Positive parenting in ethnic minority families. Challenges and outcomes

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Sensitive parenting as a cross-cultural ideal: Sensitivity beliefs of Dutch, Moroccan, and Turkish mothers in the Netherlands

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Attachment and Human Development, 14, 601–619.

Abstract

The primary goal of this study is to test the hypothesis that beliefs about the ideal sensitive mother are similar across Dutch, Moroccan, and Turkish mothers living in the Netherlands. A total of 75 mothers with at least one child between the ages of six months and six years described their views about the ideal sensitive mother using the Maternal Behavior Q-Sort (Pederson, Moran, & Bento, 1999). These views were highly similar within and across cultural and socio-economic groups. Nevertheless, family income fully mediated the relationship between ethnic background and sensitivity beliefs; income of minority mothers was lower which was in turn predictive of a lower sensitivity belief score. Our findings suggest that the main behavioral markers of sensitivity are valued by mothers from different cultural backgrounds. The role of socio-economic status in sensitivity beliefs is consistent with the Family Stress Model.

Keywords: maternal sensitivity, beliefs, culture, socio-economic status.

Introduction

Sensitive parenting refers to the ability to perceive and interpret a child's signals and to respond to those signals in a prompt and appropriate way (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, &Wall, 1978). Sensitive parenting predicts secure attachment across cultures (Van IJzendoorn & Sagi-Schwartz, 2008) as well as positive cognitive development, social behavior, and emotion regulation (e.g., Mesman, Van IJzendoorn, & Bakermans-Kranenburg, 2012). Ethnic minority parents have been found to behave less sensitively than majority parents, but this difference may be largely caused by socio-economic factors (Mesman, Van IJzendoorn, et al., 2012). Nevertheless, some studies have corrected for socio-economic status and still found differences in sensitive behavior between minority and majority parents (e.g., Spiker, Ferguson, & Brooks-Gunn, 1993; Van IJzendoorn, 1990; Yaman, Mesman, Van IJzendoorn, Bakermans-Kranenburg, & Linting, 2010). Can these differences in behavior be explained by cultural differences in beliefs about sensitive parenting? There is reason to assume that maternal sensitivity is a universal construct viewed similarly by parents from different cultures and socio-economic groups (Mesman, Van IJzendoorn, et al., 2012). However, research to date has not provided clear conclusions about the extent to which cultural and socio-economic beliefs about sensitive parenting differ. The primary goal of our present study is to test the hypothesis that beliefs about the ideal sensitive mother are similar across groups of Dutch, Moroccan, and Turkish mothers from different socio-economic groups living in the Netherlands.

Parenting behaviors that reflect the norm in a Western middle-class population may not reflect the norm in other cultures and may have different meanings and applications across different ethnic groups (Lansford et al., 2005). How a parent perceives and interprets a child's signals and responds to them in an appropriate way may depend on parental ideas about what children need (Mesman, Van IJzendoorn, et al., 2012). Parents with collectivistic parenting goals have been reported to be more authoritarian, restricting unwanted behavior without explanation, whereas parents in individualistic cultures tend to be more authoritative, using discussion and explanations to guide child behavior (e.g., Harwood, Miller, & Irizarry, 1995; Ispa et al., 2004). Also, if parents value a certain parenting behavior, such as physical discipline, they are more likely to behave accordingly (Pinderhughes, Dodge, Bates, Pettit, & Zelli, 2000). Thus, different parenting goals and beliefs seem to be reflected in different parenting styles and behaviors across cultures. Can cross-cultural differences in sensitive parenting behaviors then also be explained by culturally divergent beliefs about sensitive parenting?

Although most studies on sensitive parenting have been conducted among mid-

dle-class European and American families, the concept of maternal sensitivity was actually developed in Africa. A study by Mary Ainsworth that was conducted in Uganda in the mid-1950s was the first to show the importance of the continuity and quality of mother–infant interaction in relation to attachment security (Ainsworth, 1967). Ainsworth's famous Baltimore study replicated her Uganda results in a Western culture (Ainsworth & Witting, 1969), showing the potentially universal applicability of the construct of maternal sensitivity. According to Ainsworth the four essential components of sensitivity are (1) parent's awareness of child's signals, (2) the accuracy of the interpretation of these signals, (3) the promptness, and (4) the appropriateness of the response to them. These elements will be discussed in terms of their potential cross-cultural applicability.

Parental awareness of a child's signals is dependent upon proximity and availability, which represent the most universally applicable aspects of sensitivity, because they are prerequisites for ensuring that an infant or child is safe and receives primary care (Keller, 2000). Underlying the process of an accurate interpretation are the parent's empathy for the child and freedom from distortion. The step from availability to responsiveness is especially marked by parental empathy for children's needs. Empathy is a universal human trait for which the neural basis was present early in human evolution (Hoffman, 1975). In addition, fostering positive infant emotions and sharing in these emotions is rewarding to parents, and motivates them to take care of their children and alleviate the children's distress. This makes parental empathy an important survival mechanism for the human species (Hrdy, 2009). The accuracy of parents' interpretation of the child's signals as well as the appropriateness of parental responses may be subject to cultural beliefs and customs (Bornstein et al., 1992; Harwood, Schölmerich, Ventura-Cook, Schulze, & Wilson, 1996; Keller & Otto, 2009). Cultural differences have been found in how caregivers respond to children's signals (Bornstein et al., 1992; Kärtner et al., 2008). For example, in response to infant signals, caregivers in independent socio-cultural contexts address the infant's sense of sight more often, whereas in interdependent contexts, the sense of touch is addressed more often (Kärtner et al., 2008). However, regardless of differences in the modality of the responses, the overall level of prompt responding (maternal contingency) is very similar across cultures (Kärtner, Keller, & Yovsi, 2010). Thus, availability and contingent responsiveness seem to be key elements of sensitive parenting across cultures. However, specific parenting behaviors (e.g., how exactly a mother responds) might differ between cultures.

Although there might be variations among cultures as to how parents interpret and respond to signals, and behave during parent–child interactions, their beliefs about the importance of the key elements (being available and responsive) may be similar

across cultures. The importance of sensitivity across cultures is also demonstrated by the fact that the associations between sensitivity and developmental outcomes, such as attachment quality and emotion regulation, appear to be the same across ethnic groups (e.g., Mesman, Van IJzendoorn, et al., 2012; Van IJzendoorn & Sagi-Schwartz, 2008). However, if different cultures have similar beliefs about sensitivity, why then did several studies report mean-level differences in sensitive behavior between cultures?

Socio-economic status is an important factor in explaining differences in sensitive parenting between and within ethnic groups (e.g., Bakermans-Kranenburg, Van IJzendoorn, & Kroonenberg, 2004; Bocknek, Brophy-Herb, & Banerjee, 2009; Yaman, Mesman, Van IJzendoorn, Bakermans- Kranenburg, et al., 2010). A possible explanation for the association between socioeconomic status and sensitivity can be found in the Family Stress Model (Conger & Donnellan, 2007). The model describes that stressors such as socio-economic strains lead to family stress (e.g., depression and family dysfunction), which in turn leads to non-optimal parenting (e.g., lack of warmth and support). In most countries there is substantial covariation between ethnic minority status and low socio-economic status, and they both predict lower parental sensitivity. In line with the Family Stress Model, the link between minority status and sensitivity disappears or becomes substantially smaller when socio-economic status is controlled for (Mesman, Van IJzendoorn, et al., 2012). This finding suggests that socio-economic status plays an important role in explaining sensitivity differences between minority and majority ethnic groups. However, there are several studies in which researchers correct for educational level and still find differences in sensitivity between ethnic groups (Spiker et al., 1993; Van IJzendoorn, 1990; Yaman, Mesman, Van IJzendoorn, Bakermans- Kranenburg, et al., 2010). There is some evidence to suggest that other stressors could also play a role.

In addition to socio-economic stress, minority families have been found to experience more other family stressors than majority families, such as higher rates of teenage motherhood, single parenthood, marital discord, and general daily stress (e.g., Platt, 2007; SCP, 2009; Yaman, Mesman, Van IJzendoorn, & Bakermans-Kranenburg, 2010). Family stressors in turn have been found to negatively influence parenting competence (e.g., Berlin, Brady-Smith, & Brooks-Gunn, 2002; Mistry, Biesanz, Chien, Howes, & Benner, 2008). Hence in addition to stress due to socio-economic disadvantage, stress due to family disadvantage needs to be taken into account when explaining lower parenting quality in ethnic minority families. It is important to note that the Family Stress Model suggests that stress is one of the most important factors in explaining inadequate parenting behavior, but there is as yet no reason to believe that parents in at-risk families hold different beliefs about sensitivity compared to parents in other families. Beliefs about the

importance and nature of sensitivity may be similar across groups, but stressful circumstances may make it far more challenging to behave according to those beliefs in daily life.

To test the hypothesis that different ethnic groups converge in their beliefs about sensitivity, the study focused on families with a Turkish and Moroccan background in the Netherlands. They represent the two largest ethnic minority groups in the Netherlands and their population in the Netherlands is still increasing, which is mostly due to the increase of the second generation (Distelbrink & Hooghiemstra, 2005). The Turkish and Moroccan immigrants first came to the Netherlands as invited guest workers around the 1960s. They intended to return to their countries of origin, but many stayed in the Netherlands. Both the Turkish and the Moroccan minority groups in the Netherlands are overrepresented in the lower socio-economic classes. In terms of culture, Turks and Moroccans have a collectivistic background in which parenting goals such as obedience are considered more desirable than in the individualistic Dutch culture (Harwood et al., 1996; Phalet & Schönpflug, 2001; Willemsen & Van de Vijver, 1997). First- and second-generation immigrants identify themselves more with their own ethnic culture than with that of the host society (Phinney, Horenczyk, Liebkind, & Vedder, 2001). About 30 to 40% of first-generation and 10 to 20% of second-generation Turkish and Moroccan immigrants are never in contact with members of the Dutch majority in their leisure time. Both groups are mostly in contact with persons with a similar ethnic background and Turkish and Moroccan ethnic minorities rarely marry Dutch majority group members, but generally marry within their own ethnic group (SCP, 2009, 2011). It is then not surprising that the Turks and Moroccans are generally viewed as culturally different from the Dutch majority group as judged by themselves as well as by the majority (Verkuyten, Hagendoorn, & Masson, 1996).

The few studies on Turkish minority families with young children in the Netherlands have shown that Turkish mothers behave less sensitively than Dutch mothers (Leseman & Van den Boom, 1999; Yaman, Mesman, Van IJzendoorn, Bakermans-Kranenburg, et al., 2010). There are no observational studies on sensitivity among Moroccans in the Netherlands. By including two immigrant groups and three Dutch groups from three educational levels (low, middle, high), this study can provide not only a comparison of two different minority groups, but also compare these groups with native Dutch groups with different socio-economic backgrounds.

Our study's design was modeled after the widely cited study by Posada and colleagues (1995) in which mother's descriptions of an ideal child in terms of secure base behavior were compared across seven countries representing different sociocultural contexts using the Attachment Q-Set (Waters, 1987). For all countries, mothers' descriptions

of the ideal child were consistent with behavioral patterns that are considered as indicative of security by US experts. Despite socio-economic differences between the samples, mothers from each of the seven countries preferred children who see their mothers as a safe haven and who show a balance between exploration and proximity seeking.

Whereas Posada and colleagues investigated beliefs about the child's contribution to a secure attachment relationship (secure base behavior), our study aims to examine beliefs about the caregiver's contribution to this relationship (i.e., sensitive parenting). In addition, in the Posada et al. study mothers from different countries were included, whereas this study includes mothers from different ethnic groups within one country.

In line with the Posada et al. study, this study uses a Q-Sort method originally developed as an observational instrument, but utilized as a measure of parental beliefs about specific behaviors. Pederson and Moran (1995, 1996) developed the Maternal Behavior Q-Sort (MBQS), which is a home observation-based description of maternal behavior. The set provides descriptions of a mother's tendency to detect and recognize signals or situations that might require her response, and to respond promptly and appropriately (Pederson et al., 1990). The items of the MBQS are anchored in the descriptions of Mary Ainsworth and colleagues (Ainsworth et al., 1978). Maternal behavior measured with the MBQS has been associated with other measures of maternal sensitivity, such as the Ainsworth scales (Moran, Pederson, Pettit, & Krupka, 1992) and with attachment security (e.g., Baily, Moran, Pederson, & Bento, 2007; Van IJzendoorn, Vereijken, Bakermans-Kranenburg, & Riksen-Walraven, 2004). Given the universal nature of the key components of sensitivity and based on the findings by Posada et al. about the cross-cultural relevance of attachment-related child behavior, this study hypothesizes that the beliefs about an ideal sensitive mother are very similar across different cultural and socio-economic groups.

Method

Sample and procedure

A total of 75 mothers with at least one child between the ages of 6 months and 6 years participated. The sample consisted of five subsamples of 15 mothers: Moroccan immigrant, Turkish immigrant, Dutch low educational level (vocational school or lower), Dutch middle educational level (secondary school, middle vocational education) and Dutch high educational level (high vocational education, university or higher). To ensure the homogeneity of the immigrant sample and to make sure that all mothers followed at least some years of education in the Netherlands and were able to speak and read Dutch,

only second-generation immigrant mothers born in the Netherlands (both of their parents were born in their country of origin) or first generation immigrant mothers who migrated to the Netherlands before the age of 11 years were included. The Moroccan and Turkish mothers, as well as the Dutch high-educated mothers were recruited by giving verbal information and an information letter about the goal of the study to any potential participant within the authors' network. Dutch low and middle-educated mothers were recruited from a sample of a previous observational study on early childhood parenting conducted by our research team. In that study no measure or treatment was used that could have influenced participants' views of the ideal mother. Thirty-two of these Dutch mothers were informed about the present study and asked to participate, of whom 15 low-educated and 15 middle-educated mothers agreed. The number of children of participating mothers ranged from one to five, with an average of two children. The mother's average age was 32 years (*SD* = 4.97, *range* = 23-46). All mothers gave written consent and were visited at home by one of five trained students (undergraduate and graduate). The home visit was conducted in the Dutch language. All mothers indicated that their spoken Dutch language ability was fluent (n = 72) or sufficient (n = 3).

Measures

Maternal view of the ideal sensitive mother

The maternal views of the ideal sensitive mother were assessed using the Maternal Behavior Q-Sort (MBQS; Pederson et al., 1999). The MBQS consists of 90 cards with statements about maternal behaviors that the mothers sorted into 9 stacks from '*least descriptive*' (1) to '*most descriptive*' (9) of the ideal mother. Because the original items were designed to be evaluated by professionals rather than mothers, the behavioral descriptions were simplified for the present study to make them more understandable for (low educated) mothers. For example, the item *"Provides B with little opportunity to contribute to the interaction"* was simplified into *"Gives her child little opportunity to play along or to respond"*. The mothers were first asked to sort the cards into 3 stacks from '*do not fit the ideal mother at all*' to *'fit the ideal mother really well'*. The mothers were explicitly told that there are no correct or wrong answers and that it is not about their own parenting behavior, but about what the ideal mother should or should not do. Any question they had concerning the meaning of an item was answered according to the item explanations in the protocol. When the mothers distributed the cards across the three stacks, they were asked to sort each stack into 3 smaller stacks. After the mothers distributed all cards across 9 stacks, they were asked to evenly distribute the cards across the stacks until each stack consisted of 10 cards.

Sensitivity belief scores were derived by correlating the resulting profiles with the criterion sort provided by the authors of the MBQS (Pederson et al., 1999), because this is the standard criterion sort that has been used in previous research. Within the subgroups there were no mothers with outlying sensitivity belief scores. Within the Moroccan, Turkish and Dutch groups the *z*-scores of their 90-items MBQS sensitivity beliefs scores were all between -3.29 and 3.29.

Ten Dutch academic experts provided sorts of the ideal sensitive mother. These experts were all very familiar with attachment theory and research and each had extensive experience with coding parent-child interactions. The correlation between the composite sort of the experts (the average of the experts) and the criterion sort was .94 and their individual sensitivity scores were very high (M = .88, *range* .86-.90). In addition, we computed a Dutch criterion sort that showed to be very similar to the criterion sort provided by the Canadian authors of the MBQS (r = .93).

Religion in child rearing

The importance of religion in child rearing was measured with 4 self-developed items. The answer categories ranged from (1) '*totally disagree*' to (5) '*totally agree*'. An example of an item is *"I use my religion as a guideline for the parenting of my child"*. A total score was computed by summing item scores. The internal consistency of the scale was high (Cronbach's α = .94).

Educational level and family income

Educational level was measured on a scale from 1 to 5: *primary school* (1), *vocational school* (2), *secondary school/middle vocational education* (3), *high vocational education* (4) and *university or higher* (5). Annual gross family income was measured on a 7-point scale ranging from (1) '*no income*' to (7) '*50.000 euro or more*'.

Results

Similarities and differences between groups

Using analysis of variance we tested whether there were significant differences between groups in background variables and sensitivity belief score. For post hoc comparisons Games and Howell's test for unequal variance and sample size was used for religion in child rearing and LSD tests were used for the other variables (Table 1). Considering educational level, Turkish and Moroccan mothers were most similar to Dutch middle-educated

mothers. The mean educational level of Turkish and Moroccan mothers was higher than that of Dutch low-educated mothers and lower than that of Dutch high-educated mothers, $F(4,70) = 39.50$, $p < .001$. The family income of Turkish mothers was lower than that of all other groups and Dutch high-educated mothers had a higher family income than all other groups, $F(4,70) = 8.60$, $p < .001$. Moroccan mothers were younger than Dutch high-educated mothers. Turkish mothers and Dutch low-educated mothers were younger than Dutch middle-educated mothers and Dutch high-educated mothers, $F(4,70) = 6.40$, $p < .001$. The groups were similar in average number of children. Among religious mothers, Dutch high-educated mothers found religion less important in child rearing than Moroccan and Turkish mothers, $F(4,70) = 4.71$, $p < .01$. If non-religious mothers were included in analyses as well (score 0 on the religious child rearing scale), Moroccan and Turkish mothers were found to perceive religion more important in child rearing than Dutch low, middle and high-educated mothers, $F(4,70) = 11.33$, $p < .001$.

The mean sensitivity belief scores differed significantly between groups, $F(4,70) = 3.77$, $p < .01$. The views of Dutch high-educated mothers were significantly more similar to the MBQ criterion sort (provided by the authors of the MBQS) than those of Moroccan, Turkish, and Dutch middle-educated mothers. The views of Dutch low-educated mothers were significantly more similar to the MBQ criterion sort than the views of Moroccan mothers. When the total sample ($N = 75$) was split up into low ($n = 21$), middle ($n = 29$) and high-educated ($n = 25$) mothers, the mean sensitivity belief scores were also significantly different across groups, $F(2,72) = 6.02$, $p < .01$. High-educated mothers ($M = .77$, $SD = .04$, *range* = .71-.85) had views that were more similar to the views of the authors of the MBQS than low ($M = .72$, $SD = .10$, *range* = .41-.82) and middle-educated ($M = .71$, $SD = .04$, *range* = .61-.82) mothers. The higher the educational level of a group of mothers the smaller the range of sensitivity belief scores within the group. However, it is important to note that the mean sensitivity belief scores of all groups indicated a high similarity with the criterion sort.

Composite sorts of the ideal sensitive mother in the different groups

To test whether the mothers from the different groups define the ideal mother in a similar fashion, the fifteen sorts of each group and the ten sorts of the Dutch experts were averaged into a composite sort. Correlations were computed between the different composite sorts (Table 2). The correlations among mothers' composite sorts ranged from .95 to .98, indicating that the views of the ideal mother of the group as a whole were very similar across Moroccan, Turkish and Dutch low, middle, and high-educated mothers. The correlations between the composite sort of Dutch experts and mothers ranged from .86 to

Table 1. *Descriptives for Moroccan, Turkish, Dutch low-, Dutch middle-, and Dutch high-educated mothers*

	Moroccan	Turkish	Dutch low-	Dutch middle-	Dutch high-	*F*	*p*	*Post Hoc (LSD)*
Maternal educational level								
M (SD)	3.33 (0.82)	2.93 (0.88)	1.87 (0.35)	3.00 (0.00)	4.60 (0.51)	39.50	.000	Dl < M, T, Dm < Dh
Range	1-4	2-5	1-2	3	4-5			
Family income[a]								
M (SD)	4.92 (1.38)	3.92 (1.38)	4.84 (0.90)	5.13 (1.19)	6.47 (0.92)	8.60	.000	T < M, Dl, Dm < Dh
Range	2-7	2-7	3-6	3-7	4-7			
Maternal age								
M (SD)	32.20 (4.80)	29.80 (4.36)	29.20 (3.32)	34.20 (4.52)	35.93 (4.71)	6.40	.000	M < Dh; T, Dl < Dm, Dh
Range	23-40	23-39	25-35	26-41	28-46			
Number of children								
M (SD)	2.40 (1.06)	2.13 (0.74)	2.07 (0.26)	2.13 (0.35)	2.13 (0.83)	0.50	.738	
Range	1-5	1-3	2-3	2-3	1-4			
Religion in child rearing (whole sample)[b]								
M (SD)	17.00 (2.37)	18.17 (2.12)	6.93 (2.25)	8.20 (2.23)	5.07 (1.54)	11.33	.000	M, T > Dl, Dm, Dh[d]
Range	12-20	14-20	0-20	0-20	0-20			
Religion in child rearing (if religious)[c]								
M (SD)	17.00 (2.37)	18.17 (2.12)	14.86 (6.31)	15.38 (4.87)	10.86 (3.08)	4.71	.003	M, T > Dh[d]
Range	12-20	14-20	4-20	6-20	8-16			
Sensitivity belief score								
M (SD)	.70 (.09)	.71 (.07)	.75 (.04)	.72 (.03)	.78 (.05)	3.77	.008	Dh > M, T, Dm; Dl > M
Range	.41-.80	.51-.82	.67-.82	.67-.78	.71-.85			

[a] Moroccan $n = 12$, Turkish $n = 12$, Dutch low $n = 13$.
[b] Moroccan $n = 12$, Turkish $n = 12$, Dutch low $n = 15$, Dutch middle $n = 15$, Dutch high $n = 15$.
[c] Moroccan $n = 12$, Turkish $n = 12$, Dutch low $n = 7$, Dutch middle $n = 8$, Dutch high $n = 7$.
[d] Games and Howell post hoc comparison test for unequal sample size and variance.

.90, indicating that the experts' views of the ideal mother were also very similar to those of the Moroccan, Turkish and Dutch low, middle, and high-educated mothers. However, the correlations between the composite sorts of the different groups of mothers were significantly higher than the correlations between the composite sorts of mothers and the Dutch expert composite sort. Similar results were found if the total group was split up into low, middle, and high-educated mothers. Correlations among the composite sorts of low, middle, and high-educated mothers were all .98.

Table 2. *Pearson correlation coefficients among composite sorts*[a] *of the hypothetical ideal mother*

	Moroccan	Turkish	Dutch-L	Dutch-M	Dutch-H	Dutch experts
Moroccan						
Turkish	.97					
Dutch-L	.97	.96				
Dutch-M	.97	.96	.98			
Dutch-H	.96	.95	.97	.97		
Dutch experts	.88	.87	.88	.86	.90	

Note. Dutch-L = Dutch low-educated; Dutch-M = Dutch middle-educated; Dutch-H = Dutch high-educated.
[a] composite sort = the average sort per group.

Maternal view of the ideal sensitive mother within and across groups

We investigated whether mothers' views regarding maternal behavior of the ideal sensitive mother were more similar within than across groups. Correlations were computed between all pairs of mothers and Dutch experts' MBQS descriptions, both within and across subsamples. These correlations indicate the similarity between two profiles of the ideal mother. The correlations were converted into Fisher's *z*, averaged within and across samples and then converted back to correlations (see Posada et al., 1995). The within- and across-subsample means are presented in Table 3. The mean correlations of mothers' views of the ideal mother within groups (M = .77, *range* = .73-.81) were similar to the mean correlations across groups (M = .76, *range* = .73-.79). The same results were found if the total group of mothers was divided into three groups of low, middle, and high-educated mothers. If only the ethnic minority mothers were divided into three groups of low (n = 6), middle (n = 14) and high-educated (n = 10) mothers, the correlation ranges for the middle (M =.71, *range* = .54-.83) and high-educated (M =.81, *range* = .74-.87) ethnic minority mothers were smaller than the correlation range for the low-educated ethnic minority mothers (M =.65, *range* .28-.83).

The mean correlation within Dutch experts (M = .88, *range* = .80-.92) was some-

what higher than the mean correlations between experts and mothers (*M* = .73, *range* = .71-.77), but both indicated that the view about the ideal sensitive mother was highly similar both within Dutch experts and between Dutch experts and mothers.

Table 3. *Mean correlations among mother's and expert's 90-items Q-sort descriptions of the ideal mother both within (bold) and across groups*

	Moroccan	Turkish	Dutch-L	Dutch-M	Dutch-H	Dutch experts
Moroccan	**.73 (.24-.84)**					
Turkish	.73 (.28-.85)	**.74 (.48-.87)**				
Dutch-L	.76 (.30-.89)	.76 (.53-.89)	**.79 (.64-.90)**			
Dutch-M	.75 (.30-.88)	.75 (.52-.88)	.78 (.60-.89)	**.78 (.68-.86)**		
Dutch-H	.75 (.27-.90)	.75 (.53-.89)	.79 (.63-.90)	.78 (.60-.90)	**.81 (.70-.91)**	
Dutch experts	.71 (.31-.86)	.71 (.52-.87)	.74 (.62-.85)	.72 (.59-.85)	.77 (.63-.90)	**.88 (.80-.92)**

Note. Dutch-L = Dutch low-educated; Dutch-M = Dutch middle-educated; Dutch-H = Dutch high-educated.

Mothers' views of the ideal sensitive mother seemed highly similar both within and across different ethnic and socioeconomic groups. To test whether the same results hold for a short version of the MBQS, we followed the same procedure with the 25-item selection presented by Tarabulsy et al. (2009). The results indicated that the mean correlations of mothers' views of the ideal sensitive mother within groups (*M* = .82, *range* = .79-.84) were comparable to the mean correlations across groups (*M* = .81, *range* = .77-.84). Maternal views of the ideal mother were highly similar within and across groups for both the 25-item version and the 90-item version.

Differences across groups on item level

Although we found a high degree of similarity in maternal views of the ideal mother across groups, variability on item level may still be observed. Using analysis of variance we tested whether there were differences between the groups in how descriptive the mothers found each item for the ideal mother. Because of the large number of tests we chose a conservative significance level of $p < .01$. We found only six items that showed significant differences between groups. LSD tests were used for post hoc comparisons. The mean score on item 10 *"Speaks to her child directly and not just about her child"* was significantly lower for Turkish mothers than for mothers in all the other groups, indicating that the item was perceived as less descriptive for the ideal mother by the Turkish mothers, $F(4,70) = 5.16$, $p < .01$. Moroccan mothers scored significantly lower on item

14 *"Suddenly stops playing with her child to talk to a visitor"* than Dutch low, middle, and high-educated mothers and Turkish mothers scored lower than Dutch low and middle-educated mothers on this item, $F(4,70) = 5.34$, $p < .01$. On item 35 *"Finishes activities and games with her child properly so that her child is content"* the mean scores of the Turkish and Moroccan mothers were significantly higher than those of the Dutch low, middle, and high-educated mothers, $F(4,70) = 8.02$, $p < .001$. Turkish and Moroccan mothers scored significantly higher on item 63 *"Shows that she is aware of her child's distress but does not respond"* than Dutch low and high-educated mothers and Dutch middle-educated mothers scored higher than Dutch low-educated mothers on this item, $F(4,70) = 4.79$, $p < .01$. On item 70 *"Is so late in her responses, that it is not clear for the child what she is responding to",* the Moroccan mothers scored significantly higher than all the other groups, $F(4,70) = 4.42$, $p < .01$. The Dutch high-educated mothers scored higher than Turkish, Moroccan and Dutch middle-educated mothers on item 71 *"Joins in the focus of her child's attention"*, $F(4,70) = 3.72$, $p < .01$.

If the total group was divided into three groups of low, middle and high-educated mothers, only two items were found to be significantly different across groups. LSD tests were used for post hoc comparisons. Low-educated mothers found item 56 *"Has fixed ideas about how her child needs to be taken care of and always does these things the same way"* more important for the ideal mother than high-educated mothers, $F(2,72) = 5.70$, $p < .01$. High-educated mothers found item 71 *"Joins in the focus of her child's attention"* more important for the ideal mother than low and middle-educated mothers, $F(2,72) = 5.44$, $p < .01$.

Background variables and maternal views of the ideal mother

Although we found a high degree of similarity in maternal views of the ideal mother within and across groups, the sensitivity belief scores (the similarity between a mothers' profile and the criterion sort provided by the authors of the MBQS) were significantly different across groups, indicating that there was still a possibility for background variables to affect sensitivity belief scores. Table 4 presents bivariate correlations between background variables and sensitivity belief scores. Ethnic background was significantly correlated with sensitivity belief scores, $r(73) = -.31$, $p < .01$. When background variables (e.g., maternal education and family income) were not taken into account, ethnic minority mothers ($n = 30$) had lower sensitivity belief scores than Dutch mothers ($n = 45$). Maternal education and family income were also significantly correlated with sensitivity belief score. Higher educated mothers had a higher sensitivity belief score, $r(73) = .34$, $p < .01$. Higher income was associated with a higher sensitivity belief score, $r(65) = .35$,

$p < .01$. Maternal age and number of children were not associated with sensitivity belief score. Only the role of religion in child rearing among religious mothers was associated with sensitivity belief score. More religious mothers had lower sensitivity belief scores, $r(44) = -.29$, $p < .05$.

There were some significant correlations among background variables. Family income was significantly associated with ethnic background and maternal education. Minority mothers had lower family incomes, $r(65) = -.38$, $p < .01$, and higher educated mothers had higher family incomes, $r(65) = .51$, $p < .01$. Maternal age was significantly correlated with maternal education, family income and number of children, respectively, $r(73) = .32$, $p < .01$, $r(65) = .43$, $p < .01$, and $r(73) = .45$, $p < .01$. Religion in child rearing for the whole sample was correlated with ethnic background, $r(65) = .63$, $p < .01$. Minority mothers found religion more important in child rearing. For religious mothers only religion in child rearing was correlated with ethnic background, $r(44) = .45$, $p < .01$, and family income, $r(42) = -.35$, $p < .05$. More religious mothers were more often minority mothers and had lower family incomes.

Table 4. *Correlations between sensitivity belief score and background variables*

	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.
1. Sensitivity belief score	-							
2. Ethnic background	-.31**	-						
3. Maternal educational level	.34**	-.01	-					
4. Family income[a]	.35**	-.38**	.51**	-				
5. Maternal age	.14	-.21	.32**	.43**	-			
6. Number of children	-.07	.11	-.02	.03	.45**	-		
7. Religion in child rearing (whole sample)[b]	-.13	.63**	-.10	-.22	-.04	.17	-	
8. Religion in child rearing (if religious)[c]	-.29*	.45**	-.26	-.35*	-.26	.06	-	-

[a] Ethnic minority $n = 24$, Dutch $n = 43$.
[b] Ethnic minority $n = 24$, Dutch $n = 45$.
[c] Ethnic minority $n = 24$, Dutch $n = 22$, for family income Dutch $n = 20$.
* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

A hierarchical multiple regression analyses was conducted to test the contribution of maternal education and family income to sensitivity belief score independent of one another, to test whether ethnic background added a significant amount of variance to the prediction of sensitivity belief score above family income and maternal education, and whether there was an interaction effect between ethnic background and maternal educa-

tion and between ethnic background and family income. Family income and maternal education were centered, to reduce multicollinearity and to simplify the interpretation of the main effects. In the first step, maternal education and family income were entered, in the second step ethnic background was included, and in the third step the two interaction terms were added. There was a significant main effect of family income on sensitivity belief score, $\beta = .32$, $t(64) = 2.32$, $p < .05$. Corrected for family income, there was no effect of maternal education. Ethnic background did not add a significant amount of variance to the prediction of sensitivity belief score, $R^2_{change} = .03$, $F_{change}(1, 63) = 2.25$, $p > .05$. The interaction terms also did not add a significant amount of variance to the prediction of sensitivity belief score, $R^2_{change} = .01$, $F_{change}(2,61) = 0.30$, $p > .05$.

We tested whether family income was a significant mediator in the relation between ethnic background and sensitivity belief score (Table 5). There was a significant initial relation between ethnic background and sensitivity score of the ideal mother, $\beta = -.27$, $t(65) = -2.29$, $p < .05$. When income was included simultaneously with ethnic background in the second step of a hierarchical regression analysis, only family income was a significant predictor of sensitivity belief score, $\beta = .29$, $t(64) = 2.30$, $p < .05$. The relation was fully mediated by family income (Figure 1). A Sobel test (Sobel, 1982) confirmed that family income was a significant mediator in the relation between ethnic background and sensitivity score of the ideal mother ($z = -1.99$, $p < .05$).

Table 5. *Hierarchical multiple regression analysis testing family income as mediator in the relation between ethnic background and sensitivity belief score (N = 67)*

	B	*S.E.*	β	ΔR^2
Step 1				.07*
Ethnic background	-.03	.01	-.27*	
Step 2				.07*
Ethnic background	-.02	.01	-.16	
Family income	.01	.00	.29*	

* $p < .05$.

Since income was the main predictor of sensitivity belief score, we tested whether there were differences on the item level between mothers with a low ($n = 22$), middle ($n = 21$), and high ($n = 24$) income. We found only seven items that showed significant differences between groups ($p < .01$). Three of these seven items (items 10, 35, and 71) were already found to be significantly different across groups when the sample was divided into Moroccan, Turkish and Dutch low, middle, and high-educated mothers. The scores

on items 10 *"Speaks to her child directly and not just about her child"* and 49 *"Seeks contact with her child"* were significantly lower for mothers with a low income than for mothers with a middle and high income, respectively $F(2,64) = 6.94$, $p < .01$ and $F(2,64) = 5.08$, $p < .01$. Mothers with a low income found items 11 *"Speaks slowly and repeats the words if she talks to her child"* and 35 *"Finishes activities and games with her child properly so that her child is content"* more descriptive of the ideal mother than mothers with a middle and high income, respectively $F(2,64) = 5.63$, $p < .01$ and $F(2,64) = 6.86$, $p < .01$. Mothers with low and middle incomes scored significantly lower on items 71 *"Joins in the focus of her child's attention"* and 85 *"Suddenly interrupts things that she is doing with her child"* than mothers with high incomes, respectively $F(2,64) = 9.93$, $p < .001$ and $F(2,64) = 6.12$, $p < .01$. Mothers with a middle income scored higher than mothers with low and high incomes on item 78 *"Plays games together with her child"*, $F(2,64) = 5.19$, $p < .01$.

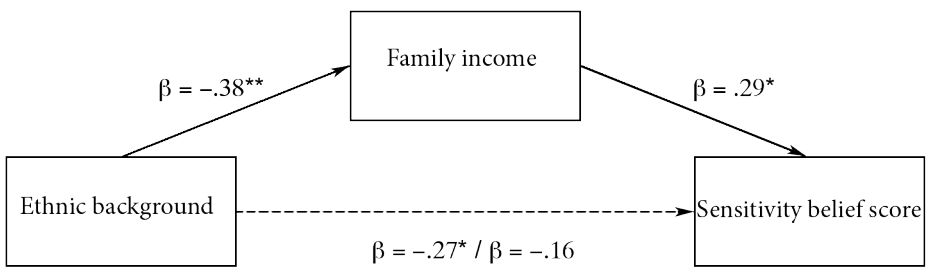

Figure 1. Family income fully mediates the relation between ethnic background and sensitivity belief score.

Discussion

Maternal views of the ideal sensitive mother were highly similar across cultural and socioeconomic groups. Few item level differences were found between the groups. Nevertheless, this study found that mothers' sensitivity beliefs were related to socioeconomic factors. The first evidence to support our hypothesis that the beliefs about an ideal sensitive mother are similar across different cultural *and* socioeconomic groups, was the average sensitivity scores of the ideal mother of Turkish, Moroccan, and Dutch low, middle, and high educated mothers. Although this study did find some differences between and within these groups, the mean sensitivity scores for descriptions of the ideal mother were high in each group, suggesting that across groups, mothers' views about sensitivity were consistent with behavioral patterns that are considered indicative of sensitivity by the au-

thors of the MBQS. Thus, the views about sensitive behavior across experts and mothers from different cultural and socioeconomic groups within the Netherlands are more similar than different. This is consistent with the finding by Posada and colleagues (1995) who reported that mothers' descriptions of the ideal child of different sociocultural groups were consistent with behavioral patterns that are considered as indicative of security by U.S. experts.

Other evidence to support our hypothesis was found in the correlations between composite sorts (average sorts) and in the within- and between-sample similarities among mothers' Q-sort descriptions. This study found high correlations between the composite sorts of the different groups. Also, consistent with our prediction, the similarity in descriptions of an ideal sensitive mother within groups was equal to the similarity in description between groups. This finding was the same when a short version of the MBQS by Tarabulsy and colleagues (2009) was used. By using the full and a short version of the MBQS, this study provided evidence for the (cultural) construct validity of both versions. Our findings suggest that, overall, the cultural and socioeconomic groups found the same behaviors important in the description of the ideal sensitive mother. This is in line with the conclusion of the recent literature review, which showed that it is unlikely that cultural factors are responsible for differences in sensitivity between minority and majority mothers (Mesman, Van IJzendoorn, et al., 2012).

It is also notable that the sensitivity profiles of Dutch experts were highly similar to the criterion sort provided by the authors of the MBQS, indicating that Dutch and Canadian experts define optimal sensitive parenting in the same way. Mothers' profiles were also similar to the Dutch experts' profiles, but the convergence within Dutch experts and within mothers was higher than the convergence between mothers and experts.

Responses on only 6 out of 90 items were significantly different between Moroccan, Turkish and Dutch low, middle, and high educated mothers. When the total group of mothers was divided into three groups of low, middle, and high-educated mothers, only 2 out of 90 items showed significantly different responses across groups. In addition, when the total group of mothers was divided into three income groups (low, middle, and high) only 7 out of 90 items were significantly different across groups. Thus, also on item level this study can conclude that the views of mothers on specific behavioral statements about sensitivity were very similar across different cultures and socioeconomic groups.

Although this study found only few differences on item level, there is evidence that there are cultural differences in the specific content or modality of parental responses (Fouts, Roopnarine, Lamb, & Evans, 2012; Kärtner et al., 2008). Our findings suggest that all participating mothers find it important to be responsive to a child's signals, but

the statements of the MBQS leave room for individual differences in the specific content of a mothers' behavior. For example, item 20 "*Responds well when her child is sad*" does not specify the specific content of mothers' response, but only that the child calms down in response to mothers' behavior. However, in Ainsworth's Maternal Sensitivity Scale (Ainsworth, Bell, & Stayton, 1974) is described that the appropriateness of the response should be mainly inferred from the outcome of mothers interventions. Thus, not the content of mother's response but the influence of mother's response on child's behavior is what is most important in maternal sensitivity. This means that parenting behaviors (and beliefs) may vary between persons in terms of the content of a response and that these differences do not necessarily mean that one response is less sensitive than another. The influence of the response on the behavior of the child is what is important in determining whether a response was appropriate (Mesman, Oster, & Camras, 2012).

Although this study found strong overlap between all mothers' and experts' views of the ideal mother, our final analyses revealed that the family income of minority mothers was lower which was in turn predictive of a lower sensitivity belief score. The relation between ethnic background (Dutch versus minority) and sensitivity belief scores was completely mediated by income and not by educational level. This illustrates the importance of including a variety of SES indicators in cross-cultural research. The fact that income is a significant mediator and a more important predictor than educational level seems to support the Family Stress Model (Conger & Donnellan, 2007) that proposes that economic strains lead to family stress, which in turn leads to less optimal parenting behavior (e.g., Berlin et al., 2002; Mistry et al., 2008). Contrary to our hypothesis, our findings suggest that economic strains do not only negatively affect sensitive *behavior*, they also negatively affects parenting *beliefs* about sensitivity. It may be that mothers from a lower socioeconomic background found it harder to separate ideal parenting from real parenting and relied more on their own parenting practices than on their beliefs about what an ideal mother would do, resulting in a view about the ideal mother that was less similar to that of experts. Another possibility is that lower educated mothers made sorting errors because of the complexity of the sorting task, which may also have resulted in views about the ideal mother that were less similar to those of experts. However, since this study found no outlying sensitivity belief scores within the groups, it is unlikely that mothers made many such errors. It is also possible that parents from lower socioeconomic backgrounds indeed have a less optimal view about an ideal mother, for example due to the stress that they experience. They might view their actual parenting behaviors as close to ideal under the present (stressful) circumstances. There is indeed evidence that parenting stress is related to parenting beliefs regarding the importance of sensitivity and

responsiveness (Respler-Herman, Mowder, Yasik, & Shamah, 2012).

To our knowledge, the relation between socioeconomic status, stress, beliefs about sensitivity and sensitive parenting has not yet been investigated. It would be interesting to test a mediating model in which economic strains affect stress and beliefs about sensitivity, which in turn affect sensitive behavior. The interaction of parenting beliefs and behaviors in the prediction of child development also deserves future investigation. For example, sensitive parenting has been found to be related to lower internalizing behavior problems only when mothers did not believe that spoiling a child was harmful (Barnett, Shanahan, Deng, Haskett, & Cox, 2010).

Several limitations of this study should be noted. First, a convenience sample was used and the sample size was small. Convenience sampling could imply a limited representation of the target population. The small sample size may have resulted in limited statistical power to detect interaction effects. For example, the combination of minority status and low socioeconomic status might have a double impact on parenting beliefs, just as they do on parenting practices (McLoyd, 1990; Weis & Toolis, 2008). In addition, the Turkish and Moroccan mothers were not selected on educational level. Since socioeconomic status is such an important factor in explaining between and within group differences, future research should distinguish different groups of socioeconomic status within the ethnic minority groups as well. It is also important to note that we compared different cultures and socioeconomic groups within one country. All minority mothers who were included in the present study were second-generation immigrants or first-generation immigrants who moved to the Netherlands before the age of 11. Minority members who immigrate at a younger age integrate more into the host society than immigrants who arrive at an older age (Martinovic, Tubergen, & Maas, 2009). Although the two minority groups and the Dutch group are viewed as culturally different from each other by themselves and by the other groups (Verkuyten et al., 1996), they have been living in the Netherlands for (almost) all of their lives. They may have maintained the family values and parenting practices of their heritage, but may also have adopted some values from the host society which might explain that their reported views are very similar to those of the majority group. Cross-country comparison of views about the ideal mother is necessary to investigate whether the views of Turkish and Moroccan mothers living in their countries of origin are just as similar to the views of Dutch mothers as the views of the two minority groups were. Furthermore, we only focused on mother's view of the ideal mother. Future research should include fathers as well.

Although the present study has some limitations and more research is necessary, it contributes to the argument that sensitive parenting is perceived as equally important

across groups that vary in cultural background. Our study did not reveal evidence that there are differences in sensitivity beliefs between ethnic groups within a country. Our results are informative for scientists as well as practitioners working with minority families by providing insight in the influence of cultural factors on maternal behavior. Our findings suggest that culture- specific measurement of maternal sensitivity is not required, at least not for cultural groups within the same country or context. This implies that the nature and focus of parenting interventions to promote sensitive parenting can be similar for minority and majority parents. In addition to (or as part of) such interventions, it seems important to try to reduce socioeconomic and other family stressors to improve sensitive parenting. Culture should not be considered as an explanatory factor in parenting behaviors without taking into account the broader socioeconomic context.