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Video observations of sensitivity in context: integrating insights from seven cultural communities

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ABSTRACT

This integrative discussion of the special issue on video observations of sensitive caregiving in different cultural communities provides a reflection on the seven empirical studies that comprise this special issue. The two main aims of this special issue are highlighted in terms of their overall conclusions: (1) video observations can be useful and reliable tools to assess sensitivity in non-Western cultural contexts; (2) caregiver sensitivity can be observed across very different cultural contexts and can be expressed in various culture-specific ways; (3) the Ainsworth sensitivity scale is particularly useful for capturing sensitivity regardless of modality. Further, the limitations of the set of studies as well as opportunities for future research are discussed.

KEYWORDS

Maternal sensitivity; cross-cultural; video observation

The two main aims of this special issue on sensitivity in cultural context were (1) to provide insight into the feasibility of videotaping parents and children in different cultural contexts for the study of sensitive caregiving in early childhood, identifying both obstacles and potential ways to overcome these; (2) to enhance our understanding of the occurrence, nature and role of caregiver sensitive responsiveness to young children being raised in non-Western cultural contexts. Seven empirical studies using video observations of sensitivity in seven different countries and cultural contexts contributed unique information towards these aims. In my role as supervisor of each of these seven studies, training co-authors to code sensitivity, and coding many hours of video myself, I will reflect not only on the results of these studies as presented in the papers, but also on the general experience of collaborative observational studies in such divergent contexts.

Using video to assess sensitivity across cultures

All seven studies confirmed the feasibility of using video observations to assess caregiver sensitivity in diverse cultural contexts. Although there were some exceptions, in most studies there was very little evidence that participants were more uncomfortable with the camera than is typical of Western samples. In fact, the approach of following families for several hours without any instructions regarding their activities – as in the studies in rural Peru and rural Kenya – yielded the most naturalistic video observations in which attention

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for the camera was almost absent and people were clearly just going about their business. This impression was confirmed by the authors who were familiar with these specific communities. The mean levels of sensitivity observed in these two communities with similar observation procedures were quite different, and yielded both within- and between-group variations. The richness of this type of video data, showing the infants in different situations with different caregivers, is immense and probably approaches some of the intensive observation work that Mary Ainsworth conducted both in Uganda (Ainsworth, 1967) and in Baltimore (M.D.S. Ainsworth et al., 1974).

Although even very short observations (even those of just a few minutes) have been shown to also tap into individual variations in sensitivity that are consistent with those found in longer observations (e.g., Joosen et al., 2012), longer observations might yield more ecologically valid and reliable data simply because they can capture a wider variety of interactions across multiple settings that might evoke different levels of sensitivity. One of the cases in Peru clearly illustrates this point. If we had only observed one mother in a free play situation with her child for maybe 15 minutes, we would have rated her as highly sensitive, but following the pair for several hours made it clear that as soon as customers arrived at her home-based shop, she would abruptly abandon the child and leave it crying in a pen until she was finished with the customer. These recurring sudden and complete breaks in interaction were clearly upsetting to the child whose needs were intermittently met with great care or ignored completely (Fourment et al., [this special issue](#)). Similarly, if we had chosen to just observe the Gusii mothers bathing their children, most of them would have received very low sensitivity scores. Apparently, bathing is conducted more like a chore in this community rather than an opportunity for social interaction, whereas other routine mother–child interactions (such as feeding) were much more sensitive and reciprocal in nature.

Of the studies employing shorter and more structured observations, the one conducted in Iran encountered the lowest levels of camera awareness. The studies in Indonesia, Brazil, and South Africa revealed more camera awareness by subgroups of mothers, as evidenced not only by looking at the camera frequently but also expressing insecurity about what to do or trying to make their children “perform” in front of the camera. However, I have also frequently observed these behaviors in short observations in Western samples, such as families in the Netherlands, the USA, or the UK. In typical “free play” sessions of 5 to 10 min, parents commenting on the camera and being filmed are not uncommon, and mothers and fathers often try to elicit certain behaviors (especially smiling in infants) for the benefit of the camera. However, to my knowledge, these behaviors have never been systematically coded in these contexts, and direct comparisons of the frequency of such behaviors in Western versus non-Western countries cannot be made.

Anecdotal observations in the South African study for example, suggest that young mothers in particular seemed anxious in front of the camera (Dawson et al., [this special issue](#)). Racial and educational divides between observer and participant were also felt to be potential sources of camera shyness. In the Indonesian sample, camera awareness seemed to also be expressed in the way that mothers dressed themselves and their children. Some dyads were clearly dressed in their nicest clothes, with mothers also wearing far more makeup than seemed typical for the area. However, in other Indonesian families, mothers and children were very casually dressed and videos included

for example, fathers wearing only shorts taking a nap at the edge of the scene, suggesting little concern about appearances. We do not yet know what distinguishes the first from the second type of family, but this is worth investigating because it might be very relevant to the validity of observations in certain subgroups of families.

The study revealing the most clear influence of the camera was the one conducted in the Yemeni slum areas. The contrast between the video equipment and the living circumstances was by far the largest out of all of the studies in this special issue. The homes of the participants were generally no more than bare rooms with cracked concrete walls and floors and broken windows and a mat or mattress to sit on. The families generally had no furniture and very few possessions on display and no evidence of electricity. This was in contrast to the slum area in Indonesia where all families had furniture, toys, and electrical equipment, including big televisions. Even in rural Kenya and Peru living circumstances were generally characterized by more amenities and presence of electrical equipment and furniture than what was observed in Yemen. Thus, both the visitor (Yemeni, but from a very different social background) and the equipment appeared to be very “alien” to the mothers and children. As noted in the paper by Alsarhi and colleagues (Alsarhi, [Rahma et al.](#), [this special issue](#)), the entire observation situation was un-naturalistic because mothers and children rarely spend time together inside during the day, as children are almost always outside without much adult supervision. And because of the camera, mothers were fully veiled whereas they would normally not be veiled in their homes without male visitors. Interestingly, however, both the native Yemeni coder and myself had no significant trouble coding sensitivity, and intercoder reliability was obtained with relative ease. Further, sensitivity scores in this sample were significantly and meaningfully related to other variables (social support and education), suggesting that the observations did tap into some ecologically valid individual differences in parenting. Nevertheless, investing in alternative settings for video observations in communities like these would be a worthwhile endeavor to increase validity and decrease participant discomfort. Or maybe this is one of those rare contexts in which live observations are actually preferable.

Importantly however, camera-related behavior and sensitivity were unrelated in the studies in which this could be statistically tested or inferred from patterns in the smaller samples. This is reassuring, because individual differences in attention to the presence of the camera itself do not seem to affect the expression of the key parenting variable in this set of studies. In a way this was to be expected based on the notion that sensitivity is thought to be expressed largely at an unconscious and “intuitive” level rather than at a conscious level. Camera awareness might be more likely to correlate with other parenting dimensions such as teaching behavior and discipline. Ideally, assessments of camera awareness would not only be applied to parents (and other caregivers) but also to children. In this set of studies, we did not code camera-related behavior of the children, but there were certainly cases in which the children (including siblings of the target children) appeared more interested in the camera than the adults. In most of these cases their behaviors did not necessarily seem to be very “unnatural” and a typical range of behavioral inhibition was shown across all children. Especially in the Yemeni sample, a few children almost froze in front of the camera and did nothing much except for stare at it. Nothing this extreme was observed in any of the other studies, but there were certainly children who for a little while would just stare before going back to their activities. Making

the rating of camera-related behavior a standard assessment in video observation research would be helpful in furthering our understanding of which family members in which situations appear to be particularly influenced by the presence of a camera and in what ways.

Even though the camera is clearly not an entirely neutral “player” in this type of research, the value of video far outweighed the downsides in this set of studies. First, the fact that intercoder reliability between an expert Western coder (myself) and new coders from the countries in question in these studies was established without significant problems means that (1) the Ainsworth sensitivity construct resonates with people from different cultural backgrounds; (2) the scale can be applied to very different cultural contexts; (3) the reliability of the sensitivity scores is ensured; (4) the analyses and conclusions are replicable. Further, the fact that the project teams could go over the video materials multiple times was a clear advantage over a single observer making notes. During the coding processes in each of these studies, team discussions about the video materials often led to new ideas about important patterns of behavior (like maternal multitasking in rural Peru, and doing chores in Yemen and rural Iran). All videos could then be watched again to identify such patterns. Without video it would have been impossible to add different variables to the observation protocol post hoc. In fact, we are still in the process of noticing new aspects of the videotaped interactions that give rise to new ways of looking at the videos that might lead to new insights not just limited to the sensitivity construct. Further, the discussion and re-viewing of video materials was extremely helpful in noticing more subtle aspects of caregiver–child interactions that tend to be particularly salient for coding sensitive responsiveness in non-Western communities (Mesman et al., 2018).

Sensitivity in cultural context

The second aim of this special issue was to enhance our understanding of the occurrence, nature and role of caregiver sensitive responsiveness to young children in non-Western cultural communities. The approach of the current set of studies was one in which a specific concept taken from one cultural setting is being tested in other settings to examine whether it can be applied to other cultural contexts and whether culture-specific and potentially culture-general aspects of that concept can be identified. This is also known as the etic approach to studying behavior in cultural context and is contrasted with the emic approach that takes each culture as its own starting point (Harris, 1976). The risk of the etic approach is that the use of a predefined concept can lead to tunnel vision and insufficient attention to deviations from the expected behavioral patterns. The advantage is that it guides explorations so that more culture-general patterns can be identified without getting side-tracked by a potential myriad of culture-specific patterns. This special issue employed the etic approach because it explicitly sought to test the applicability of the sensitivity construct to non-Western caregiving behavior. The studies did have some emic qualities as well, by allowing for culture-specific expressions of sensitive parenting without sticking to predefined behavioral patterns (see also Mesman et al., 2018), and adding behaviors to code based on the first viewings of the videos, thus in response to what was encountered rather than a priori.

The seven empirical studies confirmed that sensitive responsiveness can be observed in each of the very different cultural contexts represented in this special issue. Nevertheless, patterns varied between studies. Of course, differences in observation procedures and sample sizes limit direct comparisons of sensitivity across cultural contexts, but a qualitative reflection on the apparent differences is possible. Mean levels of sensitivity were highest in rural Peru with most mothers evaluated as (highly) sensitive. This was observed in a context with access to a network of caregivers, flexible caregiving routines, and habits of multitasking (Fourment et al., [this special issue](#)). These factors in a context of limited socioeconomic resources represent a very interesting new avenue of research into contextual risk and resilience in relation to sensitivity. Sensitivity scores were lowest in the Yemeni slums, which also represented by far the most economically deprived context out of the seven communities in this special issue. Next were the rural Gusii and the mothers in Indonesian slums, where sensitivity scores were on average just in the just-good-enough range. Potentially harsh living circumstances were evident in both communities, but significant within-community variations showed that there are likely to be many other potential factors influencing sensitivity other than the broad socioeconomic context. Indeed, in Indonesia a maternal history of childhood maltreatment (Rahma, Alsarhi, Prevoo, Alink, & Mesman, [this special issue](#)) and among the Kenyan Gusii access to a network of caregivers (Mesman et al., [this special issue](#)) appeared to be relevant variables explaining variations in sensitive responsiveness. Sensitivity scores for mothers in Brazil, South Africa, and Iran were on average in the adequate range. Results in these studies also revealed significant within-sample variations that could be partly explained by sociodemographic variables in Brazil (Ribeiro, Seidl-de-Moura, Fernandes Mendes, & Mesman, [this special issue](#)).

Regarding the nature of sensitivity in the seven communities, different expressions have been observed. In the samples from urban Brazil, urban Indonesia, and urban Iran, sensitivity was expressed in ways rather similar to those commonly observed in Western samples. Verbal exchanges were common, as were face-to-face playful interactions, and these were often the ways in which sensitivity was expressed. Indeed, even though there were clear culture-specific elements to some of these interactions, I found the general experience of coding sensitivity in these videos rather similar to coding sensitivity in Western families. This was quite different in the observations of rural Kenya, rural Peru, rural Iran, and rural/urban Yemen. Here, manifestations of sensitivity were far less verbal (quite a few mothers hardly ever spoke directly to their children), and more physical in nature, similar to what I have previously described regarding rural communities in the Philippines, Congo, and Mali (Mesman et al., 2018). Sensitivity was often subtle, and part of routine caregiving interactions or chores that could easily be missed as being important vehicles for sensitive responsiveness.

In urban South Africa, the pattern was mixed, with some mothers showing a more “Western” pattern with high verbosity and face-to-face play, and others showing very little speech and more physical responsiveness. It may be that these within-group differences relate to the context of mothers’ own upbringing. Many Alexandra slum residents have migrated from rural areas, whereas others have been urban residents since childhood. A rural background may relate to the more non-verbal pattern of sensitive interactions in this sample. This notion is consistent with findings in the study with samples from urban and rural Iran (Asanjarani, Abadi, Ghomi, Woudstra, & Mesman, [this special issue](#)). The two

samples did not appear to differ much regarding sensitivity levels, but were clearly different in the modes of interaction, with rural mothers showing lower levels of verbal expression and warmth during the observations than urban mothers. Thus, the urban-rural distinction may be particularly important to the manifestations of sensitivity rather than the level of sensitive responsiveness.

The Ainsworth Sensitivity scale has proven to be particularly useful for coding sensitivity across cultures and even across infancy up until preschool age. Precisely its general descriptions of child-centered responsiveness make the instrument so valuable for assessing sensitivity in a way that is open to considering different behavioral manifestations relevant in different contexts and at different ages. Whereas many newer instruments include references to specific modalities (like verbal interaction) and/or specific parenting behaviors (such as teaching), the Ainsworth scale does not dictate WHAT it is that a parent should do, but focuses on HOW the parent would do it if they were sensitive. The main point is that every parenting behavior can be done both sensitively and insensitively. In the Western world we may like the idea of a parent teaching a child how to count or playing a game of peekaboo, but these things can be done without regard for the child's interest in the activity, and in a tempo not fitting the child's developmental level, which would make the executing of these activities insensitive. Therefore, making such specific behaviors as teaching and playing part of the definition of sensitivity without explicit reference to how the behavior is done (i.e. sensitively or not) clouds the sensitivity construct, and turns it into a general scale reflecting parenting that is considered appropriate in a Western context. This notion appeared to be applicable to some of the findings in the study in the South African sample (Dawson et al., [this special issue](#)).

Based on this special issue and our experiences with coding the video materials, my co-authors and I contend that herding sheep in rural Iran is not inherently less sensitive than playing with a ball in the park in New York, but that a parent's sensitivity depends on the execution of these activities. Both activities have worthwhile culturally specific and appropriate features in terms of learning opportunities, but parents may vary in the extent to which these are done in a child-centered manner. These reflections re-emphasize the brilliance of Mary Ainsworth's work and likely the influence that her stay in Uganda had on understanding the cultural relativity of specific activities and customs, in contrast to the crucial importance of how parents engage with their children in terms of reading their signals and needs and responding to them promptly and appropriately (Ainsworth, 1967).

Regarding the role of sensitivity in parenting in these different contexts, the main questions that remain open are those of associations with pertinent child outcomes such as attachment security and general social-emotional functioning. Studies aimed at answering these questions are crucial to the interpretation of the meaning of sensitive caregiving in different cultural communities, and our understanding of the universality versus culture-specificity of the sensitivity hypothesis in attachment theory (Mesman, Van IJzendoorn et al., 2016). This hypothesis states that sensitivity serves to instill basic trust that a caregiver can function as a secure base from which to explore and a safe haven to return to when in need of comfort or support, thus fostering secure attachment (Ainsworth et al., 1978).

Cultural reflections

Whereas Mary Ainsworth also conducted extensive (mediated) interviews with the mothers, the studies in this special issue did not include such data (although they have

been collected in some, but not analyzed for these publications). Indeed, more in-depth information about caregivers' own reflections on their parenting goals and strategies can be helpful in the interpretation of observed behaviors, even though we have to be mindful that sensitivity is more in the realm of intuitive than planned parenting behavior (Mesman, 2010). Another strategy that has been suggested is to ask locals to review the videos and reflect on the parenting behaviors. However, this option raises some ethical and validity issues. Most of the communities studied in this special issue are very tight-knit and in several cases quite isolated, which would mean that any local would know the family in question. Their personal relations with the family could easily interfere with their interpretations, either feeling inhibited to disclose sensitive issues, or providing subjective interpretations based on their feelings for the family rather than actual behaviors. And having someone who knows the family provide evaluations of their parenting is ethically questionable in itself.

Another option could be to interview (health care) professionals working in the communities. This might uncover a little bit more "couleur locale" to the interpretations of the video observations. However, for the majority of the communities represented in his special issue, prejudice and discrimination are very real threats to professionals' objectivity regarding these families' parenting skills and practices. Families in slums are often seen as inherently unintelligent and crude, and rural families are seen as backward and superstitious, unfortunately also by those who are meant to support and serve these families. Nevertheless, this is probably not the case for all professionals working in such communities, and in future studies their perspectives would be worthwhile to include.

The strategy we adopted in this special issue mostly relied on the insights of the co-authors who grew up in the countries in question, who were instrumental in crafting the discussion sections in particular. However, in the majority of studies, the co-authors were from the country in question, but not from the region or specific area in question. The likelihood of finding educated scholars who actually grew up in a slum or a remote rural area are realistically rather slim. So even though the authors were knowledgeable about the language and general country-level customs, norms, and values, they themselves were also at times surprised by what they observed in the videos, as they were not intimately familiar with these subcultures. I imagine this would be much the same if I were to visit a family from a traditional fisherman's community in the town of Urk in the Netherlands. Having been born and raised in the Netherlands, I am intimately familiar with the Dutch language and culture, but in practice mostly within the limited demographic in which I grew up. Nevertheless, I would be better equipped to interpret some of their behaviors and interactions than someone from – say – Switzerland, because the broader societal and linguistic context in which they occur are within my expertise. The co-authors on the Gusii paper actually did grow up in the region represented in the study, and they did provide their own local interpretations of the parenting observations. Many of these reflections however went beyond the scope of this special issue, and will need to be addressed elsewhere.

Even though the "local" co-authors were not always intimately familiar with the communities represented in this special issue, they were invaluable to the success of these projects. As outlined in the Introduction to this special issue (Mesman, [this special issue](#)), their ability to access these communities, understand their language, and to a certain extent interpret the observations were clear assets to the studies. The entire

process of these projects was experienced as win-win in the research teams. As a scholar of cross-cultural questions in parenting, I gained access to a wealth of observations from across the globe that have significantly broadened my understanding of salient issues in my research field. My co-authors got the opportunity to be trained in standardized data collection, observation methods, statistical analyses, and academic writing skills, and have access to the international parenting research community, all things that are often difficult to come by in countries with limited scholarly resources and traditions. This approach was not always feasible due to the practical constraints of long-distance training and coding, especially with limited internet access. This is why in one study (the one conducted in Kenya) the standardized coding was done by myself, although always in close communication with the co-authors from that country. As a scholarly community we should be more adamant that models of actual cooperation are adopted when data are collected in non-Western countries, to prevent Western appropriation of knowledge development about non-Western childrearing, and rather stimulate true collaboration and knowledge sharing.

In conclusion

The entire process of several years leading up to the publication of this special issue – from meeting with young scholars from different parts of the world to working closely with them to address some of the most salient scholarly questions on early childhood parenting – has been one of the most rewarding and instructive ones in my scientific career. Each project taught me something new about the nature and expression of sensitivity and its place in daily caregiving in different cultures. And each project has led to a myriad of new questions and new avenues of research to explore. Of course, several studies in this special issue are in fact pilot studies that are particularly suited for hypothesis generation (e.g., S Peru, Kenya, Brazil, Iran) but not necessarily for big definitive conclusions due to their (very) small sample sizes, which precludes (certain) statistical analyses. However, small samples with more extensive observations can be incredibly valuable for generating new ideas that can subsequently be tested in larger samples. Indeed, the richness of the available video materials has led to the design of several larger follow-up studies that will allow for several expansions in scope and depth.

The more I reflect on the different approaches to studying a concept like sensitivity in different cultural context, the more I value the more anthropological methods of extensive naturalistic observations and talking to community members to get to know the context better and facilitate interpretations of those observations, while retaining some standardized assessment methods (such as the Ainsworth scale) as theoretical anchors. This is indeed what we have tried to do in the studies in Peru and Kenya, but a more embedded approach including extensive conversations with locals would certainly have had added value and might have deepened some of the interpretations of the video materials. Recognition of the value of approaches from historically separate fields of study and their integration is a particularly powerful way of reaching new insights and bridging gaps in the literature. Although such bridges can seem beyond reach sometimes when differences rather than common ground are emphasized, they are certainly within our grasp if we want them to be.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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