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Video observations of maternal sensitivity in urban and rural Iran

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ABSTRACT

There is evidence that rural versus urban residence is a salient factor in predicting parenting practices. In what is most likely the very first video-observation study of parenting ever to come out of Iran, mothers and their 18–60-month-old children were observed for 30 min of free interaction at their homes in urban ($n = 11$) and rural ($n = 15$) Iran. None of the mothers made any comments about being filmed, none expressed insecurities about what to do, and only four mothers looked at the camera more than once or twice. Compared to rural mothers, urban mothers showed significantly higher levels of verbal expression, warmth, and doing chores as an activity during the observations. However, this did not translate to significant group differences mothers in sensitivity, non-interference, and general involvement with the child. The discussion focuses on different modalities of expressing sensitivity in urban versus rural mothers in Iran.

KEYWORDS

Maternal sensitivity; Iran; rural versus urban; observation

Introduction

There is evidence that parents in rural areas show less sensitive parenting than parents in urban areas, due to a host of factors including more traditional lifestyle and values and less access to socioeconomic resources (Bornstein et al., 2008). The main aim of the current study is to examine sensitivity in rural and urban Iran to investigate whether these findings generalize to a cultural context that has rarely been represented in parenting research, and how other parenting dimensions relate to sensitive parenting in these areas.

The Islamic Republic of Iran is the second largest country in the Middle East. In terms of population, Iran has one of the highest urban growth rates in the world, but about 25% of its population is still living in rural areas that often do not have access to (globalized) services and resources with regard to education, healthcare, the job market, and communication that are increasingly common in urban Iran. Families in urban Iran are, therefore, more exposed to Western norms of parenting than rural families. In recent years, Iranian society has experienced a significant decrease in fertility rate, now at about 1.8 per woman (Jafari, Pourreza, Vedadhir, Jaafari-pooyan, 2017). This is partly due to government family planning policies aimed at rural families, where fertility rates have dropped from eight to replacement level, virtually eliminating the traditional rural-urban gap in fertility (Salehi-Isfahani, Abbasi-

Shavazi, & Hosseini-Chavoshi, 2010). Similarly, rural-urban disparities in family health have decreased (but have not been eliminated), with improvements in rural infant and maternal mortality rates, and births attended by unskilled personnel (Aghajanian, 1995, 2001). There are only very few studies on parenting in Iran, and most of those are on parenting adolescents and none specifically about sensitive parenting. We discuss the available studies that may at least serve to characterize common parenting practices in Iran. One such study among urban mothers of middle adolescents suggests the authoritarian parenting style to be normative, especially among poorer and less educated mothers (Assadi, Smetana, Shahmansouri, & Mohammadi, 2011). Similarly, corporal punishment is still widely used and endorsed by Iranian parents, and verbal abuse is common (Oveisi et al., 2010). In a study by Oveisi et al. (2010), 80% of the urban mothers used corporal punishment and reported that such punishment is sometimes necessary to raise children. The mothers in this study had very little awareness of the potential negative effects of this parenting practice.

These findings together suggest parenting patterns that do not appear to be consistent with sensitive parenting that is, in essence, child-centered and (implicit) acknowledgment of children's autonomy (Ainsworth, Bell, & Stayton, 1974). However, this information is based on very few studies, none of which have used observational measures and are thus subject to potential social desirability effects (i.e. parents answering questions about parenting in ways that fit perceived cultural expectations). Further, because sensitive caregiving is a versatile construction that may be manifested in different ways depending on cultural context (Mesman et al., 2017), and constellations of parenting dimensions appear to differ across cultures (Deater-Deckard et al., 2011). There is room for sensitivity in the context of predominantly authoritarian parenting practices. Further, given that in Iran boys are generally favored in terms of worth for the family and society (Mahmoudian & Mahmoudiani, 2014), they might receive preferentially (i.e. more sensitive) treatment. On the other hand, boys are also expected to grow up as typical males who are tough and independent, mothers may also treat them more harshly to prepare them for these roles, which would make mothers less sensitive toward boys than toward girls. These competing hypotheses have never been examined in relation to sensitive parenting in Iran before.

The current study, to the best of our knowledge, represents the first video observation study on sensitivity in Iran. We test the following hypotheses: (1) Rural mothers show lower levels of sensitivity than urban mothers; (2) Urban mothers show more Western patterns of parenting than rural mothers, including more involvement, warmth and verbal interaction, and less physical interaction and less chore-based activities; (3) Mothers show equal levels of sensitivity to girls than to boys. Further, studying family relations, especially using videotaping is very uncommon in Iranian society. Iranian people, especially women, are quite private and being videotaped could be seen to violate that privacy. Thus, getting access to families' homes with a video camera might be a challenge, which is why we also evaluate the videotaping process in terms of mothers' behaviors in relation to the camera.

Method

Sample and procedure

A total of 26 mother-child dyads (11 urban, 15 from rural) participated in this study, which took place in the cities of Tehran, Isfahan, and Arak, Sari and Shahrood (urban

areas), and in Kalateh, Natanz, Davudabad, Ahangaran, Khondab and Bastam (rural villages from the same regions). Eligible participants were mothers with a child aged between 18 and 60 months, both without notable physical or mental disabilities. For both rural and urban families, we asked local female students and researchers to help us find eligible participants through personal networks, followed by snowball sampling. Mothers received a general explanation about the study and the reason for being videotaped over the phone, and in more detail in person when they agreed to take part in the study. They were assured of confidentiality and the fact that these data will not be shown or uploaded in any public media. Mothers were asked to sign an informed consent form, which included reasons for the study and giving permission to the researcher to use videos for future academic purposes. The researcher also provided contact information in case they would change their mind and did not want their videos to be used for the study. No withdrawal of consent after participation occurred. Once mothers were on board, they all signed the forms and did not reconsider their decision.

Mothers' age ranged from 21 to 35 years ($M = 28.16$, $SD = 3.88$), children's age ranged from 18 to 60 months ($M = 33.75$, $SD = 11.86$), and families included 1–3 children ($M = 1.68$; $SD = 0.63$). About half of the children were firstborn children (54%) and little under half were female (42%). Only one of the mothers was employed.

Observation procedure

Videotaping took place at the homes of the participants, either inside ($N = 17$) or outside in the family's yard ($N = 7$, all rural) or a nearby park ($N = 2$, both urban). Filming outside was done because some mothers were reluctant about being filmed inside their homes.

The fact that the yard was the place of choice for half of the rural families is probably due to the fact that children spend most of their time outside in these areas which makes that an easy alternative to filming in the home. Mothers and children were videotaped during 30 min of free interaction, after being asked to do something together that they would normally also do together as part of their daily routine. All videos were translated into English by the first author (who is Iranian and has a BA degree in English translation) and were provided in a time-labeled document. The document also included explanations of certain behaviors or statements if the translator felt that this additional information was necessary for understanding the situation or interaction.

Video coding

Coding was done by the last author, who is an expert coder of sensitivity and other aspects of parent–child interactions across cultures, providing training in each of the constructs coded for this study to multicultural teams. Overall, coding did not present any problems, and if any doubts about the meaning of certain behaviors arose, these were discussed with the first author for clarification.

Maternal sensitivity and non-interference

These were coded using the Ainsworth scales of Sensitivity and Non-interference (see Introduction to this special issue).

Maternal warmth

Mothers' warmth as expressed physically (hugs, kisses, caresses, gentle holding), verbally (terms of endearment, praising, expressing love and affection), or with facial expressions (smiling). The warmth was coded on a 5-point scale ranging from 0 = no warmth to 4 = very high warmth (warmth is shown throughout the video and almost the entire interaction is characterized by this warmth).

Involvement

Mothers' involvement with the child was scored based on physical contact, verbal contact, eye contact, or a clear joint activity that did not require those forms of contact but did require some mutual coordination (like cooking together). Involvement was coded on a 5-point scale ranging from 0 = low involvement to 4 = continuous involvement throughout the video.

Maternal physical contact with the child

Mothers' physical contact with the child included touching and holding the focus child, regardless of the quality of the physical contact. Hair brushing and washing the child were also scored as physical contact. The scale included the following scores: 0 = low physical contact (hardly any touching, just a few times and almost all of those are brief), 1 = medium physical contact (up to half of the duration of the video), 2 = high physical contact (physical contact more than half the duration of the video).

Maternal verbal expression

Mothers' verbal expression included talking and whispering that is aimed at the focus child. The expressions were coded on a 3-point scale: 0 = low verbal expression with little talking, 1 = medium verbal expression with regular talking but also some longer silences, 2 = high verbal expression, with few and only very short episodes of not talking.

Interaction focused on chores

Chores include household tasks such as washing, cleaning, tidying, sweeping, folding, etc. This scale was added as a number of mothers decided to ask their children to do chores as the main activity for their interaction with their children. This measurement was coded on a 3-point scale (i.e. 0 = no chores, 1 = some chores, but less than half of the time, 2 = many chores).

Camera-related behavior

The extent to which mothers were observed to be clearly aware of the camera and being filmed was assessed, but descriptively rather than by using the scales described in the Introduction to this special issue.

Results

Before analyzing the quantitative data, we first reflect on the effects of the camera on mothers' behavior. Overall, mothers did seem a little self-conscious at the beginning of videotaping, but the Iranian research team, as well as the Western coder, noted that this decreased quickly and that the use of 30 min observation time (rather than shorter)

Table 1. Results of comparisons between urban and rural mothers.

Variable (range)	Urban M (SD)	Rural M (SD)	T-test results
Sensitivity (1–9)	6.82 (2.14)	6.07 (1.91)	0.94
Non-interference (1–9)	7.18 (2.40)	6.67 (1.59)	0.62
Involvement (0–4)	3.55 (0.69)	3.33 (0.72)	0.75
Physical contact (0–2)	0.73 (0.47)	0.47 (0.52)	1.32
Verbal expression (0–2)	1.27 (0.65)	0.80 (0.41)	2.27*
Warmth (0–4)	2.82 (1.08)	1.67 (1.23)	2.48*
Chores as activity (0–2)	0.09 (0.30)	0.67 (0.82)	2.51*

* $p < .05$

contributed to a more naturalistic end result, especially as the videotaping progressed. This was also evidenced by the observation of camera-related behavior during those 30 min. None of the mothers made any comments about being filmed (to the child, bystanders, or the researchers), none expressed insecurities about what to do, and only four mothers looked at the camera more than once or twice. Overall, the impression is that mothers were quickly comfortable with being filmed and behaved quite naturalistically.

Table 1 shows the scale averages for the urban and rural mothers, as well as the results of *t*-tests conducted to investigate differences between the rural and urban mothers two groups of mothers. There were no significant differences between the urban and rural mothers in sensitivity, non-interference, involvement, and physical contact. Mothers in both groups were scored as (quite) sensitive as reflected in averages between scores 6 and 7 on the Ainsworth scale. Only 3 mothers (2 rural, 1 urban) scored in the insensitive range (scores <5), whereas 13 mothers (5 rural, 8 urban) were scored as (highly) sensitive with scores 7–9. Mothers were also generally unlikely to interfere with their children in an intrusive manner, with averages for non-interference hovering around score 7 (non-interfering). Only 4 mothers (2 rural, 2 urban) scored in the interfering range (scores <5), whereas 15 (8 rural, 7 urban) were scored as (highly) non-interfering with scores 7–9.

Compared to rural mothers, urban mothers did show significantly higher levels of verbal expression, warmth, and doing chores as an activity during the observations. Regarding chores, 7 out of 8 mothers who chose to focus on chores for the child for a significant portion of the observation (scores 1 or 2) were from rural areas. The chores chosen by the rural mothers were mostly related to livestock management, such as feeding livestock, herding sheep into an enclosure, or cutting chicken's tails. Activities chosen by urban mothers were mostly playful or educational, such as reading, drawing, or doing a puzzle.

Sensitivity levels were not different as shown toward boys ($M = 6.33$, $SD = 2.16$) than toward girls ($M = 6.45$, $SD = 1.86$), $t(24) = -0.15$, $p = .88$. Non-interference was also shown equally by mothers of boys ($M = 6.33$, $SD = 1.84$) as by mothers of girls ($M = 7.64$, $SD = 1.91$), $t(24) = -1.76$, $p = .09$. There were no gender differences for any of the other interaction scales mentioned in Table 1 (all $ps > .10$).

Discussion

The current study showed that sensitivity appeared to be rather normative in both rural and urban Iran, with averages in the upper half of the scale and relatively few mothers showing a consistent lack of sensitivity. Even though mothers from urban versus rural

areas in Iran show different patterns of interaction with their young children (more verbal, more warmth, and less chore oriented), this did not result in differences in sensitivity and non-interference. Mothers appeared to be comfortable with being filmed as shown by very little visual or verbal attention to the camera.

Regarding the comparison between urban and rural families, some differences in interaction patterns came to light that appears to reflect a more Western approach to parenting in urban Iran, characterized by high affection, verbal exchange, and playful interaction, as opposed to the more quiet and introverted modes of interaction focused on practical activities found in rural Iran. Globalized urbanization is known to bring certain patterns of originally Western behaviors and lifestyles to non-Western regions (Pizarro, Wei, & Banerjee, 2003). Based on the statistics released on 2013, in urban Iran, 53.29% of the population have access to the internet, which is about 44 million, whereas such exposure is far more limited in rural Iran. Interestingly, however, these stylistic differences in interactions were not reflected in different levels of sensitivity between the regions. As has been argued before, sensitivity can be expressed through a range of different modalities and superficial styles of interaction, depending on the cultural context (Mesman et al., 2017). Sensitivity can be shown just as well during a reading game, as during sheep herding, and it can be shown by smiling and talking, or by physical following and facilitating. The fact that the rural mothers did not show more physical contact with the children than the urban mothers did is probably due to the age of the children (no longer infants who are held a lot) as well as the nature of the activities that required independent locomotion and performance.

The analyses did not reveal differences in sensitivity or non-interference levels as shown by mothers of boys versus mothers of girls. The children may have been too young to receive gender-specific socialization practices. Such differentiation might become more salient in later childhood and adolescence when children's roles in society become more prominent. In addition, gendered parenting tends to show itself in more specific areas of parenting (rather than broad dimensions such as sensitivity) and are expressed mostly in rather subtle ways in response to very specific situations or stimuli rather than routine daily interactions (Mesman et al., 2017).

The study has some limitations that need to be considered. First, the sample sizes of the two subgroups (urban and rural) were small which limits the generalizability and robustness of the results. The mothers who consented to be videotaped were likely to represent a selective group who were culturally open to new experiences. Future studies could provide more groundwork to overcome such selection effects, for example, by conducting focus group discussions with mothers from a variety of backgrounds to figure out what factors might facilitate recruitment for this type of study. Second, we did not collect information on mothers' education or income levels, which precludes the investigation of socioeconomic factors that could be relevant in comparing rural and urban families. This is an important issue, given that poverty is more common in rural areas in Iran (Khosravinedjad, 2012) and parenting practices in general and sensitivity, in particular, have been shown to vary as a function of affluence (Mesman, Van IJzendoorn, & Bakermans-Kranenburg, 2012). Third, only mothers were included in this study, whereas fathers are also important figures in childrearing. Mothers are seen as the main caregivers and also do the bulk of this task in Iran, which does make them an obvious first choice for studying parenting. Nevertheless, fathers in Iran do increasingly

play a role in parenting, especially in urban areas (Simbar, Nahidi, & Ramezankhani, 2010), and non-parental caregivers such as siblings, grandparents, and aunts can also play prominent roles in childrearing. Finally, the videos were only coded by a Western coder who used translations. Although the coder is an expert observer of caregiver–child interactions with extensive experience with videos from many different cultures, it is always preferable to (also) involve local coders to make sure that certain behaviors are not misinterpreted due to a lack of specific cultural knowledge. However, this limitation was to some extent minimized through intensive communication between the coder and the local researcher when certain behaviors or interactions seemed ambiguous or unclear.

In conclusion, considering that to our knowledge this study represents the first video observational study of parenting in Iran, it provides a good starting point for further exploration of the themes addressed here as well as new research questions. Sensitive parenting can be observed using video in both rural and urban Iran, which opens up opportunities for uncovering its (culture-specific) predictors and outcomes that were not addressed in this study. The study strengthens the notion of multiple possible styles of sensitive caregiving that are culturally determined but do not necessarily affect the *levels* of sensitivity. The results emphasize that playing a fun counting game with a child is not inherently more sensitive than cleaning the yard together without much conversation. They serve quite different purposes in terms of the content of socialization efforts that are logically bound to the roles and activities that await children, as they grow older, but are largely independent of the extent to which a caregiver monitors a child's needs and adapts her behavior accordingly. Nevertheless, the stylistic parenting differences between rural and urban regions in Iran do provoke interesting questions about the way that global cultural influences may shape within-country differences in parenting practices.

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