

Title: The Development of Teaching and Social Learning Across Cultures

PI: Cristine H. Legare

Funder: National Science Foundation (NSF) Science of Learning Program (SL)

Variation in human cultures is unique among animals in its extent, complexity, and modification over generations. Humans display a wide repertoire of socially acquired and transmitted behaviors that vary between groups and change over time. Adaptations for social learning—acquiring, creating, and transmitting cultural knowledge—provide the foundation for human culture. These learning mechanisms should be flexible, enabling individuals to respond to diverse cultural contexts. The objective of this cross-cultural research project is to study the psychological processes that allow us to learn, create, and transmit culture. Continuity and variation in child development within and across populations will be documented and explained. Multiple methods—observation, interviews, and experiments—will be used to examine the psychological foundations of cultural transmission practices (teaching) and acquisition strategies (social learning) across cultures (U.S., Northern Australia, Cameroon, Namibia, Vanuatu, and Fiji). This project partners five developmental psychologists, two evolutionary anthropologists, and an economic psychologist, all with expertise in cross-cultural research.

The dearth of systematic research outside of Western cultural contexts presents a major impediment to theoretical progress in the psychological sciences. There is a need for a new path forward in developmental psychological science to better understand global diversity in human development. The results of these studies have the potential to inform the development of international education programs by increasing understanding of variation in teaching and social learning practices around the world, allowing teachers to adapt to the diverse ways that people learn. This research team will work closely with local communities at our international field sites to contribute to the preservation of information about the beliefs, values, and practices of these unique cultural contexts.