

## Responsibility in Childhood: Three Developmental Trajectories

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**Abstract** In this article, we analyze the development of responsibility through the lens of the Peruvian Matsigenka, Samoan, and middle-class Los Angeles, California, childhoods. We propose that recognizing social awareness, social responsiveness, and self-reliance as keystone properties of responsibility supports an argument that children's routine work at home enables not only social but also moral responsibility, in the form of respectful awareness of and responsiveness to others' needs and reliance on knowledge that takes into consideration others' judgments. We document distinct modes of engagement in community and family activities evidenced in community ethnographies of children in Matsigenka, Samoa, and in middle-class Los Angeles, and propose seven arguments (related to sociopolitical organization, necessity, development, school priority, independence–interdependence, attention practices, and inconsistency) that bear on these observations. A contradiction in the values and practices for promoting independence and giving care is manifested exclusively in the L.A. families, creating a dependency dilemma for children of these families. If moral responsibility involves an active turning toward the other that engenders the capacity for compassion, our research indicates childhood socialization practices differentially facilitate or complicate achievement of this perspective. [responsibility, child development, socialization, Samoa, Los Angeles, Matsigenka]

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In this article, we analyze the concept of responsibility in childhood through the lens of three societies in which we have conducted field research: the Matsigenka of the Peruvian Amazon, Samoans residing on the island of Upolu, and middle-class U.S. families in Los Angeles, California.<sup>1</sup> We propose that social awareness, social responsiveness, and self-reliance are keystone properties of moral personhood and use these properties to articulate ways in which actions and stances of others influence children's accountability in everyday family life. Building on cross-cultural studies of children's domestic activities, this study advances the literature by arguing that much more than practical competence and social responsibility are afforded by children's assistance in tasks. We hypothesize that practical household work is a crucible for promoting moral responsibility in the form of a generative cross-situational awareness of and responsiveness to others' needs and desires. This proposal appreciates Aristotle's insight that "It is of no little importance what sort of habits we form from an early age—it makes a vast difference, or rather all the difference in the world" (Aristotle 1976:32). Aristotelian virtue is rooted in *hexis* (habit), conceived as an active state that performers continuously work to possess or hold.

Philosophy has been a source of insight in psychological anthropology from cultural relativists' reliance on Herder and Humbolt (Boas 1938), to Turner's (1986) use of Dewey and Dilthey in explaining drama, to the import of phenomenology in recent ethnographic perspectives on empathy (Throop and Hollan 2008). The present essay hopes to offer an intellectual synergy in bridging philosophical considerations of situated human morality and ethnographic accounts of practical responsibility in children's daily lives. Of particular importance to a psychological anthropology of responsibility are philosophical views that locate morality in a primal corporeal and perceptual attention to others. Ethnographic studies reveal ways in which such attention is socioculturally configured in early childhood, with implications for children's differential responsibility for others across settings and communities.

As noted by Stein, empathy is experienced through "the medium of corporeality" (1989:117). In our perspective, moral responsibility is an active turning toward the other that begins corporeally in early childhood socialization and develops as a capacity for compassion. Although practical competence does not automatically engender moral consciousness, corporeal participation in tasks may afford such consciousness. We propose that children learning tasks may also be "learning to learn" (Bateson 1972) a habitus of moral responsibility. This view builds on Whiting and Whiting's conclusion that children's participation in work-related tasks constitute "mechanisms by which children learn to be nurturant-responsible" (1975:103) and Weisner's (1979) finding that rural Kenyan children, who performed work tasks twice as often as urban counterparts, tended to be more sociable, less aggressive, and sought fewer resources from their mothers (see also Grusec et al. 1996; Seymour 1988).

We suggest that children's routine assistance in housework, childcare, and self-care is a crucial path for gaining what Aristotle called *phronesis* (insight) and Kant called "judgment," that is, the ability to think in commonsense ways that assume standpoints of others (cf. Arendt 2003). Task participation also apprentices children into responding to others' face-wants (Goffman 1967; Levinas 1969, 1985) and thus to realizing respect in ways that exceed courtesy idioms. "Please" and "thank you" exemplify a superficial level of politeness, or *politesse des manières*, whereas task-enactments display deeper politeness, or *politesse de l'esprit* and *politesse du coeur* (Bergson 2008; Duranti in press).

We analyze growing up responsibly in middle-class Los Angeles in comparison with Matsigenka and Samoan family life. Many middle-class L.A. parents devoted time and energy assisting children in simple chores in a manner not observed in Matsigenka and Samoan families. Such interventions conflict with U.S. parental ideals of independence, creating a *Dependency Dilemma* (Whiting 1978), that is, children are apprenticed into a milieu where both independence and reliance on others are emphasized, rather than an alternative where modes of social awareness, social responsiveness, and self-reliance in household tasks are mutually reinforcing. We propose seven arguments (sociopolitical organization, necessity

development, school priority, independence-interdependence, attention practices, and inconsistency) bearing on these cross-cultural observations.

We distinguish three kinds of responsibility in this study: (1) causal, for example, one's behavior (or supernatural force) leads to X (Kant 1963, 1989); (2) moral, for example, one is responsible as a self-regulating moral agent (Arendt 2003; Aristotle 1976; Kant 1987, 1991); and (3) social, for example, one's social position entails responsibility toward others for X (Parsons 1951). These modes of responsibility are coimplicated, as for example when moral or social responsibility implicates causal responsibility.

Some scholars relate the idea that responsibility is a natural and universal human disposition to Kant's position (1988, 1989) that reason overwhelms feelings of self-love and gives rise to respect for a moral law. This vision is echoed in Kohlberg's (1984) analysis of a developmental ascent from preconventional ego-oriented notions of right and wrong to adoption of conventional perspectives to postconventional universal standards of justice. Others eschew the idea that responsibility is ultimately rational in favor of the phenomenological notion that responsibility is intersubjective, evoked when encountering another (Levinas 1969). Openness to the social world and universal affective proclivity leads one to respect the call of another's face. This response to face defines the authentic relationship of responsibility: "Before the face I do not simply remain there contemplating it, I respond to it" (Levinas 1985:88–89).

Beyond its universal qualities, responsibility is quintessentially sociocultural. The most celebrated social quality of responsibility is entailed in one's status or situational role (Parsons 1951). Parameters of what "should" transpire are wholly or partly socio-cultural-historical. Grounds for responsible friendships as specified by Aristotle may or may not hold outside Ancient Greece. Grounds for establishing responsibility for transgressions may be assessed in terms of mental states (e.g., accountable for intentional acts) or on the basis of consequences, regardless of an actor's mental states (cf. Duranti 1988; Ochs 1988; Rosaldo 1982; Shore 1982 on this disposition in Oceania).

Of interest to responsibility in childhood is the matter of knowledge. Aristotle (1976) notes that for an action to be affirmed as virtuous, the agent needs to know what he is doing. Arendt (1954) bemoans the "ruinous" *laissez faire* attitudes of U.S. educators, insisting they should teach past knowledge to give children resources for thinking and acting responsibly. Acquainting children with an older world of ideas and events is related to the importance of judgment in the making of a responsible person (Arendt 1954, 2003). From a Kantian perspective, judgment involves a broadening beyond subjective thinking to recognition of the "position of everyone else" (1987:160). Following Aristotle and Cicero, Arendt sees judgment as key to civic responsibility. A responsible person is a moral agent whose thoughts and actions are informed but not necessarily swayed by the common sense of others: The antidote to the "banality of evil" (1963) is to combine social awareness with Socratic reflection that rouses one's self and others (2003:176).

Building on these ideas, we stipulate social awareness, social responsiveness, and self-reliance as central properties necessary for a child to be morally responsible. Social awareness involves attention to situated activities, participants, and judgment (à la Kant). Social responsiveness involves prosocial dispositions and behaviors, especially attunement to others' needs (Levinas 1969). Self-reliance includes the ability to depend on one's intellectual, emotional, and physical resources. Self-reliance is related to personal autonomy, involving self-initiation and self-regulation of one's behavior.

### Three Developmental Stories

Following Ochs and Schieffelin (1984), we provide three developmental stories of social awareness, social responsiveness, and self-reliance among the Matsigenka (a small-scale egalitarian society), Samoans (a postcolonial socially stratified society), and middle-class families in the United States (a postindustrial society with a market economy). We limit our discussion of responsibility to work performed in family environments. The stories do not aspire to represent the full range of family expectations, ideologies, and practices surrounding children's responsibilities. Nor are the activities across stories necessarily of the same type, given cultural variability in daily routines. Instead, the stories distill salient orientations and scenes from everyday life repeatedly observed and recorded by the authors and other researchers, offering a comparative framework for investigating sociocultural configurations of responsibility in childhood.

#### Developmental Story 1: Matsigenka (Peruvian Amazon)

Yanira stood waiting with a small pot and a bundle with two dresses and a change of underwear in hand.<sup>2</sup> A member of the Matsigenka people of the Peruvian Amazon, she asked to accompany anthropologist Carolina Izquierdo and a local family on a fishing and leaf gathering expedition down river. Over five days away from the village, Yanira was self-sufficient and attuned to the needs of the group. She helped to stack and carry leaves to bring back to the village for roofing. Mornings and late afternoons she swept sand off the sleeping mats, fished for slippery black crustaceans, cleaned and boiled them in her pot along with manioc then served them to the group. At night her cloth bundle served as blanket and her dresses as her pillow. Calm and self-possessed, she asked for nothing. Yanira is six years old.

Yanira's comportment exemplifies key elements of what constitutes well-being for the Matsigenka: working hard, sharing, and maintaining harmonious relationships (Izquierdo 2009). The Matsigenka are a small-scale, egalitarian, family-level society. As a social group, they have historically survived in isolated extended family compounds in the Amazonian rainforest and more recently have been brought together as small communities by Protestant missionaries, all the while continuing to subsist on fishing, hunting, and subsistence horticulture (mainly manioc, bananas, and sweet potatoes).

Self-sufficiency in accomplishing daily tasks coupled with sociability lie at the heart of what it means to be a competent member of the Matsigenka family and society. These basic tenets are socialized early in a child's development and permeate daily life. The Matsigenka constantly recount folktales in which animals, plants, and other agents punish Matsigenka people for being lazy, stingy, and angry (Izquierdo and Johnson 2007; Johnson 2003). When a person falls ill or dies, a common explanation is that the person or someone in the person's family has committed one or more of these transgressions. Even before children are born, pregnant Matsigenka women and their spouses take precautions to prevent bearing a *peranti* (lazy) child. Laziness is parents believe preventable in children by following dietary rules as well as carrying out certain activities.

During the first year of life, infants are cherished, surrounded by warmth and love, protected by a network of family and community. Infants are kept close to their mothers nursing throughout the day from within body slings that women wear across their front. Once infants are able to sit up and move around, they are discouraged from crawling or being active. The movements of older babies are restrained by the caregiver, for example, holding or enveloping the baby's body or issuing imperatives such as "Kemisante!" (Listen-obey-stay-still!). Getting infants' bodies to remain still is seen as part of apprenticing infants to be attentive and cooperative. Infants and young children are embedded in the middle of quotidian activities where they are positioned to quietly observe and learn what others are doing. Moreover, their mobility and possible inattentiveness are undesirable; potentially dangerous and interfering.

Infants are weaned when they are approximately one and a half years old, coinciding with learning to walk. When they have gained strong footing and can get around, they are encouraged to do things for themselves and are given leeway to learn through trial and error. Older siblings and other family members maintain a watchful eye, while toddlers and young children experiment heating their own food in the fire and putting sometimes scalding foods in their mouths. Three-year-olds frequently practice cutting wood and grass with machetes and knives. When three-year-old Julio wandered too close to the edge of a cliff and rolled several feet down the ravine, his mother washing clothes nearby scolded him for being careless. Error correction of this kind, rather than prevention and intervention is the prevailing socialization strategy directing young children into self-sufficiency.

Task competence begins early in life. Children emulate parents' activities. Toddlers carry out numerous small tasks in proximity to their mothers. Many of these tasks are self-initiated, whereas others are in response to mothers' commands. Children of all ages readily comply with these directives (Johnson 1978). Those who are disobedient or lazy are punished by being bathed in hot water or rubbed with an itchy inducing plant. Family and community members use various strategies to ensure children's contributions and participation in household tasks including public shaming. Additionally folk stories, involving *peranti* (lazy) characters who suffer dire consequences for their behavior, are told purposely

to indicate disapproval and instill a sense of fear and shame in children who require reminders of the tenets of Matsigenka collaboration.

When children are young, tasks are not distributed according to gender. Around the age of six to seven years, boys start accompanying fathers to hunt, fish, and plant in the gardens, while the girls remain close to their mothers to observe and help with cooking, sweeping, weaving, washing clothes, child care, and women's work in the gardens. Like young Yanira on the fishing expedition, children know what to do and quickly accomplish tasks.

Although Matsigenka children attend the village school for part of the year, they perform a plethora of tasks before and after school hours and task competence prevails as a family and community value. Children's homework generally did not take more than an hour to complete and parents did not get involved in homework activities. Adults and children alike regarded children of non-Matsigenka Peruvian teachers as lazy, incompetent, and too talkative. The sons of the mestizo teachers, they reported, noisily interrupt them with "Escúchame!" (Listen to me!), demand food, but do not help in any way.

By the time they reach adolescence, Matsigenka boys and girls attain a high degree of skill in everyday tasks.<sup>3</sup> The division of labor is clear and efficient, with few words exchanged about what needs to be done or how to coordinate activity. In looking for a spouse, young men and women look for good providers, prioritizing qualities of skilled and hard work: women good at weaving and making manioc beer and men good hunters and fishermen. They prioritize autonomy and self-sufficiency in carrying out everyday tasks, feeling diminished and manipulated when told what to do and viewing directing others as a sign of disrespect. Ultimately as children grow older they "are expected to look after themselves and gradually to take on domestic responsibilities. Through work, children develop a sense of autonomy . . . a basic characteristic of the Machiguenga personality" (Johnson 1978:166).

### **Developmental Story 2: Samoan (Upolu, Samoa)**

It is 1978 and raining outside as the family prepares a new roof of pandanus leaves for a house in the family compound.<sup>4</sup> Young boys are bringing leaves from the nearby plantation, while young men burn the old roof leaves and others prepare food to serve to elders, all under the watchful eyes of the high-ranking head of the family. A group of girls care for infants and split pandanus leaves, while elsewhere mothers and grandmothers sit sewing leaves into roof mats. Nearby small children observe them. When an infant cries, a girl covers his head to protect him from the rain and quickly brings him to his mother for breastfeeding. She waits until he is fed then is told to take her *soukei* (dear sibling) with her. Familiar commands to children echo throughout the courtyard: "Hurry up!" "Sit down!" "Cover the baby!"

Underlying this scene are two major organizing principles of Samoan society: social hierarchy and distributed responsibility for task accomplishment. Every extended family is

headed by at least one *matai*, whose title is associated with its particular descent group and lands (Duranti 1994; Shore 1982). Titled persons rank higher than untitled persons, and among untitled persons further stratification is applied according to relative age and generation. Rank organizes economic, domestic, and ceremonial activities. Higher ranked persons tend to be less active and delegate physically demanding tasks to lower-ranking persons (Shore 1982). Older persons carry out seated activities, such as weaving or giving speeches. Younger untitled persons generally work in the plantations, carry food and fuel to the family compound, prepare ovens, and serve food, kava, and other offerings to matai and other dignitaries.

Hierarchy is maintained through the display of *fa'aaloalo* (respect), a term composed of the causative prefix *fa'a* (to make) and the respect-vocabulary term *alo* (to face) thereby entailing a bodily and social orientation toward others (Duranti 2007). A 1978–79 study of Samoan children's language development and socialization (Ochs 1988) documented caregivers routinely prompting infants to notice, accommodate, and anticipate needs of others. Infants were held face outward to witness activities and interactions nearby. Toddlers were fed facing others and prompted to notice and call out to people. Such practices apprenticed young children to be attuned not only to the presence of other people but also to social attunement itself, that is, to be attentive to others as habitus. Adults emphasized that the path to knowledge is to serve. The path begins with attentiveness, which is key to respect. Young children observed ongoing activities while located at the periphery of houses, sides of the road, or near elders. Such exposure facilitated practical competence in activities.

In *Coming of Age in Samoa* Margaret Mead noted that “work is something that goes on all the time for every one; no one is exempt” (1928:229). Even four- to five-year-old children “perform definite tasks, graded to their strength and intelligence, but still tasks which have a meaning in the structure of the whole society” (1928:226). In 1978, young children still carried out active, important work for their family and community. They climbed trees to fetch coconuts; knocked breadfruits to the ground with long poles; carried produce from the plantation in pandanus baskets that they wove; and participated in food production, such as grating coconut, pounding cocoa and coffee beans, tending fires, and cooking. Children cut grass, swept mats, and washed clothes. Under the watchful eye of an older family member, they bathed, groomed, soothed, fed, and watched over infants. They relayed messages across households and switched to respect vocabulary to accommodate a high-ranking addressee. These tasks were mainly carried out before and after children attended school. In some families, children took turns staying home from school to help the family.

Older family members rarely intervened to instruct before children perform tasks. Instead, children were directed to do something then corrected if necessary with “Aua!” (Don't!), “Soia!” (Cut it out or else!), by running a hand over the child's face, saying, “Mâ!” (Shame!) or other punishment. When children resisted, they were usually admonished, but adults supported occasional cheekiness, noting that untitled youth are sometimes called on to be “bad” in ways unbecoming to older titled persons.

Actions were generally seen as cooperative (Duranti and Ochs 1986; Ochs 1988). Although schoolteachers praised a child, family members rarely issued praise. It was also unusual to compare individual skills in family surroundings. Indeed, Samoan language does not have the equivalent of “better” and “worse.” Rather, one performing an activity was viewed as benefiting from a *tâpua’i* (supporter). Distributed responsibility was recognized through a common verbal exchange: A *tâpua’i* notices a person’s activity by saying “Mâlô!” (Well done!), then the person reciprocates “Mâlô le taapua’!” (Well done the support!). Through such exchanges children were socialized to give and receive support and that responsibility resides beyond one person. This perspective is tied to the view that a person’s actions are not completely controlled by a unified “self” (e.g., there are no Samoan reflexive pronouns) and that watchfulness by others is necessary (Shore 1982).

### Developmental Story 3: Middle-Class Los Angeles

At 6:30 a.m. Mom climbs the stairs to wake up 11-year-old Mikey, 12-year-old Mark, and 15-year-old Stephanie for school and to ask them what kind of sandwich they want her to prepare for their lunch.<sup>5</sup> She repeatedly calls out:<sup>6</sup> To Stephanie: “Hop up, rise and shine. Stephanie? Stephanie? It’s time to get up. Don’t forget we have to leave early, okay?” To Mark: “It’s time to get up.” “Okay. Come on. Up and at ‘em!” To Mikey: “Start getting up. Okay?,” to which he responds “Why?” “Because . . . Rise and shine.”

In the kitchen Mom asks the children what they want for breakfast and puts choices on the table. She prepares lunches, reminds them to take lunch boxes, and tells them to brush their teeth, comb their hair, and put on shoes. After confirming that Mark has finished breakfast, Mom asks him to take out the trash. He emphatically refuses “No!,” but Mom points to the garbage bags, prodding him “Come on. Put your tennis shoes on now.” When he goes upstairs and does not reappear, Mom yells “MARK! COME ON! WHAT ARE YOU DOING?” He replies “Playing.” Resigned, she responds “Never mind. I’ll take it out.” When Mark promises to do it, Mom responds “I’m taking it out right now.” Rather than actually taking out the trash, however, she deposits the bags by the door in expectation that Mark will take them out, which he finally does.

Throughout breakfast Mom reminds the children of the countdown to departure time: “Keep an eye on the time,” “Make sure you get all your stuff together! . . . We have to be out of here in 10 minutes . . . FIVE MINUTES! . . . Get your stuff together. We’re leaving”. She also reminds them of their after-school schedule of activities. As they pile into the car, Mom directs the children where they should place their backpacks and gives them the lunchtime instruction “Make sure you eat!” This mother carries out a series of interventions to ensure that her children will awake, dress, eat, grab belongings, and be ready for school while the clock is running.

Middle-class U.S. parents are highly child-centric and accommodating starting from infancy and continuing through middle childhood and into adolescence: Adults use highly



simplified baby talk, teach games step-by-step, invest time, and money and use child-oriented artifacts such as toys to stimulate children, intervene when children face difficulties, and anticipate possible harm through elaborate safety devices and placing dangerous objects out of reach (Ochs and Schieffelin 1984, 1995). Middle-class parents also make great efforts to understand young children's thoughts and emotions, engaging infants in face-to-face protoconversations and expanding unintelligible utterances (Bates et al. 1979; Ferguson 1977). Adults also give children sole credit for accomplishments in which parents provide considerable assistance, lauding children for achievement. Beginning in infancy, children are often praised for unsuccessful efforts ("Good try!"). Parents build an image of the competent child by letting children win or appear to be almost on a par with older opponents. When children reach school age, many parents become heavily involved in children's homework, creating a time management plan, monitoring progress, and helping them with assignments (Wingard 2006).

At least since the mid-20th century Dr. Spock's childrearing manuals have advised U.S. parents to maintain a friendly but firm control over young children's behavior and to tolerate a certain amount of rebellion (Spock 1957, 2004). In contrast to Spock's directive that parents avoid giving children too many options and reasons for doing a task, negotiations between children and parents over children's tasks were prevalent among the families observed in the CELF study.

Parents, especially mothers, carried out household tasks with little or no assistance from their children (Klein et al. 2008). Although video footage evidences the intense pace of performing these tasks in limited time before and after work, many parents remarked that it takes more effort to get children to collaborate than to do the tasks themselves. Parents did not systematically apprentice children into chores nor routinely delegate chores to them.

Across 30 families observed, no child routinely assumed responsibility for household tasks without being asked (Klein et al. 2008). Children were assigned tasks and intermittently made their bed, or cleared the table, or got dressed on their own. But the overall picture was one of effortful appeals by parents for help with practical matters, relying on politeness markers such as "please," offers of rewards, or veiled threats. Directives were often cast as suggestions, as in "You know what you can do, Alex? You can wash your hair in the bathroom. Do you *want* to do that?" Parents also frequently directed a child to help then backtracked and did the task themselves, as when a mother asked her daughter to do laundry then told her to dry her hair instead and that she will do the laundry (not expecting the daughter to do both). Although some children were cooperative when asked, children in 22 families observed frequently resisted or flatly refused (Klein et al. 2008). In a representative scenario, an exasperated father asked his eight-year-old son to take a bath or shower five times then carried him to the bathroom. Minutes later the boy returned to a video game. In the other eight families, children were more cooperative but contributed little to the practical running of the household.

Although Spock did not advocate negotiation of authority to the point of children ruling the roost, children observed in the CELF study frequently directed parents to perform tasks on their behalf. Eight-year-old Haley, for example, sat down for dinner, did not see silverware, and asked her father, “How am I supposed to eat my meal?” prompting her father to fetch a spoon. The following exchange between eight-year-old Ben and his parents illustrates the slippery slope of parent–child negotiations of authority: About to leave the house with his son, Ben’s father is displeased that his son forgot his jacket, “Son, son, I’m a little annoyed. Go get your jacket . . . Go get your jacket.” Ben ignores him, trying to put his feet in sneakers whose laces are tied. His father repeats “Go get your JACKET!” to which Ben responds “Oka:y Oka:y. Stop screaming at me.” Instead of getting the jacket, Ben sits down and says “Seriously, it’s like you’re always a control freak. I’m not trying to like call you a name . . . I am just saying you’re like acting like a control freak.” As his father objects, Ben thrusts a sneaker before him and commands “Untie it.” Ben’s father demands that he “ask” for this service. After Ben reformulates his order, “Can you untie it?” his father insists that he add “please.” Ben complies, and his father unties both shoes. Ben then directs his father (politely) to tie his shoes: “Can you please tie it?” He then expands his request: “Can you please go and get my jacket, and *then* can you please tie it?” Only now does his father hold firm: “No, son, *go* get your own jacket and *you* tie your shoes and let’s *go*.” Ben curses, “Dang. I’m just *a:sking*.” At this point Ben’s mother then intervenes, “You shouldn’t ask for things like that. These are things you can do for yourself. You guys are so accustomed to not doing *anything* for yourselves.” Ben’s father asks his son again to get his jacket but uses the mitigated “let’s” form: “Let’s go get your jacket.” With a resigned “Oka::y,” Ben walks out of the room and gets his jacket all by himself!

Resonating with repeated observations in other families, the parent in this exchange retreats from a no-nonsense authority figure to a valet for the child. Incrementally, the parent’s authority assumes more limited scope: When ordered to untie his son’s shoes, the father exerts authority only over the degree of politeness of his son’s directive (i.e., *politesse des manières*). Only after this service and the son’s further requests does the father stand his ground, buttressed by the mother’s moral instruction, and does the son comply with the father’s weakened directive to get his jacket. This excerpt illustrates the conflict between idealizations of children’s responsibilities and actualities.

### Interpreting Stories of Responsibility

Juxtaposition of these developmental stories begs for an account of responsibility in childhood. Two interrelated expressions of responsibility stand out: (1) displays of children helping family members and (2) displays of family members helping children. Why do Matsigenka and Samoan children help their families at home more than L.A. children? Why do L.A. adult family members help their children at home more than do Matsigenka and Samoan adult family members?

Cross-cultural scholarship documents children in a range of communities routinely helping family members in household tasks (Goodnow 1988; Harkness and Super 1996; LeVine et al. 1988; Munroe and Munroe 1975; Reynolds 2008; Rogoff 2003; Rogoff et al. 2003; Seymour 1988; Such and Walker 2004; Weisner 1979; Weisner and Gallimore 1977). Middle-class children in the United States in contrast have been observed contributing much less help at home (Klein et al. 2008; Whiting and Whiting 1975). Dr. Spock did not view children as capable of housework, but, rather, advised that children help with chores to build self-esteem: “By the time children are eight or nine, it is very good for them to *feel* that they can contribute meaningfully to their family’s well-being . . . to have chores that allow [the child] . . . to *feel* that he is truly helping out [*emphasis ours*]” (2004:183–184). The assumption that school-age children cannot help others at home is belied by cross-cultural studies.

The second striking contrast across the developmental stories is the difference in assistance that parents provided for children. In Los Angeles, parents helped school-age children carry out basic self-care tasks such as brushing hair, brushing teeth, taking a shower, and picking up belongings (Goodwin 2006; Fasulo et al. 2007; Klein et al. 2008). Matsigenka and Samoan children of similar ages were more self-reliant in self-care and domestic chores. Rare in these communities are the patterns found for middle-class L.A. children of requesting adults to do things for them when they are capable on their own, and adults’ routine assistance even when unsolicited. These parent–child engagements are constitutive of a dependency dilemma arising from a contradiction between U.S. cultural ideals of independence and caregiving practices that promote dependence (Weisner 2001; Whiting 1978).

## Seven Arguments

Below we set forth and consider the relative merits of seven interrelated arguments that might explain differential displays of children’s responsibility for household tasks in Matsigenka, Samoan, and middle-class L.A. communities. The arguments move along a cline from weak to strong explanatory force:

### Sociopolitical Organization

This argument holds that the sociopolitical structure of a community accounts for adults’ expectations and children’s enactments of tasks. This account fails to explain our data: Samoan society is hierarchical, with higher-status persons giving frequent commands and expecting compliance. In contrast, Matsigenka social organization is egalitarian, with a strong emphasis on not telling people what to do; it is disrespectful to tell even children what to do once they have learned a task. Yet, across these different forms of social organization, children in both communities are impressively socially aware, socially responsive, and self-reliant at a very young age, contributing significantly to the running of the household and family well-being. What cuts across these childhoods is a clear set of community

expectations regarding children's tasks and ample opportunities for apprenticeship into those tasks. In these communities children hold default responsibilities qua members of families and communities.

### **Necessity**

This argument holds that L.A. working parents do not need children's contributions. The argument is weak on several counts: Although some L.A. families outsourced heavy housecleaning, others did not. Moreover, regardless of outside assistance, numerous daily tidying and self-care activities demanded time and energy of L.A. families. After work, parents, especially mothers, hectically multitasked while children were otherwise engaged (see Bianchi et al. 2007; Good 2007; Hochschild and Machung 2003; Offir and Schneider n.d.). Many L.A. parents complained to researchers that their children do not help around the house, that it is frustrating and time consuming to get them to do so, and that it is easier to do tasks themselves (Klein and Izquierdo 2007). Moreover, they complained to their children, as in Ben's mother's lament "You shouldn't ask for things like that." Finally, most parents did request help from their children with housecleaning and personal hygiene tasks.

### **Development**

This argument holds that school-age children are not developmentally competent to perform household and self-care tasks or to assume responsibility for them. This reasoning is weak in light of (1) early developmental studies indicating that prerequisites for cooperation are acquired by 15 months (Tomasello 2005) and (2) cross-cultural studies indicating that children progressively become more skilled in domestic tasks such that five- to seven-year-old children partly or fully assume these tasks in many communities (cf. Izquierdo 2001; Ochs 1988; Rogoff 2003; Schieffelin 1990; Seymour 1988; Whiting and Edwards 1988; Whiting and Whiting 1975). Developmentally at odds is that many middle-class L.A. families do not benefit from children's capacities to be socially aware, socially responsive, and self-reliant in tasks at home.

### **School Priority**

This argument holds that the locus of middle-class L.A. children's responsibility to the household lies in their accomplishment of schoolwork, rather than housework. This argument has both strengths and weaknesses. On the strong side, compulsory schooling historically redefined children's responsibilities, diminishing participation in paid and domestic work (Cunningham 2005; James and Prout 1997; Mintz 2006). The importance of doing well at school is also compatible with a contemporary middle-class U.S. parenting ethos that values children being "smart" and academically competitive (Laureau 2003). Indeed, many parents felt that children were too busy with schoolwork and other activities to help at home.

That homework and extracurricular activities take priority as children's work for L.A. parents may account for why their children are not routinely delegated major household tasks like laundry or primary care for younger siblings. The privileging of school activities, however, does not explain why L.A. children frequently resist carrying out lighter chores that do not take up much time or effort, such as setting the table or taking their plate to the dishwasher after a meal, especially when a parent issues a request. The privileging of school also does not explain why children feign helplessness in simple self-care tasks like untying shoes and why parents routinely provide assistance in such circumstances.

An important question is the extent to which L.A. children displayed self-reliance in school-related activities or relied on parental help. The L.A. parents complained about homework, not because it occupied so much of children's time but because it made demands on their time (Forsberg and Wingard 2006). Although some assignments appeared challenging and requiring assistance, other times children did not even start the homework without a parent alongside. Some children eliciting help appeared oblivious (i.e., displayed minimal social awareness and social responsiveness) to other household demands facing their parents after work, even when parents tried to get children to be more responsible. Some parents who helped with homework became annoyed by children's distractions or loss of resolve (Goodwin 2007). Such points of contention lie at the heart of the contradictions emerging in L.A. parental ideals and expectations for children's everyday uptake of responsibility.

### **Independence–Interdependence**

This argument holds that divergent cultural models of independence and interdependence held by different social groups account for Matsigenka, Samoan, and middle-class L.A. children's differential participation in household work. This argument is deeply flawed, in that independent and interdependent selves characterize every society (Freud 1965; Spiro 1993; Whiting 1978). As Levinas notes, all human beings are interdependently vulnerable and accountable to the face of others (1985:95). Moreover, the dichotomy does not consider discrepancies between normative and experienced independent and interdependent selves (Harkness et al. 2000; Harkness and Super 1996; Shweder 1984; Spiro 1993; Super and Harkness 1997). Although L.A. middle-class parents idealized children's independence ("You shouldn't ask for things like that. These are things you can do for yourself"), socialization practices at home promoted dependence. Similarly, although Matsigenka and Samoan families and communities promoted interdependence, they also socialized children to be highly self-sufficient in practical tasks.

Supporting Spiro's claim that cross-cultural studies theoretically underspecify and ethnographically oversimplify what is meant by self, independence, and interdependence, Kağıtçıbaşı (2005) argues that autonomy is entirely compatible with interdependence. Indeed, Matsigenka and Samoan families and communities count on children's default self-reliance to maintain others' well-being. These insights go beyond saying that cultural models can be ignored, transgressed, or flaunted in the throes of everyday exigencies.

Rather, contradictory logics dialectically coexist as a mindset across members of a community and even within the mindset of one person.

A further critique of the independence–interdependence dichotomy is Kuserow’s (2004) compelling hypothesis that independence itself is not a homogeneous concept. She proposes that two configurations of individualism coexist in the United States: hard individualism (favored in working-class communities) and soft individualism (favored in upper-middle-class communities). Hard individualism encourages children to be tough enough to handle obstacles even fighting as needed to defend oneself. Soft individualism encourages the child to “open out into the world and realize her full potential” (Kuserow 2004:99). Relevant to responsibility in childhood, hard individualism is built through insistence on vigilance, obedience, and respect, whereas soft individualism promotes egalitarian parenting that empowers children to speak their own minds and negotiate others’ control over them.

Although hard individualism’s emphasis on hierarchy matches Samoan but not Matsigenka social order, its focus on children’s readiness to handle exigencies holds true for both communities. Alternatively, soft individualism may account for middle-class parents’ greater reluctance to impose domestic chores on children. Relevant to soft individualism is the historical emergence of the entitled child in the United States (Cunningham 2005; Zelizer 1994). A decline in number of children per family and rise in children’s legal rights over the last century may have promoted the status of children as love objects. Zelizer proposes that 19th-century European and U.S. households valued children for their labor potential, whereas the 20th century valued them as “economically useless but emotionally priceless” (1994:281). Cunningham argues that in the search for emotional gratification from children, parents have sacrificed their authority in the late 20th century. He also notes, however, that this predicament is not unique to contemporary times. Medieval European religious leaders also worried that Catholic parents loved their children to the point of idolization.

### **Attention Practices**

This argument holds that rudiments of moral responsibility lie in socialization practices that organize children’s attention through orientation of bodies and senses to the social world. It suggests that: (1) young children in some communities (Matsigenka and Samoan) more than others (L.A. middle class) or in some situations more than others are corporeally oriented to pay close attention to persons and the tasks they are performing, and (2) this bystander orientation affords children’s apprehension and enactment of these tasks, which is necessary for assuming responsibility for these tasks. We suggest that attention to people performing activities lays the foundations for both interdependence (social awareness, social responsiveness) and independence (self-reliance).

In this line of reasoning, body hexis becomes the organizing medium (Bourdieu 1977) for children’s emergent moral agency. This argument is compatible with Kant’s (1963) view that

moral responsibility is linked to respect (*Achtung*), which depends on attention and with the similar Samoan view that respect (fa'aaloalo) is an outcome of turning to face another. It also supports Levinas' point that "access to the face is straightaway ethical" (1985:85). The argument is part of a broader proposal that the habitus of respect and empathy is generated through children's active participation in seemingly simple embodied practices that orient them to regard phenomena deemed worthy of consideration.

Kant would view attention to others through body hexis as critical to children's becoming moral practical reasoners. To expand knowledge and talents, it is critical that children diminish "self-love" and respect those more competent than themselves. This view of respect underlies Arendt's (1954) insistence that educators have a responsibility to the child and the world to acquaint children with a world of knowledge much older than them. In our perspective, socialization practices that promote children's attention to the activity of others is a first step toward social awareness; social responsiveness and self-reliance in practical matters that affirm the worth of others and give dignity to the child's own place within the family and community.

### **Inconsistency**

This argument holds that children's assumption of responsibility for practical tasks is impacted by relative consistency in assigning such tasks and monitoring their execution. Matsigenka and Samoan caregivers displayed a high degree of consistency in expectations of children's participation in practical tasks in comparison with the often inconsistent L.A. parental stances toward children's involvement in tasks.

Relevant to this argument is the distinction between routine tasks that children are expected to perform and occasioned tasks that children are asked to perform. From Aristotle to Kant to Bourdieu, stability in the form of habituation is key to the cultivation of a moral self in a normative sense. *The Nichomachean Ethics* (Aristotle 1976:32) suggests that "people become builders by building and instrumentalists by playing instruments. Similarly, we become just by performing just acts, temperate by performing temperate ones, brave by performing brave ones." As such, routine participation cultivates social and moral responsibility; and parental inconsistency in task assignment, with concurrent confused expectations, clouds the path to this end.

Decades ago Mead reflected that immigration and rapid cultural change in the United States has led to discontinuity in models for how to act, think, and feel across generations (Mead 1955). Discontinuities also may be exacerbated by geographic mobility that distances adults from their families and communities of origin, contributing to variable parenting styles from generation to generation, family to family, and parent to parent. The relative infrequency of extended family members residing together may contribute to inconsistency and conflict in assignment and monitoring of housework and childcare responsibilities observed in many L.A. middle-class families (Klein et al. 2008; Klein and Izquierdo 2007).

The “priceless child” and “soft individualism” ideologies may also play a role in the prevalence of inconsistent stances toward L.A. children’s practical contributions to family life: Children should be enjoying children’s pastimes, but then again children need to learn to care for themselves and others as cornerstones of their own and other’s dignity. This ambivalence was instantiated when L.A. parents bathed directives in politeness forms. Displays of politeness both soothed the face-wants of children and (re)configured would-be responsibility into a favor. Similarly, the much touted and widely observed strategy of offering “choices” to children about when, which, where, and how tasks are to be performed gave the illusion that children are doing tasks out of their own volition as empowered agents (Paugh and Izquierdo in press). That L.A. parents were often inconsistent and indecisive did not mean, however, that they were permissive; rather, they vacillated between strictness and leniency in expecting children to do tasks.

Finally, beyond historical discontinuities and ideologies of children, inconsistency in assigning and monitoring children’s tasks also stemmed from situation-based conditions. For example, in the L.A. story, the clock running in the countdown to getting out the door for school is a backdrop to the mother’s oscillation between issuing commands and back-sliding into assuming part of her son’s obligation to take out the garbage. Goodwin (2006) also found that parents who were themselves involved in other tasks in other rooms away from the child and who did not sustain a face-to-face orientation to the child were more likely to encounter resistance and less successful in getting the child to perform tasks than parents who sustained corporeal and cognitive focus on the child.

Inconsistency in assigning and responding to children’s task performance subverts far more than accomplishment of immediate tasks. Social and moral responsibility is at stake here. A responsible person is held accountable for his or her behavior in relation to “an interpersonal normative standard of conduct that creates expectations between members of a shared community” (Eshleman 2004:12). Inconsistent stances and behaviors surrounding children’s practical contributions to the household undermine children’s grasp of standards and expectations about what they are supposed to do, and, as a corollary, their potential to be morally responsible agents as members of a family.

### **Argument Summary**

These seven arguments indicate that despite living in societies with different sociopolitical organizations, Matsigenka, Samoan, and L.A. middle-class caregivers all need practical help from their children, who in turn are developmentally capable of providing it. That Matsigenka and Samoan children are routinely more helpful than L.A. children cannot be explained away by the relative importance of children’s school achievement. Although school surely plays a larger role in the lives of middle-class U.S. children, it does not illuminate why so few school age L.A. children routinely perform simple, brief tasks. Nor can the difference be assigned to a greater value placed on interdependence over independence



in Matsigenka and Samoan than L.A. households, because self-reliance and respect for others are important in all three communities.

Cross-cultural differences in children helping parents and parents helping children may boil down to socialization practices that place a different value on children's practical competence. We observed Matsigenka and Samoan caregivers routinely orienting infants and young children outward to notice other people engaged in ongoing practical activities and artifacts used in these activities. U.S. infants and young children instead are routinely positioned face-to-face with caregivers who accommodate them and to child-oriented artifacts (Ochs and Schieffelin 1984). Matsigenka and Samoan children's body hexis affords social awareness, social responsiveness, and self-reliance in practical activities at an early age. Alternatively, the face-to-face body hexis of U.S. children and caregivers may promote older children's expectation that adults will continue to attend to them. This hexis may also occlude U.S. children's sensory access to practical activities, thereby hindering learning opportunities (Rogoff et al. 2003). It is reasonable to infer that Matsigenka and Samoan caregivers place a higher value on children's practical competence at home than do U.S. caregivers. This inference is borne out in the relative consistency with which caregivers socialize children into task competence through assigning and monitoring children's tasks. The greater consistency in these socialization practices in Matsigenka and Samoan than in L.A. households may indicate that the former place greater importance on children's assistance in practical tasks at home. Coupled with inconsistency, effects of rapid social change, family demographics, soft individualism, and the priceless-child syndrome fuel L.A. middle-class children's erratic socialization into household help.

## **Concluding Thoughts**

Looking at middle-class L.A. children and their parents through the ethnographic viewpoint of growing up Matsigenka and Samoan has distilled paths to responsibility in childhood. Social awareness, social responsiveness, and self-reliance are keystones orchestrated by the "context of situation" and the "context of culture" (Malinowski 1935) as well as by the course of human development. Samoan and Matsigenka children from infancy are apprenticed to be aware and respectful of others. A great deal of effort is devoted to socializing them into being self-reliant and helpful, to doing things at once on their own and cooperatively, and their contributions are deemed essential to the household and community. This effort has the benefit of being distributed across many persons, households, and generations in the child's social environment. Other people are inevitably around to monitor and partake in the socializing process. Although this orientation might be construed as socialization into obedience and static "traditions," we take issue with such a conclusion and instead emphasize the power and agency that such socialization bestows on Matsigenka and Samoan children. These children are given leeway to make mistakes and learn from them over repeated occasions before enacting a task, leading to confidence about their task competence. This assurance may be seen as a form of self-esteem and worth that arises from

*praxis*, which in turn both draws from and emanates outward toward others. By contrast parents and children in middle-class Los Angeles demonstrate a kind of codependency across practical and school-related tasks. We have hypothesized that such dependency is consequential for development of Kantian *Achtung* and effective household operations.

We have proposed that Matsigenka and Samoan children's body hexis facilitates early attention to and respect for others, modes of sociality that promote moral responsibility. We have also suggested that L.A. parents' inconsistent assignment and follow-through of children's practical activities is not conducive to children's habituation of self-reliance and awareness of and responsiveness to needs of others. Nuclear households on their own may be less fertile sites for consistency in socialization practices than the distributed cross-generational and cross-household monitoring of children's behavior observed in Matsigenka and Samoan communities.

Finally, we appreciate philosophical insights that regard moral responsibility as a ubiquitous human goal enmeshing members of communities into a reflexive self- and other-monitoring moral universe. Members of families and communities have the responsibility to educate their children into awareness of the conduct and judgments of others and into knowing when and how to display respect as well as when and how to search inward for their moral compass to guide them as responsible practical reasoners. Participation in practical tasks is not the only medium for becoming a morally responsible person, but we hypothesize that it is an important one, in that it nurtures social awareness, social responsiveness, and self-reliance integral to hearth and home and the fabric of family life. "The question is never whether an individual is good," notes Arendt (2003:151), "but whether his conduct is good for the world he lives in. In the center is the world and not the self." For the developing child, the world begins at home.

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## Notes

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enhanced our acquaintance with philosophical approaches to responsibility and offered inspired insights into the sociocultural implications of phenomenology and other schools of philosophy.

1. Izquierdo conducted fieldwork among the Matsigenka (1995–present) with IRB approval from UCLA, and Ochs conducted fieldwork in Samoa (1978–79, 1981, 1988) with IRB approval from the University of Southern California. Fieldwork among L.A. families (2001–04), with IRB approval from UCLA, was conducted by the UCLA Sloan Center on Everyday Lives of Families (CELf), under the direction of Elinor Ochs.
2. The total Matsigenka population numbers approximately 12,000 living in approximately 35 communities. Data collection included participant-observation, semistructured and open-ended interviews with most community members, and video-recordings of family activities.
3. O. Johnson's video-recorded observations of Matsigenka children indicate that two- to five-year-old boys spent 21 percent and girls 12.6 percent of the day on housework and childcare; six- to 13-year-old boys spent 39.3 percent and girls 45.1 percent of their time in such activities (1978:182).
4. Six Samoan children (three male, three female) under three years of age at the start of the study (1978) and 25 siblings were longitudinally audio- and video-recorded in family interactions. Participant-observations, interviews, and a photographic archive of children's work and play activities were also undertaken.
5. The UCLA Sloan CELf study included 32 middle-class, dual-income L.A. families with two to three children, including one eight- to ten-year-old child. The study captured family life through a week of video-recording (c.50 hours per family), scan-sampling family members' locations and activities, photographing home environments, ethnographic interviews, clinical questionnaires, and assessments of stress hormones.
6. The following conversation analysis transcription conventions appear in excerpts of spoken interaction:
 

...	sound lengthening
...	
UPPER CASE	loudness
Italics	emphatic stress

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