
SPRINGS

THE RACHEL CARSON CENTER REVIEW

Issue #9 | 2026

February



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GROWING UP AMID ENVIRONMENTAL CHANGE: A CONVERSATION
WITH JAN DAVID HAUCK

Jan David Hauck and Pooja Nayak

Springs
The Rachel Carson Center Review

9 • 2026

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Jan David Hauck is an anthropologist who has been working with the Indigenous Aché communities in Paraguay since 2007 on topics including language shift, child socialization, ethics and morality, health care, and environmental transformations. Recently settled hunter-gatherers, the Aché like to make fun of his lack of hunting skills whenever he accompanies them on forest treks. If he manages to capture anything, it's not an armadillo or peccary but video footage, which he analyzes to understand linguistic, cultural, and moral change. At the RCC, he is principal investigator of the project "[Changing Environments, Changing Childhoods: A Cross-Environmental Ethnography of Moral Socialization in Three Small-Scale Societies](#)," for which he received an ERC Starting Grant. Pooja Nayak is a sociocultural anthropologist of environments and modern South Asia, researching how aspects of work, biodiversity, state capitalism, and more-than-human relations overlap in post-extraction settings in the Western Ghats. In Munich and nearby, she's been enjoying getting to know the moods of various pools and waterbodies through swims. Here, Pooja and Jan discuss environmental change and language, ethnographic practices, different forms of subsistence, as well as conceptions of morality and well-being.



A baby tapir growing up in the Aché village is curious about his human playmate. Photo by Jan David Hauck. [CC BY-NC-ND 4.0](#).

POOJA NAYAK (PN): Jan, your current project broadly studies the impact of environmental change on children's moral socialization. Before this, you researched and taught linguistic anthropology in the US and in the UK. Could you share a little bit about your academic trajectory?

JAN DAVID HAUCK (JH): I began studying sociocultural anthropology in Germany at the Free University of Berlin in 2003, with a minor in Latin American studies. In my third year of studies, I participated in a research trip to the Mercosur countries,¹ and as part of that, I did fieldwork in Paraguay on bilingualism of Spanish and the Indigenous language Guaraní, about which I later wrote my MA thesis.²

After that trip I got a visiting scholarship from DAAD, the German Academic Exchange Service, to spend a year at the University of São Paulo in Brazil. There I began collaborating with a linguist, Eva-Maria Roessler, who was studying close by at the University of Campinas, and who proposed to apply for a language documentation project with the Indigenous Aché, former hunter-gatherers in Paraguay. Together with another colleague who had begun working with the Aché, Warren Thompson, we wrote a project for the Volkswagen Foundation's [DOBES endangered languages program](#) and were awarded funding, initially for three years. I finished my MA, and while working on language documentation, I applied to the PhD program in [linguistic anthropology](#) at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), where I started in 2010.

I had become interested in the question of language shift—why are the Aché shifting away from their heritage language? My training at UCLA opened my eyes to the role of children and child socialization. We were awarded a second DOBES grant, and with that grant, in 2013 I embarked on a [language socialization](#) study for my dissertation fieldwork. I spent over a year living in one Aché village, working closely with two families, and looking at children's language learning and language awareness. That research became my dissertation.



Location of the Aché village where Jan did his research. Map by Jan David Hauck. [CC BY-NC-ND 4.0](#).

PN: Right. And your current project, how does it take that forward?

JH: The Aché used to live as nomadic foragers in the forest, before settling in villages in the 1960s and 70s. They now subsist on small-scale agriculture, but the village where I did my research is located adjacent to a forest reserve, where they have hunting rights. I was fortunate that I could join them on monthly hunting treks, spending four or five days in the reserve. I collected and analyzed ethnographic data and video recordings from both environments, forest and village, which represent past and present modes of existence.

In 2019 I started a postdoc at the London School of Economics and Political Science, which was concerned with morality. I reanalyzed my videos, focusing on behavior that was relevant to the socialization of moral values, such as cooperation and sharing. And I began noticing some striking differences: In the forest, children unquestionably helped clearing the campsite, making fire,

fetching water from a creek, or collecting grubs. In the village, they spent more time playing in the peer group and sometimes even asked for compensation when helping out with everyday chores. The environment seemed a relevant variable for children's moral behavior. And that was when the idea for my current project was born: How do environmental transitions, moving from one environment to another, impact children's moral socialization?



Aché children wash the intestines of game that the women had cut up at a small creek close by the camp. Photo by Jan David Hauck. [CC BY-NC-ND 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).

PN: What are some of these reasons why the Indigenous groups you study shifted from hunting and gathering in the forest to now living in the village?

JH: Paraguay is quite a sad story because almost all of the original forest in the eastern part of the country has been cut down. The Aché simply didn't have anywhere to go. Moreover, throughout the first half of the twentieth century, Paraguayan settlers organized manhunts of the Aché. The government intervened in the 1960s and began to contact and settle the remaining groups. Many also died from contact-related diseases once settled. It's a very traumatic history.

The Aché were always on the move. That means that for them settling in villages was a much more dramatic change than for other groups, with a major impact on language, culture, and morality.

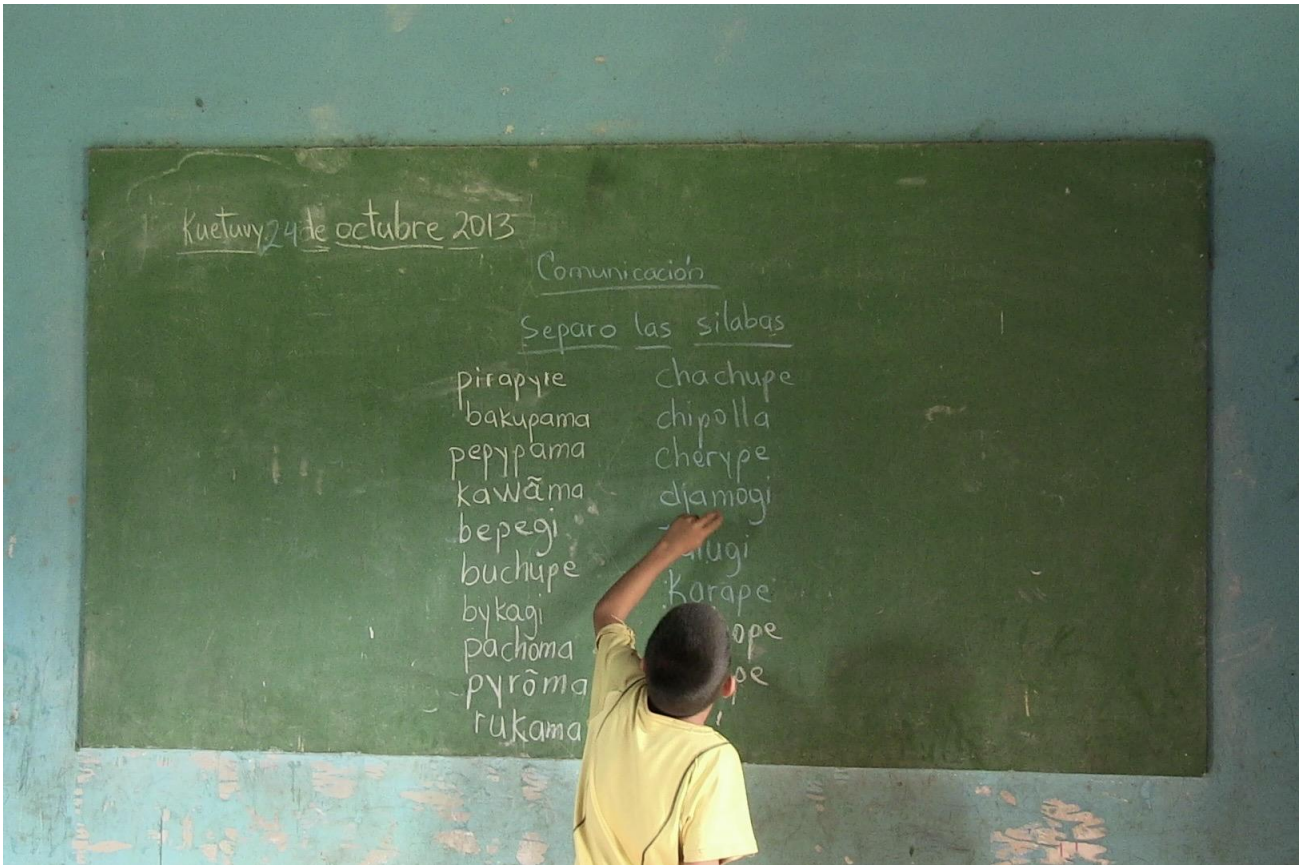
PN: What does subsistence now look like for the Aché after being forced out of the forest?

JH: As full-time nomadic foragers the Aché were a special case among Indigenous groups in South America. Most other groups have always been semi-sedentary; they did hunt and gather but also engaged in slash-and-burn agriculture, where patches of the forest are cleared and cultivated for some time and then abandoned to regenerate, and new patches are burned and cultivated. But the

Aché were always on the move. That means that for them settling in villages was a much more dramatic change than for other groups, with a major impact on language, culture, and morality.

PN: And how would you describe the impact of this change of environment on language and ideas of morality?

JH: As the Aché were settling in villages there was a lot of pressure to learn Guaraní. Paraguay is a unique case in South America, because an Indigenous language, Guaraní, is spoken by most of its population, not just by a few Indigenous groups.³ While most Paraguayans are bilingual in Guaraní and Spanish, the dominant language in the countryside is Guaraní. And that's what the Aché ended up needing to learn, not Spanish. But the shift to Guaraní was also a very slow and complex process. Settlement took place over the course of almost two decades, with one group after another leaving the forest and settling in different reservation communities. For pragmatic and cultural reasons, newcomers were compelled to learn the language of those already settled.⁴ But they themselves were often also still in the process of learning Guaraní, so the language that the newcomers heard was a partial or mixed Guaraní. And you end up with a very dynamic linguistic ecology with elements from both Aché and Guaraní in frequent use. The children are taking all those linguistic resources and appropriate them and make them their own, creating a new mixed language, which they call Guaraché.⁵



An Aché boy is identifying syllables of words of his heritage language that the teacher has written on the blackboard in a village-school classroom. Photo by Jan David Hauck. [CC BY-NC-ND 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).

PN: Maybe this is a good place to ask, did you end up studying Guaraní when you were in Paraguay?

JH: I did. Before starting dissertation fieldwork, I took a language course in Guaraní, so I could really understand the difference between it and Aché. It's really fascinating, because they are related languages; they're both from the same language family. So, at times it's hard to discern:

When you look at a particular linguistic construct, is this Guaraní, is this Aché, or is this a new invention? I studied Guaraní to be able to analyze these subtle differences. But I never became fully fluent, because as soon as I arrived in the village, I began to learn the mixed language, Guaraché. By the way, learning a language with children is a very rewarding experience because they just talk freely with you; they don't try to accommodate you, and their language is a bit more straightforward—it is not as complex yet.

PN: But what about the relation of environmental change and morality?

JH: Right, morality! So, my initial observations of children cooperating more spontaneously in the forest but not so much in the village, they evoke some long-standing questions on human morality that have been debated extensively. To simplify a bit, the common narrative is that way back when all of humanity was still hunting and gathering, everybody was cooperating extensively, just as contemporary hunter-gatherers like the Aché.⁶ Those conditions are often understood to have provided the grounds for the origin of morality in general—of ideas of fairness and justice and so on.⁷ Then came the Neolithic: Humans began to settle, developed agriculture, started accumulating resources, and eventually power hierarchies and inequalities emerged.⁸

It seems that forms of political organization and moral dispositions represent choices of how to live together that human communities have been making throughout their history.

More recent research has complicated this linear evolutionary narrative, much of it condensed in David Graeber and David Wengrow's book *The Dawn of Everything*.⁹ They provide archaeological, historical, and ethnographic evidence for the coexistence of egalitarian and hierarchical structures throughout history and give many examples of collectives that switched between forms of social organization depending on the circumstances, often on the season: hierarchical in the summer, egalitarian in the winter, or vice versa.¹⁰ Rather than the inevitable outcomes of sedentarization and the development of agriculture, it seems that forms of political organization and moral dispositions represent choices of how to live together that human communities have been making throughout their history.



An Aché hunter carries a peccary back to the camp. Photo by Jan David Hauck. [CC BY-NC-ND 4.0](#).

Does all that mean that environments and modes of subsistence are entirely irrelevant? Had deforestation and sedentarization no bearing on the Aché? What is unique about them and what gives us an opportunity to tackle these long-standing questions in a novel way is that many Aché still go back and forth between forest and village. There are lots of studies with small-scale societies that focus on morality, on cooperation and sharing, but most of them simply compare hunter-gatherer collectives with agriculturalists or with pastoralists or city dwellers; so they contrast not only environments but also different people with different cultural histories, different languages, different values. By contrast, we will work with the same families as they move between environments, so that we can isolate the environment as an independent variable.

And then, approaching this question from the perspective of child socialization will allow us to explore not only if different environments impact moral understanding and behavior but also how these are learned. We come to understand our rights and duties, ideas of fairness and justice, through everyday interactions with caregivers and peers. Analyzing these can shed light on whether particular moral understandings are acquired, acquired differently, or not at all.¹¹

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PN: Long-term ethnographic work typically involves building mutual relations of trust over time. Have you had a chance to learn what community members thought of your project?

JH: I've worked for almost two decades with the Aché on different projects, on language documentation, pedagogy, on health—I've built a clinic in one of the communities. So, I have a long-standing relationship with many Aché people, and they collaborate actively in my research. But this particular project also addresses a fundamental concern of the Aché themselves.

The Aché are observing moral change. They wouldn't frame it explicitly as moral change, but I would often hear statements such as, "We don't give anymore." Giving is a very important value for the

Aché. A virtuous person, someone who is highly valued is someone who is able to give. This is not uncommon in a hunting-and-gathering context, where hunting success is not guaranteed all the time or where you have to cooperate in hunting down large game. It only works if people share, even if reluctantly,¹² if you can rely on someone else on the day you come home empty-handed. Giving, sharing, and generosity are highly valued in many of these contexts.

Now that they live in villages and have less opportunities for hunting, there are less resources from the forest that people can share. And then there is the exposure to the capitalist economy that extends to rural Paraguay. There are primary schools and teachers who receive salaries. There is government assistance in the form of provisions or pensions. There are Paraguayan peddlers that come to the communities to sell their goods. They are experiencing a completely new way of relating to the needs of everyday life and the way resources that can fulfill those needs are generated. Moreover, people live in huts or houses where they can hide things away.

This situation has created a kind of conundrum: A lot of the traditional virtues are no longer realized. And how to maintain some of the values that were so dear to them in the face of all these changes is a moral question that the Aché are deeply interested in—as are many communities experiencing environmental changes around the world.



Women and children stay at the forest camp while the men are out on a hunt. The smoke from the fires helps keep mosquitoes at bay. Photo by Jan David Hauck. [CC BY-NC-ND 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).

PN: Alongside your research in Paraguay, you're also supervising scholars who are conducting their own projects among Indigenous communities in Malaysia and Namibia. What do these three field sites share or how are they different from one another?

JH: When I was a postdoc at LSE, my colleague Megan Laws was finishing her doctoral research with the Ju|'hoansi in Namibia, also a former hunter-gatherer community. She wrote a fantastic dissertation on the relationship between uncertainty, [egalitarianism](#), and patterns of movement across environments. The environments are very different, the Ju|'hoansi live in the Kalahari Desert. But there are also many parallels with the Aché, in that they were forced to settle in a small town in the 1970s and 80s, but more recently were able to move back to their original territories after

conservancies had been established in the late 1990s. Her work was a crucial inspiration for the development of my project, and she has joined us now as co-investigator. Megan then put me in touch with another colleague, Alice Rudge, who has been working in Malaysia with the Batek. The Batek also share a very similar history, having been settled but still moving back to the forest occasionally. So this is how this three-way comparative project came about. And I am very lucky to have found two highly qualified doctoral students, Wong Pui May and Hiskia Akuupa, who will be conducting the field research in Malaysia and Namibia respectively.

The Aché, the Batek, and the Ju|'hoansi strike a good balance in that they are all former and still part-time hunter-gatherers and thus provide ideal settings for cross-environmental ethnography.

Of course, in a comparative project you have to find a balance between the differences and the similarities. You can't compare too many things. But the three societies, the Aché, the Batek, and the Ju|'hoansi strike a good balance in that they are all former and still part-time hunter-gatherers and thus provide ideal settings for cross-environmental ethnography, while also being linguistically, culturally, and environmentally quite diverse.

PN: As an ethnographer, do you find such cross-cultural comparative work valuable?

JH: Anthropology, in my view, is inherently comparativist.¹³ I'm not saying that you have to find different groups on different continents to start a comparison. You can do a comparative study within one single community. The value of comparison is that it allows you to accumulate multiple perspectives on a phenomenon, whatever phenomenon you're interested in—which is important because that's how you refine your theory. It forces you to rethink your concepts, and you arrive at a multidimensional understanding of the phenomenon. Like take the case of sharing: When we think about sharing, it's something seemingly very straightforward, giving something to others or letting them take it. But there are tons of questions that remain: What exactly does sharing entail in a particular location? How is it valued? What can and cannot be shared? Is sharing downplayed or highlighted? The comparative perspective allows us to bracket our own understandings of such everyday concepts and to let them be transformed by other ethnographic realities.

PN: This gives me a chance to ask you about methods broadly. You mentioned you also use visual methods. Could you elaborate?

JH: Yes, yes. So, by training I'm a linguistic anthropologist, and I was using video ethnography already for my dissertation.¹⁴ That's, of course, crucial for studying language, because language is so much more than just the words; it's also the embodied behavior, gestures, and so on. But multimodal linguistic anthropology is well equipped to answer all kinds of research questions, because studying interaction can tell you a lot about human culture, human behavior in general, whether it's the economy, religion, questions of morality.

Taking the example of sharing again, you can of course quantify—say, in the forest, there is this much of a given resource that is shared, and in an agricultural community only that much. But what most studies don't do is look at how sharing is accomplished, which can give you answers to questions like: Do people share freely or reluctantly? What language is used to request something, to offer something? What obligation or entitlement is implied in the way a request is formulated? How close are the people standing together? Does somebody stretch out a hand? Do they make eye contact?



(Left) Aché children cross a natural bridge over a stream in the forest. The girls are carrying their belongings in traditional baskets that are attached to their foreheads. (Right) An elder woman weaving a carrying basket. Photos by Jan David Hauck. [CC BY-NC-ND 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).

Among the Aché in the forest, let's say, somebody collected a palm heart, a delicacy that they love. There are not that many palms left, so it's quite valuable. But this particular palm heart, it doesn't just automatically end up divided equally among everybody. In one interaction that I observed, a girl was trying to get her cousin to give her a piece of palm heart, and she went through several ways of reformulating her question. Translated into English, it would be like "give me," "give me a little," or "give me, please," with different intonation and affect. All these ways of initiating a transaction, the linguistic, grammatical, and interactional resources that are used to achieve the distribution of a palm heart, have moral weight. You show entitlement; you show respect; you show politeness. It tells you a lot about the relationship between the participants and how they perceive it. The formulation that ended up being successful in that she indeed received a share was a grammatical construction that kind of translates as "let's eat together." When you say, "Let's eat together," and one person has something and the other person doesn't, then it implies that, before this eating together can be achieved, a piece has to be transferred. At the same time the formulation de-emphasizes the fact that something is being shared. Video ethnography and interactional analysis can provide us with a lot of insights that otherwise we wouldn't be able to get at.

PN: Earlier you mentioned collaborating with the Aché in eastern Paraguay for more than a decade. What does collaboration with community-based members to conduct this research look like on the ground?

JH: Doing anthropology has always been a fraught exercise. As a researcher with funds from the Global North collecting data in an Indigenous community in the Global South you are inevitably faced with a highly unequal situation. Even if the goal is to use the resources of the researcher for the benefits of the community, for documenting a language, or for researching questions that are of local interest. Inequalities pervade our relationships in the field. You can't deny that.

As a researcher with funds from the Global North collecting data in an Indigenous community in the Global South you are inevitably faced with a highly unequal situation.

There have been a lot of efforts to mitigate some of those inequalities through different initiatives of benefits sharing, designing collaborative projects, and capacity building. And there are certain countries, like neighboring Brazil for example, where members of Indigenous communities have acquired PhDs in anthropology, in linguistics, and are now professors at universities. This is laudable and really an important corrective to the long colonial history.

But in contexts like Paraguay, where a PhD program in anthropology doesn't exist at all, things are much harder. One way in which we are trying to achieve a more equitable engagement with the communities is by creating programs to train community members as researchers, while working with local educational institutions to establish a system so they can receive credit toward different degrees. That would allow them to learn anthropological research methods, to design their own research questions, and to conduct their own research, all the while working toward an educational degree, and thus benefiting their own career. It's a fairly new initiative that I'm hoping to move forward.

PN: In an earlier conversation, you also hoped that your project would be of interest to audiences outside Paraguay, Namibia, and Malaysia. Could you share how a general audience might benefit from learning about environmental changes and its impact on language change and morality?

JH: We are all facing dramatic changes—environmental, social, cultural—across the world. And while I wouldn't claim that the experience of a small-scale hunting-and-gathering group undergoing a dramatic transition to a completely different lifestyle directly speaks to the experience of a shepherd on an Alpine pasture or a kindergarten teacher in Munich organizing an excursion to the forest, the question of what happens to our moral values when we're experiencing radical transitions is one that concerns us all. How are we going to continue to live together in light of all the environmental changes that we are facing? How will such changes affect the relationships that we build with one another?

The question of what happens to our moral values when we're experiencing radical transitions is one that concerns us all.

Thereby, our research doesn't just look at the transition from forest or bushland to village, from hunting and gathering to an economy based on agriculture and wage labor. While the Aché, the Batek, and the Ju|'hoansi, all have been forced to shift from a nomadic to a sedentary mode of existence, what is remarkable is that they have made the choice to continue to go hunting and gathering. They don't need to go to the forest or to a remote territory in the Kalahari to survive, but they have chosen to maintain that mobility. That is an important thing to consider: They chose to maintain different lifestyles and different subsistence practices simultaneously. And that could be something that other communities that were not originally nomadic foragers might be forced to resort to if their livelihoods are jeopardized by ecological changes—to creatively find alternatives if their sedentary existence becomes no longer viable. Our project will provide answers in that regard as well.



The anthropologist is filming an Aché boy who has been sitting for hours on top of a tree overlooking the camp. The Aché are highly adept at climbing any tree that's around. Photo by Teruko Mitsuahara. [CC BY-NC-ND 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).

PN: What are you looking forward to next in terms of your project?

JH: My doctoral students have now arrived in Munich, and we're preparing for the first pilot field visits at the end of the month to get everything set up. I am certainly very excited about the opportunity to dedicate the bulk of our time to research, to have extended opportunities to travel and work closely with the communities and build new relationships.

But I also hope that our research will instigate further debate, especially on the question of the relationship of environmental and moral change. These two topics have been discussed extensively in anthropology and other disciplines, but there's very little work that has brought and thought them together. And then, looking at child socialization provides us a privileged lens onto the emergence of moral values, of perceptions of the environment and environmental differences, and of the skills that are necessary to navigate brave new worlds.¹⁵ So I hope that our research will inspire others to follow suit and explore the nexus of environment, morality, and childhood in other parts of the world.

Notes

¹ Mercosur or Mercosul is a regional trade bloc in South America established in 1991 between Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay, and Uruguay, aimed at promoting economic integration and cooperation among its members.

² Jan David Hauck, *Language Under Construction: Bilingualism in Paraguay and Some Unsettled Thoughts About Language* (Weißensee Verlag, 2009).

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- ³ There are several reasons for the relative dominance of Guaraní in Paraguay, including: The Jesuit missions of the colonial period that operated in Guaraní and created the first written materials in the language; the *encomienda* labor system that gave land grantees control over Indigenous populations, which fostered a Guaraní-dominant environment; as well as alliances of local rulers with Indigenous Guaraní populations in conflicts with coastal powers.
- ⁴ Jan David Hauck, "The Origin of Language Among the Aché," *Language & Communication* 63 (2018): 76-88, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.langcom.2018.03.004>.
- ⁵ Jan David Hauck, "Grammaticalization, Language Contact, and the Emergence of a Hortative in Guaraché, a New Mixed Language in Paraguay," *Languages* 7, no. 3 (2022): 173, <https://doi.org/10.3390/languages7030173>.
- ⁶ Kim Hill, "Altruistic Cooperation During Foraging by the Ache, and the Evolved Human Predisposition to Cooperate," *Human Nature* 13, no. 1 (2002): 105-28, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12110-002-1016-3>.
- ⁷ Christopher Boehm, *Moral Origins: The Evolution of Virtue, Altruism, and Shame* (Basic Books, 2012); Michael Tomasello, *A Natural History of Human Morality* (Harvard University Press, 2018).
- ⁸ Kent Flannery and Joyce Marcus, *The Creation of Inequality: How Our Prehistoric Ancestors Set the Stage for Monarchy, Slavery, and Empire* (Harvard University Press, 2014).
- ⁹ David Graeber and David Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2021).
- ¹⁰ David Graeber and David Wengrow, "How to Change the Course of Human History," *Eurozine*, 2 March 2028, <https://www.eurozine.com/change-course-human-history/>.
- ¹¹ David F. Lancy, *The Anthropology of Childhood: Cherubs, Chattel, Changelings* (Cambridge University Press, 2008).
- ¹² Thomas Widlok, "Sharing: Allowing Others to Take What is Valued," *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 3, no. 2 (2013): 11-31, <https://doi.org/10.14318/hau3.2.003>.
- ¹³ Peter van der Veer, *The Value of Comparison* (Duke University Press, 2016).
- ¹⁴ Teruko Vida Mitsuhashi and Jan David Hauck, "Video Ethnography: A Guide," in *Research Methods in Linguistic Anthropology*, ed. Sabina M. Perrino and Sonya E. Pritzker (Bloomsbury, 2022).
- ¹⁵ Jan David Hauck and Francesca Mezzenzana, "Growing Up in the Face of Change: Environmental Transformation and Child Socialisation in Indigenous South America," *Social Anthropology/Anthropologie sociale* 33, no. 1 (2025): 1-14, <https://doi.org/10.3167/saas.2025.330101>.



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Pooja Nayak is a postdoctoral researcher and lecturer in the master's program Environment and Society at the Rachel Carson Center. She holds a dual PhD in anthropology and South Asia studies from the University of Pennsylvania, US, and an MA in philosophy from Manipal University, India. Prior to entering academia, she worked across a range of media, including news broadcasting, magazine publishing, and documentary filmmaking.



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Cite this article

Hauck, Jan David, and Pooja Nayak. "Growing Up amid Environmental Change: A Conversation with Jan David Hauck." *Springs: The Rachel Carson Center Review*, no. 9 (February 2026). <https://doi.org/10.5282/rcc-springs-20765>.

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ISSN 2751-9317

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