Cultural and Historical Diversity in Early Relationship Formation

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Abstract

Attachment theory has been challenged as representing exclusively Western middle class child care philosophy. In particular, the conception of a single, primary adult caregiver does not correspond with the reality of many early child care patterns worldwide. Different models of care that have been identified and described by cultural anthropologists, cultural and cross-cultural psychologists over the last decades are presented. It is apparent that in many cultural communities children and grandparents are significant caretakers and attachment figures. The particular arrangements of different caregiving systems need further systematic study. Caregiving is adapted to the sociocultural environments in which children are born and raised to become competent adults. Sociocultural environments also change over historical time, especially with respect to the amount of formal schooling and, as a corollary, maternal age at first birth, the number of children in the household, and household composition.

In the second part of the paper, sociodemographic changes in different cultural environments are documented. Concomitant changes in socialization goals and socialization strategies involving babies are presented; these involve comparing different generations (mothers and grandmothers), and different cohorts over historical time. In the discussion the interplay between change and continuity as related constructs for understanding human development and well-being is considered, along with how universality and cultural/historical specificity co-exist in early relationship formation and thus attachment.

Introduction

The human lifespan can be understood as patterned by developmental tasks which evolved during the history of humankind in order to solve adaptive problems faced by our ancestors. Thus, developmental tasks are part of the human condition that defines the universal nature of humankind. The development of attachment relationships is one of the earliest developmental tasks during human ontogeny. Human infants are born prematurely (condition of altriciality) due to hominid brain development (the obstetrical dilemma). They are therefore dependent on a caring environment that helps them to develop competence in the particular environment into which they are born. Attachment relationships can be regarded as mediating the development of competence and agency. they represent avenues to learning and information processing.

In order to execute developmental tasks, humans are equipped with a universal repertoire of behavioral dispositions that allow for contextually sensitive solutions. To facilitate the development of attachment relationships, infants are equipped with morphological characteristics as well as behavioral dispositions that elicit care. A parenting co-design to care, stimulate and console infants is equally central to the evolved behavioral repertoire, a pattern already apparent in small children interacting with babies (Keller, 2007; Keller & Kärtner, 2013).

Although John Bowlby (1969) had assumed evolutionary origins for the formation of attachment, however, he did not realized that a crucial assumption of evolutionary theorizing relates to differential effects of the environment in shaping phenotypes. Based on the Western middle-class conception of family, Bowlby (1969), later joined by the Canadian psychologists Mary Ainsworth (1967), promoted the view of monotropy as a universal mechanism. Monotropy assumes that attachment is an

intimate and vital bond of a child with one specific, particular attachment figure, usually the mother (Bowlby, 1988). In this view, the mother-infant relationship is unique and therefore qualitatively different from all other relationships the child may form; as such it has profound consequences for children's development as a whole. The relationship is considered to represent a specific emotional connection that the individual develops during the first year of life on the basis of the interactional experiences with that particular caregiver. Although current attachment researchers deny the assumption of monotropy, they nevertheless maintain the assumption of one primary caregiver (who who might be supported by a few others), who is an adult and still primarily the mother (Keller & Chaudhary, 2016). As argued below this particular scenario of attachment development is an exception rather than the rule on a worldwide scale.

The second misconception of the Bowlby-Ainsworth view of the evolutionary basis of attachment formation is that parenting quality is assumed to take the same form of (maternal) sensitivity universally (Ainsworth, Bell, & Stayton, 1978); this view is complemented more recently with the concept of mind-mindedness (Meins et al., 2002). This view assumes a secure attachment relationship, the gold standard for the start of a healthy, happy and competent developmental trajectory, can only emerge when the child experiences unconditional, dyadic, and exclusive attention. Thus even minimal infant signals need to be answered responsively and sensitively (an assumption of contingency) so that the child can develop a sense of predictability and thus agency (Ainsworth et al., 1978). Besides signs of distress, especially signals in the face-to-face context are assumed to be critical. The verbalization and interpretation of the infant' s inner state, needs, wishes and intentions, cognitions and emotions by the primary attachment figure are assumed to support the development of an early sense of agency and self-worth. Correspondingly, from the adult perspective, the belief is that the

mother finds herself primarily bonded towards a single child at a time (Minde, Corter, Goldberg, & Jeffers 1990).

In contrast to these assumptions, however, when care of children is regarded across time and space, it becomes evident that monotropy and the unconditional exclusive attention of one primary adult caregiver is predicated upon several conditions. In order for the mother to devote exclusive attention towards a single child, she must be ensured of her own safety and survival, the child's survival, a stable environment free of imminent dangers, food security, moderate temperature, and many other conditions that a modern home offers. Such conditions permit exclusive attention by leaving the adult free from other life-saving or life-sustaining tasks. As a corollary, the high level of formal education of middle-class mothers allows and promotes a particular, i.e., distal style of interactional exchange with abundant face-to-face contact and object stimulation embedded in a voluminous conversational stream.

It is the premise of evolutionary theorizing that behavior, including care arrangements for children, are adapted to the environmental context in which families live. Understood within that framework, the particular pocket of the world's population that lives in affluence and has high degrees of formal education as the necessary environment for the formation of attachment in the Bowlby-Ainsworth tradition is rather small. Yet that small segment is grossly overrepresented in research and theorizing regarding early relationship formation. Conversely, cultural anthropologists and psychologists have accumulated substantial evidence that the "neglected 95%" (Arnett, 2008) live in significantly different circumstances with diverse care arrangements.

Alternative models of care

A far more frequent model of care is alloparenting. This pattern is widely distributed across different modes of subsistence and living arrangements, such as farmers, hunter-gatherers, fishermen, pastorals, but also non-Western urban families. In fact, the involvement in child care of others -- especially grandmothers, older siblings, fathers but also unrelated kin -- on a routine basis can be regarded as a human universal going back to the appearance of homo erectus (Burkart & van Schaik, 2010). Moreover, the coordination of different tasks simultaneously as a daily challenge of many women in the world necessitates caregiving mainly as co-occurring activity (Saraswathi & Pai, 1997). Carrying a baby on the hips or the back is a mode of caretaking that allows free movement and usage of both hands at the same time. And carrying involves channels of communication other than face-to-face exchange, so that interactional regulations (e.g., behavioral contingencies) are expressed primarily proximally through body contact and touching (e.g., Chapin, 2013). However, given that mothers cannot carry infants all the time because of the need to balance energetic investment and domestic activities, the motivation for alloparental carrying of infants is crucial, since leaving children alone would pose too much risk, e.g., from predators (Keller & Chaudhary, 2016).

Multiple caregiving can consist of a multiplicity of arrangements of caretakers and responsibilities. The mother may play a special role among other caregivers, or be equal to others, or may not be a special caretaker at all. Moreover, these arrangements can vary over time. For example, when they are four months of age Aka and Efe hunter-gatherer infants are transferred to different people seven to eight times per hour, and are held by seven to 14 different individuals during 8-hour observation periods. Overall Aka children exhibit attachment behaviors to about six of the 20 people with whom they are in daily contact during the first year (Meehan & Hawks, 2013). As another example,

anthropologist Gabriel Scheidecker has described the socialization experiences of village children in the South of Madagascar where mothers play a special role in infants' life during the first two years and completely disappear thereafter. Moreover, children from that age on are not exposed to adults but develop in the context of peer groups (Scheidecker 2014).

Another abrupt change of the caregiving environment has been described by Cora DuBois (1944) for the Alorese community. There the nurturing relationship during the first year of life suddenly declines to complete inattention by the mother and even to the point of potential food deprivation, a condition that attachment theory would consider as a major precursor of psychopathology (Cassidy, 2008). But the opposite pattern may also occur. Hewlett (1991) describes for the Aka a dramatic decline in allomothering over the first year of age. By eight months of age, Aka infants receive substantially less care from others and relatively more care from the mother.

In yet another cultural variation, the primary attachment figure may not be the biological mother at all. Among the Nigerian Hausa, mothers live together and share childcare responsibilities. Hausa infants seem to become attached with the person who interacted most with him or her, which in eight of 14 observed cases was not the biological mother (Marvin et al., 1977).

In many cultural environments, from the moment of birth on, infants are passed on to other caretakers. Among the Efe, the mother may not be the first to nurse an infant, while others participate in nursing during early infancy (Tronick, Morelli, & Winn, 1987). And Aka mothers are not the first to touch and hold an infant. An older female-in-law cleans the infant and takes it to the hut until the mother arrives, since Aka women give birth outside their camps (Hewlett, 1991). Thus, multiple attachment relationships may be developed simultaneously that are similar in importance and significance (Morelli, 2015).

Multiple caregiving may be the dominant mode in particular contexts, as in the case of Aka hunter-gatherers when they are in a camp. At other times, for example during foraging activities like net hunting, the mother is the dominant caretaker (Hewlett, 1991).

In yet another variation, siblings, or polymatric caregiving, may characterize over 90% of the infant care that is not provided by the mother. Siblings mostly care for infants when they are older than 2 months of age. In Nigerian families, small children interact with other children 48% of the time as compared with 10-15% of interaction with the mother, leading to strong attachment relationships among siblings (Fatimilehini and Hassan, 2015).

Besides sibling care, grandparenting is probably the most common mode of alloparenting. Grandmaternal involvement is usually higher than grandpaternal involvement because the maternal grandmother can be sure that she is investing in her genetic offspring, whereas grandfathers can never be sure in whom they invest due to paternity insecurity (Voland, Chasiotis, & Schiefenhövel, 2004). Grandmothering is best considered an adaptation through which aging females achieve better fitness returns than continuing to produce and rear their own offspring (Hawkes et al., 2008). The extended lifespan beyond the reproductive years is assumed to allow older women to effectively help in rearing grandchildren (Lancy, 2008).

Although these evolutionary considerations apply to all grandmothers irrespective of cultural background, the role and engagement of grandmothers vary considerably across cultures. For example, Chinese culture values the involvement of grandparents in caregiving (Mjelde-Mossey, 2007), especially with respect to child-feeding practices (Xie & Xia, 2011). Direct involvement is common in rural farming families, for example in Turkey, where grandmothers raise children alongside mothers.

Grandmothers in Western middle-class families, in contrast, are more likely to understand their role as being fun partners for their grandchildren and to spend leisurely time with them. They do not consider themselves as educational authorities (Lamm & Teiser, 2013).

Different caregivers may embody different roles for children's development. The mother may be responsible for nursing the baby, whereas siblings play and stimulate with their charges, and the kind of care provided can and does differ from person to person.

Historical changes

Since they are created and co-created individually as well as collectively, cultures are dynamic systems. Therefore, they also change over historical time. Historical epochs within and across sociocultural milieus thus represent cultural environments with distinct values, ideas, and practices. Caregiving patterns and arrangements also change over historical time. Marga Vicedo (2014) has demonstrated convincingly how attachment theory itself is bound to historical time and circumstances.

Changes in the cultures of caregiving are driven by changes in sociodemographic parameters, especially an increase in formal education and related changes in age at first birth, number of children, and household composition. Changes in these characteristics can be observed in surveys worldwide. In a comparative study we have assessed sociodemographic variables of mothers and their mothers in cultural communities that adhere to different childcare philosophies (Lamm et al., 2008; see Table 1).

Table 1: Change of sociodemographic parameters from generation to generation

	Mothers				Grand-mothers			
	Berlin	Dehli	Urban Nso	Rural Nso	Berlin	Delhi	urban Nso	rural Nso
Years of formal education	15.3	15.5	12.9	6.7	11.6	12.3	3.2	1.0
Mean number of children	1.4	1.6	2.6	3.4	2.5	2.9	5.8	5.9
Number of persons per household	3.5	6.1	6.7	7.5	2.1	6.4	7.3	6.3

Table 1 indicates that formal education increases from one generation to the next in contexts as diverse as rural and urban Cameroonian Nso, urban middle-class Indians, and urban middle-class Germans. The mean number of children decreases and household composition also changes accordingly. Nevertheless, the changes vary in magnitude and also in rapidity from context to context. In the non-Western families, rural as well as urban, the changes in household size are small, indicating that the family structure may remain similar over generations. Moreover, numbers may mean different things. Changing from illiteracy to seven years of basic formal education may imply different psychological and social changes than a seven-year increase in formal education in an already highly formally educated environment.

Such sociodemographic parameters form particular milieus that can be associated with different caregiving philosophies (Keller, 2007; Keller & Kärtner, 2013).

Individuals with higher education tend to be economically more affluent and thus independent from outer constraints than individuals with less formal education. They place greater emphasis on verbal expression and inner psychological states than behavior. Fewer children in the family allow exclusive attention to the individual child which is then embodied in a distal mode of interaction with abundant cognitive stimulation. Relationships are negotiated emotionally. In contrast, less formally educated individuals tend to interact more physically with small children, with extensive body contact and motor stimulation. Verbal interactions are more restrictive and repetitive emphasizing social domains, conventional codes, and moral standards (e.g., Schröder et al., 2013).

In a study comparing maternal and grandmaternal ethnotheories about childrearing in different cultural environments, we interviewed mothers and grandmothers from the same families (see Table 1) with a picture-based qualitative interview. We documented changes between the generations in emphasis regarding content of caregiving as well as styles of narrating about caregiving in line with the sociodemographic profiles (Lamm et al., 2008).

The most pronounced differences were reported between urban Cameroonian Nso mothers and grandmothers, reflecting a dramatic change in living conditions from rural subsistence-based farming with high illiteracy rates in the grandmother generation to highly educated urban middle-class women of their daughters. Among the samples assessed in the study this group was the only one demonstrating substantial changes in explicitly formulated ideas about parenting, with mothers focusing far more on distal (face-to-face, object stimulation) strategies of parenting than grandmothers. However, there were no differences in the discourse style of urban Nso mothers and grandmothers. This may indicate that, compared to nonverbal means of communication,

language traditionally may be not as important as a cultural medium for Nso education and that such changes may only occur beyond one generation (Keller, 2007).

There were no differences in the parenting ethnotheories of rural Nso mothers and grandmothers. Although all mothers had completed almost seven years of primary school education as compared with virtually no formal education in the grandmother generation, mothers—like the grandmothers—still lived the same lifestyle based on subsistence farming in the same household. Thus intergenerational continuity did not necessitate, and may also not permit, changing child rearing philosophies.

The mothers in both Berlin and Delhi differed from the grandmother generations more in the way they expressed their general ideas about parenting than in the content domains they explicitly mentioned. The discourse style of the mothers became more self-centered, referring more to mental states, whereas the grandmothers placed more emphasis on social topics and conventions. However, the similarities in the content domains of mothers and grandmothers of the two groups may be brought about by different dynamics. It is also apparent that the grandmothers in both settings had high degrees of formal education (more than 10 years) which is associated with a preference for distal parenting (Keller, 2007).

Moreover, specific features of the two contexts may drive the similarities in content. In the Delhi sample, 92% of the mother–grandmother pairs lived in the same household and practiced collective care of children. In order to maintain family harmony it would make sense that similar strategies are emphasized.

The Berlin grandmothers, in contrast, seem to have adapted their parenting strategies towards their daughters. Keller and Demuth (2005), who had also found similarities between Berlin grandmothers and mothers in a qualitative study, suggest

that, in a society where kinship is no longer a necessary bond, grandmothers have adapted their views to their daughters in order to maintain regular contact and rewarding relationships with their children and thus grandchildren. A similar pattern had also been described for Euro-American mother–grandmother pairs (Cho et al., 2005). Euro-American grandmothers explicitly mentioned that they did not want to give child-rearing advice to their daughters or violate their autonomy as mothers. Such an interpretation is also supported by the self-understanding of grandmothers referred to earlier. That is, Western middle-class grandmothers do not regard themselves as educational partners of their grandchildren. Moreover, the fast-changing historical pace between generations in the Western world may contribute to such differences in strategies and philosophies. Each generation is literally living in a different world where their own ideas and practices regarding child care and education may not be appropriate for preparing the grandchild generation for adult competence.

In conclusion, these studies suggest a transcultural change process involving a cultural model oriented more towards psychological autonomy of the individual as a result of increasing formal education and urban life style. Mothers' ethnotheories focus more on independent functioning of the individual, whereas grandmothers' ethnotheories place greater emphasis on interpersonal relationships and harmonious functioning of the group. These differences are expressed differently in both behavioral content and narrating styles.

Another way of assessing historical changes involves the cross-sectional comparison of samples over historical time. As an example, Keller, Borke et al. (2005) compared the interactional behavior with their three-months-old babies of Nso farmer and German middle-class mothers from cohorts four–six years apart. In line with the ethnotheory study described above, there was no change in Nso farmer mothers'

interactional behavior across this short time span. German mothers, on the other hand, showed substantial changes, with a significant increase in object stimulation and a significant decrease in motor/body stimulation.

Moreover, we were fortunate to be able to study interactional behavior between German middle-class mothers and their first-born infants in two comparable cohorts about 20 years apart (Keller & Lamm, 2005). The mothers of our older sample (cohort 1) had their first child in 1977/78. The mothers of our younger sample (cohort 2) had their first child in 2000. Substantial societal changes had occurred between these two epochs that are mirrored in sociodemographic statistics. Most important, formal education had increased significantly between the two time-spans. The number of university students in West Germany had increased from about 1.04 million in 1980 to 1.63 million in 2001. And the percentage of women studying at a university had increased from 36.7 in 1980 to 46.1 in 2000. Women's participation in the labor force had also increased from 36.4% (women with children under six years of age) in 1980 to 52.9% in 2001. There were several parallel patterns -- The number of marriages had declined (6.3 per 1000 inhabitants in 1980 to 5.1 in 2000) and divorce rates had increased (from 1.8 per 1000 inhabitants in 1980 to 2.4 in 2000). The average age of marriage became delayed for women, from 23.4 in 1980 to 28.5 in 2000, and for men from 26.1 in 1980 to 31.3 in 2000. The average age of mothers when their first child is born had increased from 25.2 in 1980 to 28.9 in 1999. During this time children lived in only one in three households in Germany. (All figures from the Statistisches Bundesamt, Wiesbaden, Germany. All figures represent the national level of the Western part of Germany so that it can be expected that numbers representing middle-class only would be even more dramatic).

Overall, these developments reflect an increasing complexity of urban lifestyles, the pluralization of roles and greater social differentiation, and reduced standardization of society. All these changes amount to the definition of individuality as a social demand on each member of a society (Heitmeyer & Olk, 1995; Sünker, 1995).

These changes can also be assumed to affect the nature of parent–child relationships, since parents want to prepare their children for competence in their future lives. Indeed, our data confirm that the two generations of mothers differ in their interactional patterns with their 3-month-old babies. The younger generation of mothers provide their infants with significantly more distal contingency experiences, i.e., prompt reactions to infant's facial cues and object play; at the same time expressions of warmth, both bodily closeness as well as smiling and baby talk, decreased. Fathers changed their interactional behaviors similarly over the same time period (Eickhorst et al., 2008).

Overall, these results indicate broad changes related to global individualism. Self-determination, self-containment and a psychologically inward turn characterize competence in the complexity of urban environments. These results are also consistent with findings of a study that compared Turkish urban upper middle-class grandmothers', mothers', and daughters' perceptions of their parents' child-rearing attitudes (Sever, 1989). The reported decreased emphasis on authoritarian control and increased emphasis on encouraging independence, open expression, and expression of affect were similarly associated with social changes in the Turkish society. Also, a French three-generation study on family values (Sabatier & Lannegrand-Willem, 2005) revealed that mothers focus on modern values (individualism and autonomy) and grandmothers on traditional values (collectivism and obedience). With continuing intergenerational change, adolescents were more individualistic than their mothers. Similar observations

have been made by the Norwegian anthropologist Marianne Gullestad who related ''. . . present changes in theories of management and worklife . . . (to) . . . changes from a popular rhetorical emphasis on ''obedience'' to an emphasis on ''being oneself'' in the upbringing of children . . .'' (1996, p. 25). And an analysis of autobiographies of Norwegian women revealed that family practices related to obedience are linked to the ''positional family'' (where family roles and power structures are rigid), whereas family practices related to ''being oneself'' are linked to the ''person-centered family'' (where the members are recognized as individuals and roles are negotiated) (Bernstein, 1971; Gullestad, 1996).

Finally, Elder, Modell, and Parke (1993) underlined that across the 20th Century, each generation of American children has come of age in a different world of realities, realities that are expressed in the dynamics of family relationships. Each generation modifies the ideas about child rearing, proper care, and socialization goals that are pursued in their parents' generation. These changes pertain to all developmental domains and shape children's developmental trajectories. Similarly, Patricia Greenfield (2004) has convincingly demonstrated how changed lifestyles, especially the transition from subsistence to cash economy in a Mexican village in Chiapas, altered learning styles and consequently children's cognitive development. She also demonstrated that individual creativity emerged at the same time.

Discussion

It is obvious that cultures change over time and that historical epochs therefore need to be taken into consideration when cultural differences in socialization patterns and attachment relationships are studied. We have identified increased formal education as a driving force of generational change. Formal education is associated, in

turn, with economic prosperity and differences in life histories and reproductive trajectories. Especially maternal age at first child, number of children, and household size and composition form socio-demographic milieus are associated with cultural orientations that inform and shape child-rearing and socialization strategies. Because of the cumulative nature of such sociodemographic dimensions, it does not make sense to adopt a research strategy in which these are individually controlled (via statistical means). This point of view is the focus of controversial discussion in some segments of the scientific community (see Keller et al., 2009 and the following commentaries; Keller, 2011).

However, socio-demographic and related developmental change is only one side of the coin. Continuity and conservation are also part of historical development. As one illustration, this can be seen in the fact that cultural differences persist although historical changes are occurring -- This has been demonstrated with maternal parenting behaviors in interaction with babies (e.g. Keller, Borke et al., 2005). Another arena where continuity and change can be studied is the transformation processes that migrants need to negotiate. Especially migrants coming from traditional rural contexts into Western societies are confronted with significant cultural clashes, when they need to somehow reconcile their traditional values and the new ones they face. There are findings that, with increasing formal education, behavioral norms and patterns of the new society are adopted, yet core values and behaviors are also maintained. For example, migrants from West Africa in Italy have adopted the Western middle-class distal interactional style with their babies, employing extensive face-to-face contact and ongoing conversations; yet they maintain their focus on rhythmicity in motor and vocal behavior considered crucial for Sub-Saharan rural parenting (Carra et al., 2013). In theoretical terms, Kagitcibasi (2005) had conceptualized the interplay of change and

continuity that accompanies increases in formal education (also stimulated in large-scale training programs in Turkey) as the model of autonomous relatedness. As a corollary, she was one of the first to argue that the traditional relational model is not in conflict with the new autonomous model but, rather, that they can and do co-exist (see Keller, 2012).

Attachment theory and associated research has been remarkably resistant to acknowledging the cultural/historical embeddedness of psychological processes. As a recent example, after reviewing the rich diversity of child care practices around the globe, Mesman, van IJzendoorn and Sagi (2016, p. 37) conclude that their investigations across different cultures are in fact “remarkably consistent” with the claims of attachment theory, asserting that the theory stands cross-culturally validated “until further notice” (Mesman et al. 2016b, p. 37). This ignorance and resistance seems to be a characteristic of attachment theory ever since Bowlby’s refusal to take Margaret Mead’s cultural claims and critique seriously (Vicedo, 2017). Parallel to the view that change and continuity co-exist, and drawing on the extensive anthropological and cross-cultural literature, we argue that universality and specificity in early relationship formation co-exist. Attachment is certainly a universal human need, but how it is defined, how it evolved, and how it is deeply embedded in developmental dynamics necessarily vary across cultural contexts and changes over historical time.

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