look for networks where your work resonates and where you can engage in meaningful dialogue in the field and out. These connections can be a source of strength and encouragement, providing feedback and support every step of the way. Local researchers, community leaders, and other stakeholders can provide invaluable support and insights during your fieldwork. You’ll show up with big plans, and many of them will be wrong. Learn from the people around you; ask for their input and guidance. Regarding the dissemination of your work: focus on sharing your work with the networks you’ve developed, share widely, and be transparent. Also remember that no one knows how hard you worked to do your research, so it’s important to remember that the value of your research is not diminished by a lack of immediate recognition. Do good work, stay committed to your vision, and

continue to share your findings confidently.” –Helen Elizabeth Davis

“Always run pilots. Lots of them. Keep a research journal, write about anything that comes to mind. Ask for help. Sometimes, your supervisors are wrong. Good research projects take time. A lot of what you do and feel proud of will probably never be in a scientific paper. Learn what and who is worth your time and energy (I am still learning that one). You are more than your research.” –Natália Dutra

“There will never be perfect advice to guide you through the many difficult, exciting, annoying, and consequential decisions you will make during fieldwork (and life for that matter!). Be okay with failing. Be proud of succeeding. Be kind and open to experience. Be willing to learn. And if you accidentally buy 10 cartons of coffee instead of 10 cans, roll with it.” –Sarah Pope-Caldwell

“Be ready to accept that plan A, B, or C might not work and that is ok! Take time to rest and be in your best health, you will need it. Be humble and enjoy the unique experience you are having! And take the time to watch, learn, share, and admire the amazing people you are about to meet.” –Camila Scaff

“You are going to hit obstacle after obstacle. Just keep going. Those you think should help you, won’t. So don’t expect help—you’re in charge. You’ll be told your ideas aren’t worthy. They are. And it will seem like the thing you really want to do won’t happen. But it will. If you persevere. So, keep your head down and bite off more than you can chew ... then chew really bloody hard.” –Mark Nielsen

“I wish I had learned the importance of patience (or perhaps I should have listened to those advising me to do just that!) and the value of maintaining curiosity, especially outside the study setting. The most essential aspect of field research in psychology is understanding people, which comes not only from running studies but from spending time with them, appreciating their perspectives, listening to stories, and never missing a football match (/huru bolsa).” –Roman Stengelin

“In my research journey, I have learned that the true experts are the community members—most of whom are typically seen as uneducated—rather than the professors and PhD scholars, whom we often regard as highly educated and who usually design and conduct the research. The final resting place for research findings should be the community and NOT the library.” –Stephen Asatsa