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Eyes to see and ears to hear: sensitivity in research on attachment and culture

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ABSTRACT

How and why should attachment researchers engage in research on attachment and culture? How should they strive to develop a theoretical perspective that is both contextually sensitive and also reflecting species-typical processes of evolutionary adaptation? These comments on the remarkable empirical papers of this special issue consider what is learned from these studies, what more is needed, and directions for future research.

KEYWORDS

sensitivity; culture; context; evolution

In April 2016, the Ernst Strüngmann Forum convened in Frankfurt on the topic of culture and attachment. An eminent group of 40 scholars in cultural anthropology and cultural psychology, primatology, neuroscience, and developmental psychology met in working groups to consider the intersection of attachment theory with culture and context. As one of the representatives of developmental perspectives from attachment theory, I was surprised to find how attachment theory was described by researchers in other fields, in some cases reflecting an outdated portrayal of what contemporary attachment researchers believe. My concerns led to an invitation to write a chapter entitled “Twenty-First Century Attachment Theory” that was eventually included in the conference proceedings, which were published by MIT Press late in 2017 (Keller & Bard, 2017).

In the chapter (Thompson, 2017), I sought to correct outdated or misleading portrayals of attachment theory that were, in some cases, the basis for critiques of research in this field. The chapter noted, for example, that researchers recognize that most children have multiple attachment figures, that many researchers regard secure and insecure attachments as adaptations to different conditions of care, and that the origins of these differences derive from practices of care that are contextually shaped. In concluding, I proposed that greater efforts both by attachment researchers and its critics were needed:

While culturally oriented researchers ask for greater *culturally informed attachment research*, attachment researchers wonder where they can find greater *attachment-informed cultural studies*. When they survey the research literature on culture and attachment, attachment researchers find relatively few studies that address the central claims of attachment theory in an informative way ... research that might be relevant is often not focused on the developmental experience of young children. (Thompson, 2017, p. 318, italics in original)

It is clear, for example, that young children are cared for by people other than the mother in nonWestern contexts, as they are in the West. Not all alloparents are attachment figures (Meehan & Hawks, 2013), however, and few studies in nonWestern contexts have distinguished between caregivers in their significance to the child in order to identify who are attachment figures. It is also clear that parents in nonWestern contexts respond harshly, ignore, and are often insensitive to their young children (as they are in the West). But few studies have also sought to appraise their sensitivity in culturally relevant ways to determine how sensitivity fits into this constellation of parenting practices. In general, there is little attention to infancy by contemporary cultural anthropologists; this is noted in one of the few studies to do so that opens with the question “Where have all the babies gone?” (Gottlieb, 2004).

The remarkable collection of empirical studies in this issue, together with other recent contributions by Mesman and her colleagues (Mesman, Minter et al., 2016, Mesman et al., 2017), thus help us move forward in developing an empirical literature on attachment and culture. This commentary identifies what we learn from these papers, what more is needed, and how to proceed.

How should we design culturally informed attachment research?

One model for designing studies that appropriately inquire into cultural processes relevant to attachment is to predicate concepts and derivative measures on a comprehensive, ethnographic study of cultural practices relevant to parents and children (Rothbaum et al., 2000). Such an *emic* approach, albeit time consuming, helps to ensure that the conceptualization of early caregiving and its outcomes suitably reflects indigenous beliefs and practices before efforts to observe and measure them ensue. This approach thus strengthens contextual sensitivity but is likely to result in culture-specific concepts and measures that may not readily be generalized. That is, in fact, the point: cultures are unique.

An alternative model treats concepts and measures developed in one cultural setting as working hypotheses for inquiry into alternative contexts. This *etic* approach risks imposing beliefs and assumptions from one context onto another but increases the possibility of developing generalizable conclusions across contexts. This is the approach of Mesman and her colleagues, and their studies incorporate several strategies for enhancing sensitivity to indigenous beliefs and practices, such as including cultural informants on the research team, adapting procedures to local sensitivities, and appraising the effects of unfamiliar video research procedures on participant behavior. Most notable is the effort to study early parent-child interaction in nonWestern rural and urban contexts that are very different from Western middle-class samples and, in some cases, have not been studied before.

Each study focuses on measuring maternal sensitivity to the child’s signals. Mesman and her colleagues are not alone in doing so cross-culturally. Bornstein and his colleagues have also appraised maternal sensitivity in rural and urban communities in different cultures owing, in part, to the importance of sensitivity to cognitive and language development (Bornstein et al., 2008, 2012). Their conclusion – that “adaptive emotional relationships appear to be a culture-common characteristic of mother-infant dyads near the beginning of life, but this relational construct is moderated by community-specific (country and regional) context” (Bornstein et al., 2012, p. 171) – is consistent with other

international studies examining the influence of parenting practices on child development (e.g., Lansford et al., 2016). This conclusion is also consistent with the findings reported in the seven studies of this special issue.

Mesman and her colleagues (Mesman, this issue; Mesman et al., 2017) argue that Ainsworth's original measure of maternal sensitivity is well-suited to research in diverse contexts because it does not denote specific behavioral manifestations of sensitive responding and thus provides flexibility for contextual applications. As these papers illustrate, sensitivity can be manifested in a variety of ways: repositioning the infant to permit greater access to an object of interest, washing faster when the child fusses in the bathwater, using a lliclla to position the infant close to the mother's body while she is doing chores. Mesman and her colleagues argue that these are more subtle manifestations of sensitivity than the attentionally-focused, verbal, emotionally expressive forms more commonly observed in Western middle-class samples, and are thus more easily overlooked. The use of video recording of these observations is an important resource, therefore, as long as it does not unduly distract or increase self-consciousness in research participants, because it provides a means of detecting more subtle forms of sensitive responding while also enabling assessments of observer reliability (that are often missing in ethnographic studies) and affording repeated viewing for further study.

This use of Ainsworth's sensitivity measure has been challenged by some critics because it does not include other scales closely associated with sensitivity in Western research, such as acceptance-rejection and cooperation-interference (see Keller et al., 2018). They have a point. In Ainsworth's Baltimore study, summary ratings on these measures intercorrelated above .80 (Ainsworth & Bell, 1969), and attachment researchers have regularly employed more inclusive measures of sensitivity in their research (see, for example, the meta-analysis by De Wolff & van IJzendoorn, 1997). Ainsworth was aware of the intercorrelations among her measures of maternal behavior but she did not collapse them, and one wonders if she was guided by her previous work in Uganda to conclude that although warmth, accessibility, mutuality, and other behaviors were highly interrelated in Baltimore, this was unlikely to be true universally. For this reason, the decision to focus exclusively on Ainsworth's sensitivity measure seems defensible – more defensible, in fact, than using a more inclusive measure based on the intercorrelations of sensitivity with warmth, accessibility, and other behaviors in Western samples alone.

The results of the seven studies of this special issue offer an informative counterpart to the substantial literature on sensitivity in attachment studies conducted in the West. With the exception of the impoverished Yemeni sample and the Gusii families, each of the reported mean values of sensitivity in the remaining samples was above 5.2, ranging from 4.89 to 7.33 across the seven studies. This is generally comparable to the range of mean values for the mothers of securely-attached infants in Ainsworth's study and others using her measure in the West (Thompson, 1998, Table 2.2). Moreover, the reported reliability coefficients for the coding of sensitivity were good, indicating that experts had little difficulty distinguishing sensitive from insensitive responses, even though five of the seven studies enlisted indigenous researchers as coders. Furthermore, the correlates of sensitive responsiveness were generally consistent with expectations derived from Western research. Studies in Yemen and Brazil suggest that sensitivity was lower in economically challenging conditions, and in the Indonesian sample sensitivity was lower for mothers who reported childhood maltreatment. Taken together, these findings

indicate that sensitive responding is apparent and can be reliably measured in cultures varying in other parenting practices, beliefs, and contextual supports and demands. Sensitivity, while often subtle and mingled with less attentive parenting practices, is also associated with other influences promoting caregiver responsiveness.

Limitations

These are, of course, pilot studies anticipating more systematic research with larger samples. The reports are frustratingly incomplete at times in the range of their inquiry and in the reporting of data in hand. One might have hoped, for example, that coding of maternal warmth, verbal expression and physical contact with the child would have more often been conducted independently of sensitivity to permit comparisons of the behavior of mothers deemed sensitive and insensitive on these measures. This would have helped to address longstanding interest in whether the association of sensitivity with warmth and verbal responsiveness observed in typical Western samples can be observed more broadly (Keller et al., 2018). The diverse goals underlying each of these studies also reduce their comparability or replication across different settings and cultures. Limitations such as these do not necessarily undermine progress on the two central goals of this collection – providing insight into the feasibility of videotaping parents and children in different cultural contexts, and enhancing understanding of the occurrence of sensitive responsiveness by caregivers in nonWestern contexts – which are exploratory in orientation. But they highlight how subsequent research can build on what is provided here.

Another limitation is a bit more telling, however. As Mesman (this issue) notes, enlisting local partners is crucial to the success of research into different cultural communities for their ability to broker access, recruit participants, interpret observations, and contribute to local dissemination of findings and their applications. It is also impressive that Peruvian, South African, Yemeni, Brazilian, and Indonesian collaborators developed skill in applying Ainsworth's sensitivity measure such that they were able to achieve good reliability with an expert coder. But what is missing from these reports is the deeper insight that local informants could potentially provide into how sensitivity is culturally constructed by families in the community. Beyond applying Ainsworth's measure, for example, how would they have commented on the behavior recorded in the videos in light of local beliefs and practices? What could we have learned from them about *why* caregivers responded as they did in the contexts in which they were observed? Is behavior deemed sensitive perceived by them as functioning to pacify the baby? to support independent activity? to stimulate curiosity about the surrounding world? to enable the adult to complete chores (or to enlist the child in chores)? Do caregivers perceive themselves as behaving in consideration of the baby's needs, adults' needs, or for other reasons? Local informants might also have helped us understand how sensitive responding and harsh, cold or ignoring behavior toward the infant could co-occur as it did for some of the Gusii in Kenya and others. The creation of a South African MBQS-mini criterion sort is one example of local informants adapting a Western measure to local context and values that was interesting and informative, and it is unfortunate that there were not more efforts of this kind. This could have been done with sensitivity to the ethical issues of local informant disclosure.

We might also have gleaned from these informants more generative ideas about the origins of individual differences in sensitivity in each cultural context. It is striking that all of the measured correlates of sensitive responding in these studies are based on research with Western families – income and education, social support, child maltreatment and domestic violence – and there is not one surprising prediction derived from the local cultural context. Yet we have learned from research on culture and parenting that parent belief systems, cultural ethnotheories of children and their development, broader cultural practices and needs, and many other influences shape parental behavior toward young children. How were these indigenous influences relevant to the mothers and young children observed in these studies? The Peruvian study, for example, which found the highest levels of sensitive responsiveness in an economically stressed sample, offers thought-provoking reasons for this unexpected finding based on cultural values and practices that included providing flexibility to caregiving routines, encouraging the use of *llicllas* to permit maternal multitasking in the context of child care, and supporting a constructive role for alloparents in the community.

In short, this collection of reports could have gone much farther than showing that local partners could appropriately apply a Western measure of maternal sensitivity to their observations of mothers and children. Consistent with their exploratory intent, they could also have contributed to generating new hypothesis about the nature and role of caregiver sensitive responsiveness to young children (which was a central goal to this special issue) as well as other influences affecting parental behavior.

Ironically, we could use these ideas to inform Western research on sensitivity and attachment. The emphasis on the importance of sensitive responsiveness in these studies might cause us to overlook that sensitivity in Western studies is a reliable but not especially robust predictor of secure attachment. The definitive meta-analysis concludes that “[s]ensitivity cannot be considered to be the exclusive and most important factor in the development of attachment” (De Wolff & van IJzendoorn, 1997, p. 585). The modest variance explained in attachment security by antecedent measures of sensitivity is part of what has led to a search for explanations of the “transmission gap” between parental states of mind concerning attachment and the attachment security of offspring (Van IJzendoorn, 1995). Besides sensitive responding, therefore what else contributes to the developing security of young children?

In my commentary on the De Wolff and van IJzendoorn (1997) meta-analysis, I suggested several directions that future research on the origins of attachment security might consider (Thompson, 1997). They included (a) greater attention to the conditions in which sensitive responsiveness occurs, such as in distress compared to nondistress contexts, (b) moderators of the influence of sensitive responsiveness on socioemotional development, (c) other sources of security, such as the relationships between caregivers, and (d) the consistency of sensitive responsiveness over time. The importance of each has been confirmed by subsequent research in Western families (see, e.g., Belsky & Fearon, 2002; Davies et al., 2013; Leerkes et al., 2009; Raikes & Thompson, 2005). There is every reason to expect that sensitive responsiveness is also complexly constituted in nonWestern families, and that the conclusions of research in these contexts can inform attachment research worldwide.

Finally, it is worthwhile noting that the value of demonstrating that video observations of parent-child interaction can be conducted successfully in very diverse cultural contexts

is not only for the benefit of more careful studies of maternal behavior. Such methods can also be used for informing other aspects of attachment theory. Earlier I noted that not all alloparents are attachment figures, but that few studies in nonWestern contexts have sought to distinguish between caregivers in terms of their relationship with the child. The reason is that doing so requires very careful observation of infant and child behavior that reflects the meaning that different adults have to the child as reflected in differential signaling, directed crying, proximity- and contact-seeking, affectional interactions, and related behaviors. Video observations of infants and young children in everyday contexts have every prospect of enabling researchers to create a literature of attachment-informed cultural studies of this kind that might also inform attachment researchers of other kinds of child behaviors that reflect, in different cultural contexts, an attachment relationship.

Why should we conduct culturally informed attachment research?

Attachment theory recognizes the importance of context and culture, while also claiming that there are generalizable (i.e., species-typical) processes shaping attachment. The appreciation of context derives from the theory's focus on experientially-based variability in attachment security as well as from Ainsworth's work in Uganda. At the same time, Bowlby's claim that attachment derives from processes of evolutionary adaptation leads to the expectation that some aspects of attachment are not just context-specific but generalizable across cultures. There is no reason that these dual aspects of attachment theory should exist in uneasy tension, but in fact they are the source of some of the most strident criticisms of attachment theory and research.

One reason is that considerable research on culture and attachment is intended to evaluate the universality of central claims of attachment theory (e.g., Mesman, van IJzendoorn et al., 2016). The contributions to this special issue are relevant to one of these universality claims concerning the importance of sensitive responsiveness to the security of attachment. Other universality claims concern the normative development of attachment in human infants, the expectation that most infants will become securely attached (except in unusually aversive contexts), and that secure attachment leads to positive child outcomes. The most recent review of this literature concluded that existing evidence supports these claims in the contexts in which they have been studied (Mesman, van IJzendoorn et al., 2016), a conclusion that is noncontroversial to attachment researchers.

Universality claims are easy to dispute, however, and cultural anthropologists have exercised for decades what Margaret Mead called the "anthropological veto": any universal claim is negated by one exceptional case. With respect to the universality of sensitive responsiveness, critics of attachment theory have described several cultural contexts where typical parental practices appear to be insensitive and unresponsive to infant needs, and have thus concluded that there are no culturally-generalizable practices related to attachment in early childhood (see, e.g., Keller et al., 2018). The contributions to this special issue advance the conversation further by offering additional evidence for sensitive caregiving, especially in cultural contexts in which it might be easily overlooked. Unfortunately, the anthropological veto usually ends the discussion, and makes it an increasingly sterile and uninteresting disputation over evidence.

There is an alternative way, however, of thinking about culture and attachment. Although the exploration of universals related to attachment is valuable, it may be secondary to exploring the question that *all* cultures universally must address: how to ensure that the young survive to reproductive maturity, and that their offspring do also. Life history theory proposes that there are alternative ways of accomplishing this goal in which typical practices of early care, the meaning of normative attachment patterns, and the markers of behavioral competence are likely to vary considerably by context (Simpson & Belsky, 2016). Both evolutionary (e.g., Trivers, 1974) and psychological (Conger et al., 2010) views of parental investment, moreover, understand investment as a trade-off between competing demands related to the availability of resources, parental capabilities, social support, and the needs of the young. Viewed in this light, the question is less whether caregivers are normatively sensitive but how these competing demands are negotiated adaptively in caring for the young and ensuring their survival to a well-functioning maturity. Even when some cultural practices appear to be insensitive, the anthropological veto should not be an obstacle but an incentive to further inquiry about how these cultural practices collectively respond to the survival and developmental needs of the young. If not through sensitive responding, then *how*? Attachment theorists and cultural anthropologists can potentially have a fruitful conversation here.

The contributions to this special issue suggest the kinds of considerations that might be included in such a conversation. The studies of the Gusii in Kenya and mothers in rural Peru, for example, raise questions about the roles and functions of alloparents not just in sharing responsibility for infant care but also for enabling maternal responsiveness to young children in the context of domestic labor. These questions assume added complexity by the suggestion of Mesman, Basweti, and Misati (this issue) that traditional practices of alloparenting among the Gusii have changed over time with altered cultural practices associated with increasing Western influences in the community – a concern also voiced in several other reports – such that conditions of early care are now missing something important. Not just Westernization but also economic transitions and changed educational practices (particularly older siblings going off to classrooms rather than remaining nearby as alloparents) are implicated in these reports, along with the challenges to responsive care imposed by chronic stress associated with poverty and the potentially buffering influences of social support in impoverished communities. These considerations, and others, situate variations in sensitivity within the ecological conditions that shape the allocation of time and effort to early care in relation to the needs of the young and the other needs of society. Attachment researchers and their cultural critics could engage in a fruitful collaboration of exploring how these diverse forces are reconciled in the transcultural challenge of ensuring that newborn infants survive to reproductive maturity, and their offspring do also.

One of the ways that twenty-first century attachment theory has evolved is the recognition that modern evolutionary biology incorporates contextual sensitivity (Thompson, 2017). Perhaps alongside continuing inquiry into the universality of the central claims of attachment theory, researchers can also enlist understanding of contextual sensitivity into their studies of caregiving, culture, and attachment.

Concluding comments

The papers included in this special issue push forward inquiry into the intersection of attachment and culture and pose provocative challenges both to those who claim that there are no generalizable attributes of early care, and those who believe that identifying universal characteristics of care is important to attachment theory. Recently Mesman (in press) modified the conclusion of her recent review of cultural research on attachment earlier described (Mesman, van IJzendoorn et al., 2016). Rather than concluding that attachment theory can claim cross-cultural validity, she wrote instead that more difficult questions need to be asked before the cross-cultural validity of attachment theory can be claimed. I agree, and I propose that those “difficult questions” have less to do with confirming universality hypotheses than with understanding the role of culture in attachment – and the role of attachment in culture. I am not sure whether it is possible to build constructive bridges between attachment researchers and their cultural critics, but I think that these articles offer one avenue toward doing so.

Disclosure statement

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