“Teaching is so WEIRD”

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Abstract: Direct active teaching by parents is largely absent in children’s lives until the rise of WEIRD (Western, educated, industrialized rich, democratic) society. However, as mothers become schooled and missionized—like Kline’s Fijian subjects—they adopt “modern” parenting practices, including teaching. There is great variability, even within WEIRD society, of parental teaching, suggesting that teaching itself must be culturally transmitted.

Kline has done a fine job in laying out the various disciplinary perspectives on teaching, but she fails to acknowledge that all three perspectives are mediated by culture. I find two aspects of her argument particularly problematic. First, her definition of teaching is broadened (contrast Thornton & Railahi 2008, p. 1823) to include an enormous range of behavior. In fact, the definition is so broad that it is hardly distinguishable from social learning; for example, “social learning … refers to any situation in which the behavior, or presence, or the products of the behavior, of one individual influence the learning of another” (Caldwell & Whiten 2002, p. 193).

Specifically, Kline’s catholic definition of teaching includes teaching by social tolerance, illustrated by a Fijian woman who permits her child to get involved as she prepares food (see target article, sect. 3.1.1). This is precisely the pattern of behavior that Rogoff and colleagues have been documenting for decades in rural Mexican and Guatemalan villages, and their primary conclusion is that children learn through their own initiative, observing, participating, practicing, and doing not from being taught (Paradise & Rogoff 2009, p. 117; Rogoff et al. 2003). Perhaps the Fijian mother is simply according to the child’s inexorable drive to learn, or perhaps she’s just being accommodating to head off a tantrum?

Another “type” of teaching is opportunity provisioning (see target article, sects. 3.1.2 and 4.2.2). This would include the frequent accounts of the provision of knives to young children. For example, a Pirahã child:

was playing with a sharp knife … swinging the knife blade around him, often coming close to his eyes, his chest, his arm … when he dropped the knife, his mother – talking to someone else – reached backward nonchalantly … picked up the knife and handed it back to the toddler.

(Everett 2005, p. 89)

Again, I would use this case as prima facie evidence of parents’ aversion to teaching coupled with the bedrock belief – solicited in interviews – (Lancy, in press) that learning is children’s business (e.g., Wilierslev 2007, p. 162).

Evaluative feedback is another type of teaching discussed by Kline (sects. 3.1.4 and 4.2.4). A normative reading of the ethnographic record would stress the rarity of feedback – especially praise – from adults (Hilgier 1957, p. 77). On the other hand, corporal punishment (Ember & Ember 2005) and frightenment are certainly common enough but it isn’t clear that the intent is to teach. A Samoan mother may threaten a fretful baby by calling out “Pig! Elenoa is here, come and eat her!” (Ochs 1988, p. 183). ”Evaluative feedback” is largely used to manage the child’s behavior, rather than to transmit the culture.

My larger point is that, unlike direct active teaching, Kline’s other types of teaching are more securely and parsimoniously labeled “social learning.”

The second issue is that Kline fails to account for acculturation. She finds that teaching is “common” on Fiji (sect. 4.1, para. 1), but the villagers she queried had had over 100 years’ exposure to Western schooling and missionary influence (Kline et al. 2013, p. 357). In my fieldwork with Kpelle children in the early 1970s where teaching was conspicuously absent, the village inaugurated

Teaching interactions are based on motor behavior embodiment

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Abstract: In Kline’s target article, the role of motor behavior in teaching is missing. However, it is so important that we cannot avoid taking into account the movements of another person when performing our own movements. Moreover, the state of mind is embodied. Consequently, teaching should integrate the role of motor behavior to enhance teacher/learner social interactions.