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Video observations of sensitive caregiving "off the beaten track": introduction to the special issue

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ABSTRACT

This introduction to the special issue on video observations of sensitive caregiving in different cultural communities provides a general theoretical and methodological framework for the seven empirical studies that are at the heart of this special issue. It highlights the cross-cultural potential of the sensitivity construct, the importance of research on sensitivity "off the beaten track," the advantages and potential challenges of the use of video in diverse cultural contexts, and the benefits of forming research teams that include local scholars. The paper concludes with an overview of the seven empirical studies of sensitivity in this special issue with video observations from Brazil, Indonesia, Iran, Kenya, Peru, South Africa, and Yemen.

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One of the biggest current challenges of attachment theory is to test its universality claims outside of the (urban) Western world, not just sporadically, but consistently. The starting point of such an endeavor must be to examine whether or not the theory's descriptors of both child and caregiver behavioral patterns can be identified across cultures, and whether or not culture-sensitive reformulations of its basic tenets are needed to capture patterns that look different but might serve the same social developmental functions. This special issue aims to carry on the seminal observation work of infant caregiving by Mary Ainsworth in Uganda (Ainsworth, 1967), incorporating ethnographic as well as more quantitative approaches to early caregiver–child interactions from an attachment perspective in seven cultural contexts, with a special focus on video observations of sensitive responsiveness.

The construct of sensitive caregiving, or sensitivity – defined as a caregiver's ability to notice and respond to a child's signals in a way that fits with the child's needs (Ainsworth, Bell, & Stayton, 1974) – is a particularly important one in attachment research. First, it refers to the part of the caregiving process that precedes actual attachment development and plays a role in predicting individual differences in attachment quality (De Wolff & Van IJzendoorn, 1997; Lucassen et al., 2011). Second, recent ethnographic work suggests that the sensitivity construct can be flexibly interpreted to reflect culture-specific manifestations of sensitive responsiveness, facilitating its use in different cultural contexts (Mesman et al., 2017). Third, there appear to be variations between communities in overall sensitivity levels that are consistent with theories about

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the influence of cultural-contextual characteristics, such as affluence, and the general availability of social-emotional resources (Mesman, Van IJzendoorn, & Sagi-Schwartz, 2016). Fourth, studies of observed sensitive caregiving in Western and non-Western communities have reported significant within-group variations in sensitivity levels that also relate meaningfully to both caregiver and child characteristics (for an overview, see Mesman, Van IJzendoorn et al., 2016).

In the study of caregiving practices in general and sensitivity in particular, observations play an important role (Mesman & Emmen, 2013). Indeed, standardized observations are seen as the gold standard in the assessment of parenting (Haws & Dadds, 2006) as they are able to uncover complex and unconscious behavioral patterns that cannot be measured through self-reports. This is especially true for sensitive parenting given that noticing and interpretation of a child's signals are central to its definition. Logically, a parent, who shows low levels of sensitivity because of a lack of awareness or understanding of a child's signals, is also unaware of their inabilities in these areas (i.e. one can hardly be aware of being unaware). This phenomenon is also known as the Dunning–Kruger effect in the social psychology literature, which describes that lack of competence in certain domains often goes together with a lack of metacognitive ability to realize this incompetence, and even inflated self-evaluations about performance in the domain in question (Kruger & Dunning, 1999). This effect is clearly relevant to sensitivity, emphasizing the need for independent evaluations by trained observers for the reliable assessments of sensitive caregiving. Finally, although many valuable ethnographic studies have been carried out with *in-vivo* observations (including Mary Ainsworth's Uganda study), the use of video allows for multiple reviews of relevant interactions, facilitating more in-depth analyses of multiple behavioral modalities, and discussions between local experts and attachment researchers about the meaning of specific observations. Thus, the current special issue specifically focuses on video observations of sensitivity and provides evaluations of the use of video in different cultural contexts.

The current body of observational research on sensitive caregiving is almost exclusively based on urban Western (middle-class) samples, with some notable exceptions of observational work in other parts of the world, often not only from a more anthropological angle (e.g. the seminal work *Hunter-gatherer childhoods*, edited by Lamb & Hewlett, 2005) but also from a developmental attachment perspective (e.g. Jin, Jacobvitz, Hazen, & Jung, 2012; Liang et al., 2015; Mesman et al., 2017; Tomlinson, Cooper, & Murray, 2005). The predominance of Western middle-class samples is endemic in most areas of research in the behavioral sciences (Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010), but particularly so in subfields using video observations as their major assessment tool. This state of affairs is not surprising, given the many cultural and practical barriers that have to be overcome when conducting a study in which parents and children are videotaped in non-Western communities. Extensive preparation and cultural expertise is needed to access such communities and then establish a working relationship that will allow for data collection in the first place. Further, distrust, fear, and cultural taboos regarding being videotaped are important issues to address and overcome, as well as participants' interpretation of the "assignment" during videotaping and the extent to which their behaviors can be considered at least somewhat naturalistic under these circumstances. No wonder, video-observation studies "off the beaten track" are rare. Nevertheless, it is extremely important that we

continue to attempt such studies and find ways to employ the valuable tool of video observations of parenting in cultural contexts that are sorely underrepresented in the literature to date. This special issue aims to do just that and explicitly evaluates the use of video in a variety of cultures.

The sensitivity construct was developed within the context of attachment theory with its traditional focus on infancy and as such has been mostly studied in early childhood. Although there is no inherent reason to study sensitivity only in relation to young children – indeed, it has been fruitfully studied in samples well into adolescence (e.g. Allen et al., 2003) – there are some reasons to prefer young children for the (cross-cultural) study of sensitivity. First, there is evidence that sensitive caregiving in early childhood has ramifications for child adaptation across developmental stages well into adolescence (e.g. Haltigan, Roisman, & Fraley, 2013), suggesting that for understanding developmental pathways, an early childhood focus is particularly valuable. Second, the study of early childhood has the advantage of minimizing the educational and other institutional influences on the family system. Third, culturally specific socialization goals become increasingly prominent as children get older, and parenting is likely to become more complex because of children's more advanced skills and needs, as well as increased societal involvement. For these reasons, the studies in this special issue all focus on sensitive caregiving in early childhood.

Summarizing, this special issue has two main aims: (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 caregivers' sensitive responsiveness to young children in non-Western cultural. Both aims are represented in each of the empirical papers but have specific features depending on the research context. Each of the seven empirical papers describes experiences with the use of video to assess parent–child interactions in that particular community, as well as substantive insights into sensitive caregiving in a certain cultural context, addressing specific aspects of the sensitivity construct and/or relations with other salient variables. The papers represent samples from impoverished urban areas in Indonesia, Yemen, South Africa, and Brazil and from rural communities in Iran (also urban), Peru, and Kenya. The unique study characteristics are listed in Table 1, and the shared methodological characteristics and goals of the seven empirical studies are highlighted below.

Methodology

It is important to note that the empirical studies described in the separate papers of this special issue were designed more or less independently from each other and thus differ in their specific sample characteristics (apart from geography), observation procedures, and coding methods. The choices made for every individual study were informed by considerations such as local community practices and care systems, programmatic focus of particular research groups, and/or practical issues related to resource access. Nevertheless, the seven studies do share several methodological aspects that represent a common underlying approach to the cross-cultural study of sensitive caregiving.

Table 1. Overview of studies in this special issue.

Paper	Infant age in months	Urban/ Rural	Sample size	Video per infant[a]	Degree of observation structure[b]	Main goals
1. Kenya (Mesman et al.)	7–23	R	9	120	–	Nature of received sensitivity in Gusii community
2. Peru (Fourment et al.)	4–21	R	12	180	–	Nature of sensitivity in indigenous mothers in Peru
3. South Africa (Dawson et al.)	3–15	U	50	20	++	Cultural sensitivity of Ainsworth scale versus MBQS
4. Iran (Asanjarani et al.)	18–60	U/R	26	30	+	Maternal sensitivity in urban versus rural Iran
5. Yemen (Alsarhi et al.)	24–60	U	54	15	+	Validity of sensitivity assessment in veiled mothers
6. Brazil (Ribeiro-Accioly et al.)	2	U	17	15	+	Socio-contextual risk factors and maternal sensitivity
7. Indonesia (Rahma et al.)	24–60	U	98	15	+	Maternal sensitivity and her history of childhood maltreatment

[a]Duration in minutes.
[b]Completely unstructured (–), somewhat structured (+), very structured (++).

Procedures

Working with local partners is crucial to research in different cultural communities for many reasons that have also been emphasized by Mary Ainsworth with regard to her work in Uganda (1967). The empirical studies in this special issue were conducted in teams with researchers from each of the seven countries – and whenever possible even the specific regions – represented in this special issue. Importantly, the local partners were more than assistants, as they were trained scientific partners who were involved in all research phases, from study design to data collection and the writing process. Some as PhD students with scholarships temporarily based in a Western country, but collecting data in their country of origin, and others as researchers living and working locally and collaborating internationally. There are several important advantages of working closely with local researchers. First, there are clear practical advantages to conducting sample recruitment and data collection with people who know the local culture and language. Second, the interpretation of video materials and results is greatly enhanced and deepened by the continuous involvement of local scholars who can provide explanations and information that would be very difficult to generate with Western scholars only. Third, actively involving local scholars as integral members of the research team contributes to local scientific knowledge and skills development and allows for active participation in the international scientific discourse, in scholarly contexts where access to expert training, state-of-the-art research methods, and international publication opportunities is often limited. Fourth, local researchers are more likely to have the necessary networks and knowledge to effectively disseminate research results to local professionals and communities who might benefit from the findings. Although not its primary purpose, this special issue does hope to illustrate the benefits of this approach.

All of the empirical studies in this special issue focus on early childhood, representing children aged 0–6 years old. Four studies focus on infancy with samples up to age 24 months (Brazil, Kenya, Peru, South Africa), and three studies include children from toddlerhood until age 6 years (Indonesia, Iran, Yemen). Sample sizes vary widely, which also reflect differences in goals and duration of observation (see Table 1). The studies described in the empirical papers employ different observational procedures, ranging from relatively short observations (i.e. 15 min per family) to quite extensive ones (up to 3 h per family). Most studies represent relatively naturalistic observations in the sense that caregivers were free to what they did during the videotaping, although some situational constraints were in place in certain studies. This varied from no constraints at all (i.e. following the child around regardless of where they were and who was with them), to some structure (e.g. caregiver and focus child are asked to stay indoors), to high structure (caregiver was given specific tasks). Such procedural issues are discussed in more detail in each of the papers.

Observational methods

All studies in this special issue are tied together by the use of two specific observational coding systems, namely the Ainsworth Sensitivity versus Insensitivity scale (Ainsworth et al., 1974) and a set of scales designed to observe participants' camera-related behavior to assess the possible effects of videotaping on participant behavior. If additional coding methods or other measures were used, these are described in the individual papers.

Ainsworth sensitivity scale

This scale was used in all papers, in some supplemented with Ainsworth's scale of Cooperation versus Interference (Ainsworth et al., 1974). The Ainsworth scale is particularly useful for observing sensitivity across different cultural context as it does not presume specific behavioral manifestations of sensitive caregiving but rather leaves room for variations in how sensitivity is expressed and through which communicative modality (Mesman et al., 2017). As such, the Ainsworth scale can capture a wide range of sensitive responses and does not penalize caregivers for not showing common Western expressions of sensitivity, such as verbal responsiveness and face-to-face positive affect, which are far less common in many non-Western communities. The Ainsworth sensitivity scale has traditionally only been used to assess caregiver behavior toward infants in their first year of life. However, the same characteristics that make these scales so well suited to use across cultures also make it particularly useful for application to older age groups. The basic behavioral descriptions in the scale refer to the general notion of adapting one's behavior to a child's signals without necessarily referring specifically to caregiving behaviors that are limited to infancy. Some descriptions in the scales are particular to infants, but they are all supplementary and function more as examples than as the main coding anchors. Simply taking these out and replacing "B" (for Baby in the original scales) with "child" immediately makes clear that the scale can easily be used for sensitivity toward older children as well.

The Ainsworth sensitivity scale is also traditionally used only to rate mothers' caregiving behavior but has more recently been applied to father observations as well (e.g.

Grossman et al., 2002), and even to sensitivity as provided by an entire caregiving network (Mesman, Minter et al., 2016). This latter version measures what was dubbed "received sensitivity" which reflects the total amount of sensitive responsiveness a particular child receives regardless of the specific caregivers who are doing the responding. Received sensitivity is a particularly useful concept when assessing sensitive caregiving in cultural communities where extensive shared care is the norm and characterized by the presence of multiple caregivers simultaneously (rather than sequentially as in many Western families). The adaptation of the Ainsworth scale to coding received sensitivity was used in the study among the Gusii of Kenya (see Table 1).

Both the Ainsworth sensitivity scale (including the received sensitivity version) and the non-interference scale are rated on 9-point scales (Ainsworth et al., 1974). The sensitivity scale ranges from 1 (highly insensitive) to 9 (highly sensitive). The original cooperation scale ranged from (1) highly interfering to (9) conspicuously cooperative, which left no room for scoring passive parents who are neither interfering or cooperative. The scale was therefore reworded so that it reflects mother's respect for the child's autonomy, and lack of intrusive actions interfering with the child's ongoing activities, resulting in a scale ranging from (1) highly interfering to (9) highly non-interfering.

Camera-related behavior

A second observational measure that ties together all the papers in this special issue is one that consists of three subscales reflecting the extent to which caregivers were observed to be clearly aware of the camera and being filmed. These scales were newly developed to deepen our understanding of the impact of using video on the behaviors of caregivers in different cultural contexts. The exact scales as described below have been used in five out of seven of the empirical studies. In the other two studies (on Iran and Kenya), general impressions of this type of behavior have been included.

Mother looking at the camera. The number of times that a mother was looking at the camera during the video observation was counted. Looking at the camera included behaviors such as mother looking deliberately at the camera as if she was checking something, seeking approval, or wondering what to do. Fleeting glances that were almost unavoidable simply because the camera was in the mother's line of vision were not counted. Looking at the camera was coded according to a 3-point scale; 0 = never or rarely (once or twice, briefly), 1 = several times (3–5 times, mostly briefly), 2 = many times (more than 5 times).

Mother talking about being filmed. Mother talking about being filmed includes mother mentioning to the child or others in the room that the child is being filmed, talking to the camera person about being filmed. In this scale, we also scored instances where mother talks about how long the filming is taking, trying to get the child to do things explicitly for the camera, or worrying about what people (who see the video) will think if the child behaves a certain way. The videos were coded according to a 3-point scale (i.e. 0 = never, 1 = sometimes [once or twice], 2 = several times [more than twice]).

Mother expressing insecurity. Insecurity expressed by the mother included explicitly saying to the research assistant that she did not know what to do, asking what to do

next, or asking whether a certain activity was right or not while being filmed. The expressions were coded in a 3-point scale (i.e. 0 = never, 1 = sometimes [once or twice], 2 = several times [more than twice]).

Outline of the special issue

This special issue is structured to reflect a progression from ethnographic qualitative studies, aimed at describing the nature of sensitivity in specific cultural contexts, to more quantitative studies examining patterns of sensitivity in relation to locally salient social-contextual variables (see also Table 1). The *first paper* is a small-scale ethnographic study with observations of sensitivity among the Gusii of Kenya (Mesman, Basweti, & Misati, this issue), who represent a particularly interesting ethnic group in this regard, as they have previously been described as showing little sensitivity in infant care. Recent insights into non-Western manifestations of sensitivity are applied in this study. The *second paper* also describes a small-scale ethnographic study focusing on two indigenous communities in rural Peru (Fourment, Nóblega, Conde, Nuñez del Prado & Mesman, this issue) who have to our knowledge never been observed from an attachment perspective. Salient themes discussed in relation to sensitivity are networks of caregivers, maternal multitasking, and flexible caregiving routines. The *third paper* addresses the nature of maternal sensitivity in a South African township, comparing Ainsworth sensitivity observations to ratings using the Maternal Behavior Q-sort and analyzing differences in definitions between the two measures to elucidate their relative cultural sensitivity (Dawson, Bain, & Mesman, this issue).

The *fourth paper* examines maternal sensitivity in rural and urban Iran, focusing on behavioral correlates of sensitivity to elucidate differences in modalities of expressing sensitivity across these different regions (Asanjarani, Abadi, Ghomi, & Mesman, this issue). The *fifth paper* describes a unique study in the slums of Yemen, addressing the particularly interesting issue of using video observations to assess sensitivity in mothers who are fully veiled, addressing the validity of such observations in relation to social-contextual variables (Alsarhi, Rahma, Prevoo, Alink, & Mesman, this issue). The *sixth paper* examines predictors maternal sensitivity in an at-risk sample in urban Brazil, focusing on salient contextual variables including socioeconomic factors, unplanned/unwanted pregnancies, presence of father, and onset of prenatal care (Ribeiro-Accioly, Seidl-de-Moura, Mendes, & Mesman, this issue). The *seventh paper* addresses maternal sensitivity in an urban slum in Indonesia, in relation to mothers' own childhood experiences of maltreatment, and current sociodemographic risk factors (Rahma, Alsarhi, Prevoo, Alink, & Mesman, this issue). Further, this special issue includes commentaries by attachment research experts Ross Thompson, Karin Grossmann, and Klaus Grossmann, who provide valuable reflections on these seven papers. Finally, a closing discussion by Judi Mesman will reflect on the conclusions regarding the main aims of this special issue, lessons learned, and remaining challenges in video-observation research on culture and sensitivity.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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