

## **Parenting and educational aims in a cross cultural perspective: how culture affects early interactions with the child**

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### **Abstract**

I valori e le credenze proprie di una particolare cultura influenzano il modo in cui i comportamenti genitoriali sono espressi: le pratiche educative e relazionali perseguite mostrano delle sensibili variazioni nella loro espressione passando da un contesto culturale a un altro. Gli obiettivi educativi e le modalità con cui essi si sviluppano, aiutano il bambino a adattarsi a un particolare sistema sociale, determinando di conseguenza delle variazioni nelle traiettorie di sviluppo dei bambini dalla nascita all'adolescenza. L'influenza della cultura è evidente già nelle prime attività e interazioni che i genitori mettono in atto con i loro bambini. Il contributo esamina, in una prospettiva ecologica, somiglianze e differenze nelle prime pratiche genitoriali, analizzando le variazioni che possono essere moderate dalla cultura.

**Parole chiave:** Genitorialità, ricerca transdisciplinare, interazioni precoci, stile parentale.

### **Abstract**

Every culture has its own needs, its own conceptions of parenting norms, and its own modes of implementing parenting practices: cultural forces influence the way in which universally-occurring parental behaviors are expressed. Child rearing practices help to prepare an infant to adapt to a social system, and condition the course and eventual outcome of individual development. The differences in the ways in which societies both conceptualize parenting and care for their offspring can be evident from the earliest activities and interactions of parents with their infants. This review examines, in an ecological perspective, similarities and differences in early parental behaviors, by analyzing the variations that may be moderated by culture.

**Keywords:** parenting, cross cultural research, early interactions, parental style.

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## 1. *Foreword*

Parenting and educational practices show variation in their expression from one population to another, are sensitive to population-specific contexts, and are not comprehensible without detailed knowledge of the socially and culturally organized contexts that give them meaning (Bornstein, 1991). The cross-cultural literature provides evidence for wide cultural variations in childhood environments and highlights differences among world cultures in their concepts of childrearing and of what constitutes normal child development (Bornstein, 1991; Bornstein, 1998; Collins, 2000). In light of these results, it is clear that parenthood is made up of differentiated and complex behaviors: to understand the way through which parental style is expressed, we need to encompass cultural variations to avoid false generalizations.

Ethnographic researchers have described international differences in the norms and practices that form childhood environments and in the baseline developmental pathways of children from birth to adolescence (Levine, 2007). Whereas genetic researchers have supported the role of heredity in child development, giving parental influence little importance (e.g., Rowe, 1994), the evidence of cross-cultural research confirms that the expression of heritable traits depends strongly on experience, including specific parental behaviors. There is an interrelated effect between parenting, non-familial influences, and the broader context in which families live (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; 1989; Bronfenbrenner, Ceci, 1994).

Cross-cultural perspectives on parenting have many aims: to compare similarities and differences among childrearing practices, to highlight child development in different countries, to evaluate the bases of adaptive processes in child development, and to evaluate the universality and cultural specificity of psychosocial theories (Collins, 2000).

Adults prepare children for the physical, economic and psychosocial situations that are characteristic of the culture in which they are to survive and thrive (Bornstein, 1991). The caregiver plays an important role in child development through various forms of interaction: he shapes the child's activities as well as the expression of his early development of mental and social competencies. Parenting activities are differentiated, culturally sensitive, and typically characterized by patterns of individualized and differentiated behavior.

In this perspective, Super and Harkness (2002; 2013) have introduced the concept of «developmental niche», as theoretical framework

to analyze child development in the light of cultural influences: the child wellbeing and its growth is influenced by the physical and social settings of living, by the child rearing practices, and by the psychology of the caregivers. These three components interact mutually, in a dynamic movement, and provide information and experiences from which children derive the rules of the culture and build their own social, affective, and cognitive structure.

One of the limit attributes to the cross cultural research is the risk of excessive generalization: compare different cultural contexts is a complex procedure that could create categorizations that do not always reflect the reality. The risk is to treat the cultural contexts as a uniform background, overlooking the intracultural variation presented in each society. The culture variability in the parental behaviors, presents inside a society, represents a meaningful aspect that could be considered and analyzed in order to provide more information and better understand the expression of cultural model of parenting.

For example, some researches have highlighted that one of the aspect that determines intracultural differences in the expression of parental style is the socioeconomic status of the family, suggesting that we could observe variations in parental practices inside the same society, by making a more in deep analysis on the differences in the condition of living of the families (Richman *et al.*, 1992).

Therefore the future direction of the cross culture research should include these two different tendencies: the necessity of find universal characteristics inside a culture, and on the other hand, the need to understand cultural uniqueness. This aim could be reach refining the methodology of research, collecting data on parental practices in a more detailed and systematic way. This is not a simple process, because it requires the convergence of different discipline to build the conceptual framework of analysis, and a combination of different methodological strategies, traditionally associated to different research fields.

## *2. Methodology: how cultural differences in parenting have been studied and analyzed*

Comparative studies on parenting address questions about the origins and early development of the individual, cultural identity, and cross-cultural variation, because the home environment reflects the larger culture in terms of the values, beliefs, and customs it promulgates. Previous

research has evaluated similarities and differences in parenting across cultures through parallel, cross-cultural developmental observations of early child-caregiver interaction in the infant's home (Bornstein, 1991). These studies have compared different cultural settings (e.g., Argentina, France, Israel, Japan, and the USA). A strong methodological structure was at the basis of these core studies. The sociodemographic samples were selected to be roughly equivalent in terms of modernity, urbanity, education, and living standards. The mother and child were observed at home and a videorecorder of naturally occurring mother-infant interaction was made.

Visits were scheduled for a time when the mother and infant were at home alone together. The methodology followed by these studies was ecological, in the sense that the results were obtained by observing mothers and children during everyday family activities. Mothers were encouraged to behave in their usual manner and to disregard the observer's presence insofar as possible. The filmmaker did not talk to the parent or engage with the baby during filming; he attempted to be as unobtrusive as possible. Video records were then coded twice by independent coders using multiple coding systems to assess different parental behaviors and styles (Bornstein, 2009).

Important and substantial differences among cultures emerged from these studies in terms of history, beliefs, and values associated with child rearing and child education. Even with generally similar ultimate goals, these cultures differ in the competencies that parents promote in their children, in the paths parents believe their children should take to achieve success, and in the developmental timetables parents wish their children to follow. Similarities and differences were found in parent behaviors such as caregiver activity, responsiveness, coherence, interaction and language, and play. The results identified both culturally consistent and divergent patterns of parenting (Bornstein, 1994).

### *3. Educational aims expressed in early interaction: similarities and differences in physical contact*

There is widespread agreement that positive parent-child interaction is critical for optimizing developmental outcomes, including social-emotional and cognitive growth. The strengths or vulnerabilities of emotional, behavioral, and cognitive development are established during early development: the early experience of infant life and the environment,

shaped neural development, gene expression and the permanent neural architecture of the infant brain (Weaver, 2009). For this reason, the primary caregivers of an infant, who have a uniquely close and long-term relationship with the child, play a fundamental role in child development.

Several studies have demonstrated that caregiver's responses could affect an infant's long term health and development. Many researchers have analyzed different factors involved in the caregiver-child relationship that have a significant influence on the child's cognitive and emotional development, and social life, such as the caregiver's health or psychological mood (Carter *et al.*, 2001), cognitions when interacting with the infant (Meins *et al.*, 2001), verbal and nonverbal behaviors (Landry, 1997), caregiving skills (Landry, 2006), and sensitivity defined as warm and appropriate responses towards infant signals (Bigelow, Maclean, Proctor, Myatt, Gillis, Power, 2010). Considering these results, it is evident that caregivers exhibit a variety of behaviors, and that these behaviors could influence multiple and different infant outcomes in different ways.

The influence of culture may be evident in these earliest activities and interactions of parents with their infants. Child rearing styles condition the course and eventual outcome of individual development and are driven by the distinctiveness of cultural styles. Experience with substantive parental activities that promote or confirm "attuned" interactions can have a significant impact on child growth and development, almost independent of the frequency with which those activities are carried out. Children may follow different ontogenetic paths if their interactive environments, particularly those which they are exposed to repeatedly, differ even slightly. The patterns established early in life eventuate in mature personalities that are adequately adjusted to the demands of society. In this way, adults help to shape the cultural lives of their children.

One of the early parental behaviors that play an important role in early child development is the caregiver's physical engagement. Physical contact is considered one of the primary forms of attachment behaviors (Bowlby, 1969). In fact, establishing close physical contact with the infant during the early stage of life plays a crucial role in a child's healthy growth. To be rocked, caressed, held, stroked and cuddled is essential for young children because it guarantees the building of a specific tie with the caregiver that assures their survival. Many researchers have underlined the importance of physical contact in human development. For example, Harlow (1958) demonstrated that intimate body contact between mother and infant is fundamental in primary care in primate development. Reite (1990) underlined the importance of touch in the

psychological and physiological growth, arguing that the amount and quality of touch received during infancy affects well-being in adulthood. Hofer (1995) corroborated the physiological regulation function of maternal proximity and contact during the post-birth period in helping the child to regulate his internal state. Feldman (2003) found that early maternal contact positively affects emotion regulation, stress-reactivity, and social and cognitive development in preterm infants.

Moreover, it was found that physical contact plays several functions in the early stages of an infant's life: it enhances the establishment of attachment between mother and child (Bowlby, 1969; Harlow, 1958; 1959); it helps the infant to regulate his internal state (Tronick, 1995); and it influences the development of secure attachments in infants (Anisfeld, 1990). Additionally, physical contact is the first channel of communication between the mother and child. In fact, skin is the first sense organ to develop (Field, 2011) and it is the first way through which the child receives stimulation. It has a positive effect in the development of preterm infants (Korja *et al.*, 2008) by diminishing their distress and by improving the quality of mother-infant interaction (Lerkees, Crockenberg, 2006). The caregiver can establish physical contact with the infant in different ways, and the various sub-types of contact behaviors may affect infant development in unique ways, especially during the first months of life (Field, 2011). Previous studies have identified different forms of physical contact using both global constructs, for example, negative touch versus affectionate touch (Hertenstein, 2002), and more detailed categories of touch, for example, proprioceptive touch, vestibular touch, passive touch, instrumental touch, and firm touch. These sub-types have been used to describe different caregiver styles during interaction with the child.

Physical contact is a universal attachment behavior: in every culture parents touch their infants and maintain physical proximity. But within this universal behavior modality, some aspects are culturally mediated (Keller, 2007; Keller *et al.*, 2009).

Keller (2007) found differences in the amount of physical contact that caregivers directed toward the child between parents from non-Western and Western societies. Caregivers from non-Western farming societies spent more time in close proximity and had more physical contact with their 3- to 4-month-old infants than middle-class Westerners (e.g., Hewlett *et al.*, 2000; Keller *et al.*, 2009). Two different parenting styles regarding the way parents establish physical contact with their infants have been identified proximal and distal (Keller, 2007). The two

styles are related to cultural backgrounds that influence parental behavior differently. The proximal parenting style, characterized by greater proximity and physical contact between caregiver and child, is more frequently observed in more traditional societies (Keller, Lohaus *et al.*, 2004) that stress social relationships, obedience to authority, and hierarchy (Kağitçibaşı, 1996; Keller *et al.*, 2005), and in rural farming families (Keller, 2009) where parents usually practice proximal parenting strategies characterized by high amounts of body contact and body stimulation (Abels *et al.*, 2005; Keller, 2003). This style favors closeness between caregiver and baby and the establishment of a warm relationship, and is related to the early development of compliance in children (Keller, Yovsi *et al.*, 2004). The distal parenting style, characterized by less physical contact and more communication derived from face-to-face contact and the distal senses, is more frequent in Western middle-class families where competition, individual achievement, and self-enhancement are considered important in socialization (Keller, 2007; Keller, Borke, Yovsi, Lohaus, Jensen, 2005). The distal style encourages independence and autonomy in the child through separateness from parents.

The two parenting strategies (proximal and distal) are closely related to the expression of separateness and relatedness, and of heteronomy and autonomy in different cultural models (Kağitçibaşı, 1996). In general, three prototypical cultural models related to different contextual patterns can be identified: (1) the Independence model (in which separateness and autonomy are valued), (2) the Interdependence model (in which relatedness and heteronomy are valued), and 3) the Psychological Interdependence model (in which relatedness and autonomy are valued). These models are related to different contexts: the model of independence characterizes Western urban middle-class families, the model of interdependence characterizes non-Western rural families, and the autonomous related model characterizes urban, educated middle-class families from non-Western societies (Kağitçibaşı, 1996). Keller *et al.* (2009) found that urban, educated middle-class families from Western societies, representing the independent cultural model, express more the distal style of parenting; families with an urban educated lifestyle in a society that holds beliefs especially for family life traditionally oriented towards relatedness, representing the model of autonomous relatedness, express the two styles on a medium level; and rural farming families with little formal education, representing the interdependent cultural model, express a proximal style of parenting. Generally, the results of this study support the idea that parental behaviors and the basic process

of early interactions are part of an evolved, general parenting program that differs according to culture-specific beliefs. The gestures, activities or interactive exchanges show different ways to express communication, through proximity and distance, dependence and autonomy (LeVine, New, 2008).

The way in which parents behave and respond to their infants with variations in physical proximity is a specific function that may be moderated by culture.

Physical proximity is a differentiated, culturally sensitive format of parenting that, in most cases, serves the best interests of infants in that culture. Caregivers follow different cultural scripts in parenting, which have an adaptive value within their specific sociocultural context.

#### *4. Parents in Italian culture*

In Italian culture, social and interactive exchanges play an important role in society and are considered an important parenting goal (Bornstein, Cote, Venuti, 2001). Italian parents pay great attention to the social development of the child (Senese, Poderico, Venuti, 2003) and expect high levels of social maturity (Gandini, Edwards, 2000). Moreover, Italian parents place more importance on the communication aspects of the relationship, and focus more of their attention on their children's language (Senese, Poderico, Venuti, 2003). This domain is considered an important sign of the child's healthy development and progress in this area is generally considered a barometer of normal growth. Parents are probably more prompt to respond to verbal signals from their infant for this reason.

Parents tend to involve the child in family activities and interactions, and they tend to be protective, establishing a warm relationship with the infant (Carugati, Emiliani, Molinari, 1990; Edwards, Gandini, Giovaninni, 1996). These characteristics are also reflected in parent-child interactions. Italians usually spend a great deal of time in dyadic social exchanges with infants and are very focused on social-affective behaviors and on social interaction (Bornstein, Cote, Venuti, 2001). They tend to maintain closer contact with their infants, by touching them, looming or holding and generally staying in closer proximity to them during the day. They are highly proximally/physically contingent to their infants' vocal signals, and respond frequently, altering their proximity to the baby in response to nondistressed vocalizations. The proximal parental



style preferred by Italian parents has the function of establishing close, warm contact with the baby which reinforces the social-affective bond and reflects the emphasis in Italian culture on the affective relationship between mother and child (Bimbi, 1991).

Some studies have hypothesized differences in child rearing practices across regions in Italy (Bombi *et al.*, 2011; Bornstein, Cote, Venuti, 2001): the economic, cultural and social differences between the northern and southern regions of our country, shape parental practices and educational values.

North and South differ in terms of history, culture and beliefs, as well as education, standard of living and income: the North is grew up under the influence of Central Europe with the development of many modern independent urban industrial centers, and founds its economy on trade and on manufacturing activity. On the contrary, the South regions are characterized by a social and economic organization typical of a traditional rural society (Bevilacqua, 1993).

This different social background has had an influence on the psychology, parental attitudes and feelings of the Italians caregivers towards the family and society.

In the south of Italy, children are raised almost exclusively under the maternal care, in a typical rural family organization; mothers are often unemployed, and dedicate most of the time and resources to the management of the family. The family structure is more matriarchal, and mothers are considered the principal caregiver for the children, the figure that contributes more to their education and growth (Sabbadini, 2007). Instead in the central-northern regions, modern and progressive ideas about family are characteristics of urban areas; mothers in most case work, and have to balance the care of the family with the work commitment. For this reason women and men participate equally in family life, and the chain of support is rather being organized around an exclusive parent-child relationship.

In addition, social services and support structures for families are limited in rural areas of southern Italy, on the contrary, in the central urban areas and in northern Italy, a majority of women receiving care (Bevilacqua, 1993).

In line with this social background, some studies have found differences in the social and dyadic interchange between mother and child across different Italian regions. For example Bornstein *et al.* (2001) has found that mothers from the North tend to be more responsive and less controlling than mothers from the south; moreover mothers from the

north usually use more social and communicative exchange during interactions with the child.

Probably the higher engagement of the mothers from the south in the control of the child could be explained through the ethnographic perspective that highlighted the central role played by the mother in controlling the interaction inside the family and outside, in the social exchange with the community (Donati, 1985).

Generally, these results support the idea that parental behaviors are based in an evolved, general parenting program that could differ according to culture-specific beliefs. Moreover we can individuate differences and variation in the expression of parental practices, even inside the same country.

## *5. Conclusion*

Every culture has its own needs, conceptions of parenting norms, and modes of implementing parenting practices. Parental behavior reflects these cultural ideas about parent-infant interaction and the specific goals and aims to be realized when parenting a child. Beyond the similarities, variations in cultural background are reflected in differences in conceptions of parenting norms, educational aims, and modes of implementing parenting practices (Bornstein, 1991).

Parents prepare the child to live in a particular social context, educating him for the physical, economic and psychosocial situations that are characteristic of the culture in which he is to live. Culture-specific patterns of child-rearing can be expected to be adaptive for each specific society's setting and needs (Bronfenbrenner, 1998; Bornstein, 1991).

Variations in child-rearing practices can be observed from the first parent-child interaction in how parents establish early contact with the child; and how caregivers behave and respond with physical engagement to an infant's signals. Parents coming from different countries show some shared parental behaviors, but modulate other behaviors in an adaptive way considering the particular context and also considering cultural background. Common patterns among the behavior of mothers from urban middle-class nuclear families may reflect similarities to the caregiving practices in industrialized and developed societies. These caregivers wish to promote similar general competencies in their offspring, and some appear to do so in similar ways. Structures and processes may manifest and function similarly in different populations, between indi-

viduals, and across cultures. Shared biology or similar environmental or cultural pressures may produce universal structures and processes in individuals. When these universals do not emerge, individual or culturally specific phenomena are typically implicated.

Cultural forces operate to influence how universally-occurring parental behaviors are expressed very early in an infant's life. In this way, cross-cultural research helps to elucidate variations in child-rearing practices related to cultural background, and to understand which processes are expressed in a universal way and which are culturally influenced.

However culture is not a static process that remains the same across the time: it is a dynamic process, in a constant reconstruction and negotiation. Sociocultural transformations affect the context of leaving of the children, and transform the educational systems over time, making the educational issue more dynamic. The social changes contribute to evolve the theories about education, the conceptions and norms of child education, increasing the complexity of the study of parenting in a cross cultural perspective. We should consider for this reason how culture modified its effects across lifespan of the children. In this way we could better understand how parents think, act, and behave, in a variety of context. This information could help to better understand variations in child-rearing practices and in its goals.

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