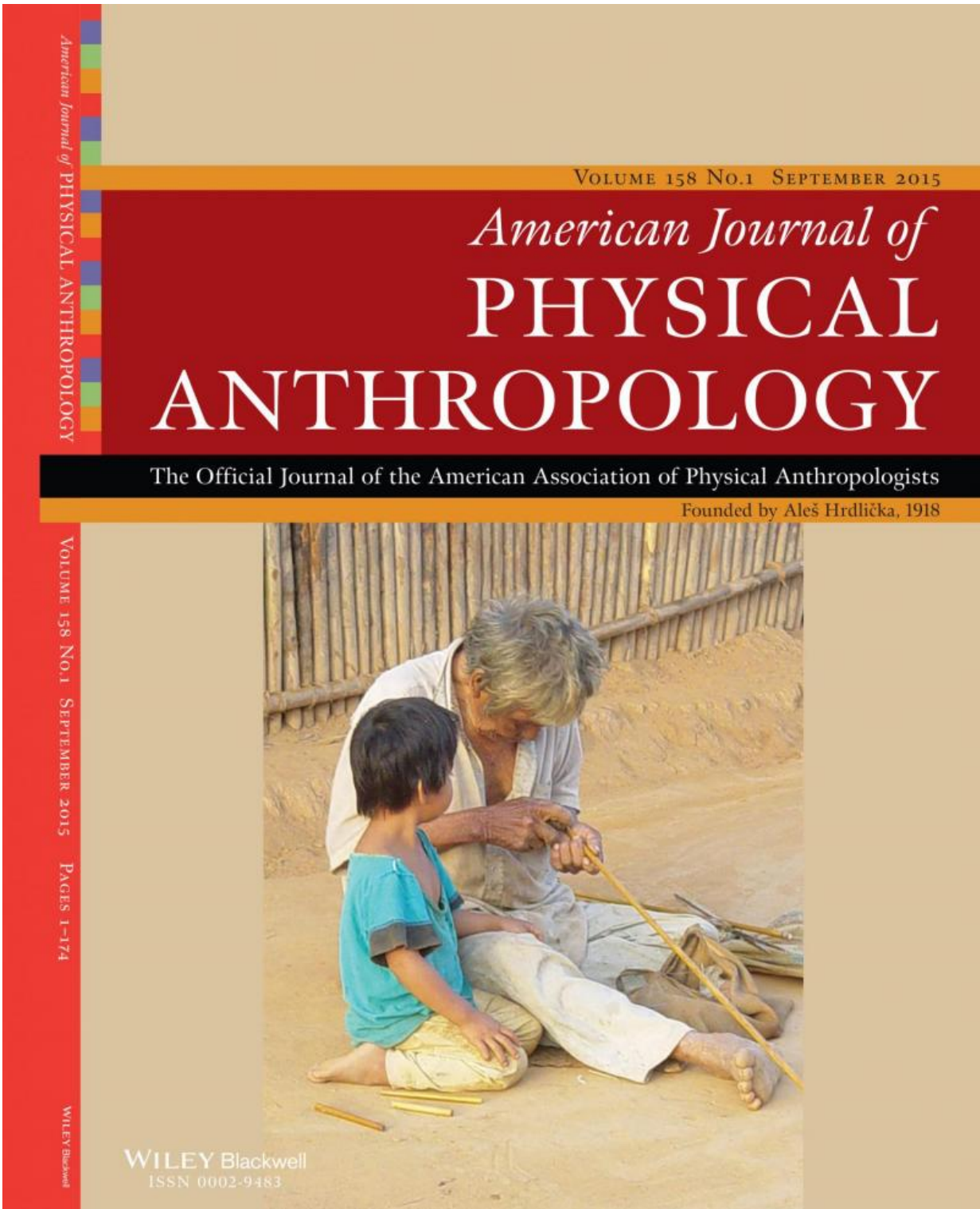


Study suggests older adults possess important forms of expertise

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The cover of the *American Journal of Physical Anthropology* featuring a Tsimane elder teaching a child a skill. Credit: *American Journal of Physical Anthropology*

Chapman University's research on aging and skill development appears as the lead article in the latest issue of *American Journal of Physical Anthropology*. The study, called "Skill Ontogeny Among Tsimane Forager-Horticulturalists," provides the most complete analysis to date of skill development in a traditional society. The results show that most skills essential to Tsimane survival are acquired prior to first reproduction, and then develop further to meet the increasing demands of offspring. As adults continue to age beyond their reproductive years, despite physical frailty setting in, they are often regarded as experts - such as in music and storytelling.

The research was conducted on the Tsimane—an indigenous population of about 15,000, who live in the Bolivian Amazon and depend on hunting, fishing, and gardening for their survival.

"Scientists have long wondered why our lifespans include an extended post-reproductive phase; the lifespans of our fellow primates, mammals and other species on the planet generally terminate once their reproductive business is over," said Eric Schniter, Ph.D., clinical assistant professor, in Chapman University's Economic Science Institute in the Argyros School of Business and Economics, and lead author on the study. "While most [skill development](#) studies have focused on subsistence [skills](#) like hunting, we wanted to examine the wider range of complementary skills that develops among aging humans."

According to the findings, older adults might be the go-to providers of many important services needed in human communities. In the field, the researchers interviewed 421 Tsimane adults across eight villages in the Bolivian Amazon and found that when it comes to many of the skills requiring lots of knowledge - but not necessarily high-strength—such as music, storytelling, making bows and arrows, and textile production,

seniors in the community report the most proficiency and are regarded by others as most expert.

While older folks, freed up from the primary responsibilities of feeding a brood, compensate for their increasing frailty by remaining productive with low-strength skills that complement their extended family's production, the extra time needed to focus on complementary skills is one possible factor explaining their expertise. But what impressed Schniter and his fellow researchers is that many of the skills older adults excel in also have a pedagogical component: they involve transferring conceptual and procedural knowledge to youngsters so that they might also someday develop the necessary abilities for life in a society dependent on interpersonal exchanges of resources acquired through hunting, fishing, and gardening.

"It shows that many important cultural skills, and not just food production like previously argued, take a long time to learn; and that not all abilities peak in middle adulthood as previously thought," Schniter says. "In (Tsimane) society people have an appreciation for that and they defer those roles to [older adults](#)."

The study leads to possible implications for industrialized societies and economies, too. Along with the skills specific to life in their traditional subsistence society in the Amazon, seniors were the age group that excelled most at planning, conflict negotiation, and delegation.

"Those are prized talents in any economy; so if baby boomers delay retirement, as some economists predict, it might behoove employers to better deploy them," says Schniter.

Provided by Chapman University

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