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## Observing sensitivity in slums in Yemen: the veiled challenge

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### ABSTRACT

This study represents the first video observation of parenting practices conducted in Yemen, where filming women is a taboo, and women are generally fully veiled, showing only their eyes, in the presence of strangers. A total of 62 mothers and children (aged 2–6 years) were filmed in their homes for 15 min during free interaction. The mothers' veils were not experienced as hampering the coding of sensitivity. Consistent with the socioeconomically deprived context, average sensitivity levels were low, but over 25% of mothers were rated as (very) sensitive. About half of the mothers elected to have their child do household chores, which in turn was related to lower levels of sensitivity. Observations revealed frequent looking at the camera. Almost half of the mothers verbally expressed insecurity about the videotaping, and a third expressed awareness of being filmed. Interestingly however, these behaviors were unrelated to Ainsworth ratings of maternal sensitivity.

### KEYWORDS

Maternal sensitivity; Yemen; slums; video observation

The country of Yemen provides a particularly interesting cultural context for the video observation of caregiver sensitivity “off the beaten track,” because most women cover their bodies and some cover their faces as part of their culture and religion when they are not only outside their homes but also at home when strangers are visiting. Further, children spend most of their time outside without their mothers (who remain inside) and can thus not easily be filmed in naturalistic dyadic interaction. As part of a larger study on parenting in relation to culture and poverty, the current study examines the feasibility and implications of using video to measure maternal sensitivity in the veiled context of Yemeni slums.

Formerly divided into two nations, North and South Yemen, the Republic of Yemen is located at the southwest tip of the Arabian Peninsula. The two countries united in May, 1990 and became a constitutional republic. The Yemeni population, which is mainly of tribal origin (Fanak, 2016), is predominantly Muslim of whom 70% follow the mainstream Sunni Islam while 30% are Shiite (Armanios, 2004) who follow the Zaidi branch of mainstream Shiism. Family size is the highest among countries in the Middle East and North Africa's regions, with a fertility rate of 6.2 in 2005 (Roudi-Fahimi & Kent, 2007), which needs to be seen in light of the high infant mortality rate standing at 43 deaths per 1000 live births (Ministry of Public Health and Population & Population Central Statistical Organization, 2013), which is substantially higher than elsewhere in the region. Since 2015, Yemen which is already one of the Arab world's poorest countries (ranking 133 out of 169 countries

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in the Human Development Index; UNDP, 2010) has been shattered by civil war. Yemen is now experiencing the world's largest humanitarian crisis where 82% of its population needs humanitarian assistance and protection. The current study took place in slum areas in Taiz Governorate and was conducted before war activities threatened safety in this area as part of a larger study on socioeconomic deprivation and parenting. The informal settlements in Taiz Governorate are characterized by extreme poverty, lack of education, bad housing conditions, overcrowding, poor health, and exclusion from employment opportunities, political representation, and legal and social protections (World Bank, 2006).

In Yemeni culture, the family is the center of life. Like in most Arabic countries, it is through the family institution that religion, social class, and cultural identities are inherited (Barakat, 2005). Consistent with the situation in the Middle East and Northern African regions (Roudi-Fahimi & Kent, 2007), marriage, childbearing, and child rearing in Yemen define life for nearly all women. Nevertheless, little is known so far on the nature of maternal caregiving in this context, because observational studies of parenting in the Arab world are limited and are nonexistent in Yemen. The few studies on parenting in Yemen reported extensive use of corporal punishment (Alyahri & Goodman, 2008), psychological aggression by caregivers such as yelling at the child or calling the child an insulting name (Lansford & Deater-Deckard, 2012), and punishment as parents' main style of discipline (The Higher Council for Motherhood & Childhood, 2004). However, there is also evidence that parenting in Yemen shows mixed and inconsistent patterns of permissive and authoritarian styles, which may be due to the increasing influence of Western culture on the Yemeni tribal system (Dwairy et al., 2006).

The current study represents the first video observation of parenting practices to be conducted in Yemen. It provides a rare opportunity of observing parenting closely in a culture where filming women is a taboo and having a video camera at home to film women is a great challenge. Women are usually less active in the public sphere and cover their bodies and faces when they are outside their homes and specifically when men are around. This includes women putting the veil on also at home if there are men present other than men from the immediate family. Therefore, children are used to seeing their mothers always veiled outside the home and sometimes at home. With that veiled context, many challenges may arise in the observation process of this study. In addition to the main challenge of mothers only showing their eyes in the video observations, it is expected that women will only be filmed at home because it provides them the privacy they need. However, in everyday life, children usually spend a lot of time playing in the streets, rather than in the home. When filming interactions between mothers and children, the challenge is to create settings in the home that do resemble daily life interactions. The goal of this study is to examine the feasibility of assessing maternal sensitivity using video within these constraints and to investigate whether maternal sensitivity scores thus obtained would be meaningfully related to other parenting dimensions and social-economic factors.

## Method

### Sample

Participants were recruited via a local NGO working in the Taiz Governorate slums aiming to achieve social justice through projects that can create equal employment opportunities,

reduce unemployment, and improve living conditions for the poor. An employee of the NGO conducted data collection for this study as part of the NGO's current work in the slums, which meant that when the NGO decided to terminate its own field work for security reasons associated with the current war in Yemen after 2 months of data collection, the study was terminated as well. The NGO recruited local facilitators to help recruit new families. Local facilitators were women from the community who could facilitate the introduction of the NGO and the research project to potential participants. Mothers were informed about the research project and its objectives of learning more about family life and child development in Yemen. Afterwards, mothers were asked for their initial consent. Mothers were included if they had been living in the slum area for at least 6 months and had at least one child between 2 and 6 years of age. The final sample consisted of 62 mother–child dyads (52% girls). The study protocol was approved by the ethics committee of Leiden University.

It proved to be impossible to determine maternal age as most of the mothers did not know how old they were. Mothers did know their children's birth dates. The participating children's mean age was 38.69 months ( $SD = 10.09$ ; range = 24–60 months). Only half of mothers could read and write, and more than half of the mothers (53%) had no education at all, 16% completed only primary school, 26% completed secondary or high school, and 5% had a college degree. The average number of children in the families was 3.19 (range: 1–10). None of the mothers had a job. Three mothers were divorced, 4 were widows, and 55 were married. Out of the two-parent families, 36 fathers (58%) had jobs. In addition, almost half of this sample lived below the minimum standard income, and the rest were just above minimum.

### *Video observation procedure*

The data collector was trained and supervised via distant phone call training by the first author (who is Yemeni). Based on four pilot visits, she commented on and edited the questionnaire and the observational tasks and procedure according to the particular cultural context. Mothers and children were videotaped during a 15-min episode of a daily activity that they usually do together. Mothers covered their bodies with a long black robe called "Belto," their hair with a hijab that is called "Magramah," and a veil that covered their faces. During the video observations, three mothers wore only the robe and the hijab but left their faces uncovered. Due to the high illiteracy rate, the questionnaire was carried out in an interview format. The whole home visit took around 2 h. All participating mothers and their husbands (in the case of two-parent families) signed informed consent forms for their own (mother's) and/or their child's participation in the study and were asked specifically if they agreed with audio and video recording of parts of the home visit. For those who could not read or write, the consent form was read out verbatim and their consent was videotaped. Families were compensated with a small gift of the value of 5 euros. However, in very deprived families, the NGO found it more appropriate to buy food items worth 5 euros as a gift.

### *Video coding*

Mothers' interactions with the focus children were rated for sensitivity using the Ainsworth scales as described in the "Introduction" section to this special issue. The first author (from

Yemen) was trained by the last author, an expert coder of the Ainsworth scales. To determine intercoder reliability, 15 videos were randomly selected and then coded by the first and last author, revealing intercoder reliabilities (intraclass correlations, absolute agreement, single rater) of .84 for sensitivity. In addition, several other scales were used to code the videos as described below.

### *Maternal warmth*

Mothers' warmth was coded as expressed physically (hugs, kisses, caresses, gentle holding), verbally (terms of endearment, praising, expressing love and affection), or with facial expressions (smiling). The smiling had to be directed at/shared with the child; general smiling or smiling at others than the focus child was not scored. It is important to note here that observing smiling of veiled women could be unseen but in some cases it was with difficulty spotted from the mothers' eyes movement and general interaction with child. Warmth was coded on 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). Intercoder reliability was .90.

### *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). Simply doing things side by side without some interaction or mutual coordination was not scored as involvement. Involvement was coded on 5-point scale ranging from 0 = low involvement to 4 = continuous involvement throughout the video. Intercoder reliability was .71.

### *Maternal physical contact with child*

Mothers' physical contact with the child included touching and holding the 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 (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 (more than half the duration of the video). Intercoder reliability was .66.

### *Maternal verbal expression*

Mothers' verbal expression included talking and whispering that was aimed at the child. The expressions were coded on a 3-point scale: 0 = low verbal expression (a few words here and there, or only whispering), 1 = medium verbal expression (regular talking but also silent episodes), 2 = high verbal expression (talking almost throughout the video, with few and generally only very short breaks). Intercoder reliability was .80.

### *Interaction focused on chores*

Chores included 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: 0 = no chores (or only minor brief ones), 1 = some chores (but not as main activity), 2 = many chores (more than half of the video). Intercoder reliability was .76.

### *Camera-related behavior*

The extent to which mothers were observed to be clearly aware of the camera and being filmed was scored by tallying the following behaviors (as also described in the "Introduction" section to this special issue): mother looking at camera, mother talking about being filmed to their children, and mother expressing insecurity about her task-related behaviors (intercoder reliabilities were all  $>.80$ ).

### *Self-report measures*

Social support was measured using a self-report questionnaire focusing on social support mothers receive from family and nonfamily members. The questionnaire contains nine items exploring the emotional and materialistic support received. Each of the questions is answered on a 3-point scale, where the value 1 is defined as "not at all," 2 as "sometimes," and 3 as "always." Maternal education was scored on a 5-point scale. Maternal education was divided into "0 = no education," "1 = primary school," "2 = secondary school," "4 = high school," and "5 = college degree."

## **Results**

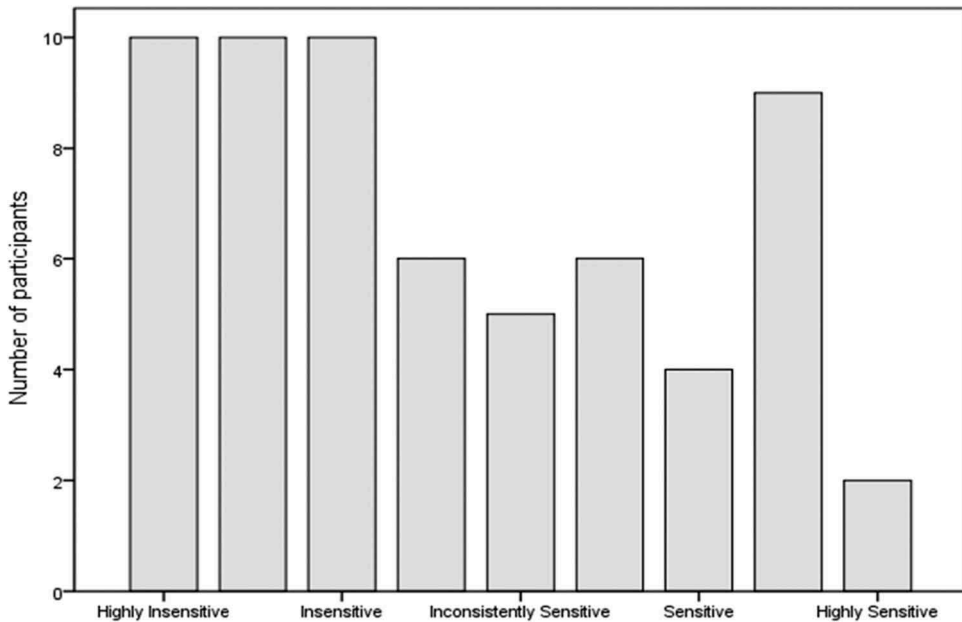
Video data were collected from 62 families as mentioned above. Results not only give information on maternal sensitivity scores of naturalistic interaction between veiled mothers and their children but also present some of the challenges faced in that context.

### *Primary maternal sensitivity results*

The mean score on maternal sensitivity in this sample was  $M = 4.34$  ( $SD = 2.54$ ), which is somewhat below the scale midpoint of 5 on the 9-point Ainsworth scale. On average, mothers in this sample were somewhat more insensitive than sensitive. The distribution of sensitivity scores is presented in [Figure 1](#). Although more than half of the mothers (58%) were indeed (mostly) insensitive to their children's signals, still 15% of the mothers were very sensitive.

### *Additional results*

Mothers were asked to do what they would normally do with their children. Some mothers created an interaction with their children where they chose to play, cook, comb their children's hair, do homework, watch and encourage their children play with other present children, and talk with their children about topics of interest to their children. On the other hand, for some mothers, the task of choosing an activity with their children was a challenge as their children usually play outside the home during the day. To avoid the situation of no interaction, the research assistant suggested some interaction activities based on advice



**Figure 1.** Distribution of maternal sensitivity scores.

from some mothers and community facilitators, including chores like folding clothes, cooking, or playing. This was helpful to some mothers who decided on one suggested activity and performed it as they would do on a daily basis. However, some mothers took those examples as literal instructions even though the example would be something they usually might not do with their children. This was reflected in the awkwardness of the situation during the activity for those mothers and their child alike where activities clearly did not approximate an actual everyday interaction, for example asking children to do things for the purpose of being filmed like in some cases asking children to do multiple chores nonstop during the 15 min. observation. Twenty-one percent of the mothers asked their children to perform chores for more than half of the video while 31% of the mothers suggested some chores but the chores were not the main activity in the video.

In regards to camera behaviors, more than 90% of the mothers looked at the camera during the 15-min interaction videos, 40% expressed insecurity about how well they were doing, and 32% talked about being filmed to their children or asked their children to perform for the camera (e.g. singing, dancing, conversing, etc.). Even though we did not measure child behavior, anecdotally, it was notable that some children were amazed, amused, or entertained by the presence of a video camera at home, some stared or whispered to their mothers, while a small number of children seemed afraid, and froze in front of the camera.

Finally, there were many people present besides the mother and the target child. The number of people present at the location of the video observation apart from the mother and the target child was high ( $M = 6.49$ ,  $SD = 3.43$ ). People present were not only family members (i.e. other children of the mother, her husband, relatives) but also curious neighbors and acquaintances. People present were allowed to stay in the observation location but not in the

scene in front of the camera. This was in line with the wishes of many female relatives and neighbors who did not want to appear in the video. This, however, created some awkwardness for some mothers. In some of the videos, some of the children and adults present gave instruction either to the child or the mother on how they should behave in front of the camera.

### Maternal sensitivity in relation to other behaviors

Regarding relations between sensitivity and other maternal behaviors (Table 1), a positive correlation was found with maternal warmth,  $r(60) = .65, p < .001$ . There were no significant correlations with involvement, physical and verbal interactions ( $-.00 < r < .18, (-.00 < r < .18, ps > .17)$ ). Moreover, the more mothers focused on chores, the less sensitive mothers were,  $r(60) = .41, p < .001$ . Interestingly, none of the camera-related behaviors (looking at the camera, expressing insecurity, talking about being filmed) were significantly correlated with sensitivity ( $ps > .17$ ). Finally, maternal sensitivity was related to higher maternal education  $r(60) = .41, p < .001$ , and higher experienced social support,  $r(60) = .35, p < .001$ . An additional multiple linear regression analysis was performed to predict maternal sensitivity by maternal education and social support. Maternal education and social support both explained a significant proportion of variance in maternal sensitivity,  $R^2 = .23, F(2,59) = 8.60, p < .001$ .

### Discussion

The obtained scores of maternal sensitivity showed significant variation, appeared independent of some of the variables that might be influenced by the video procedure, and showed meaningful relations with other variables. The study results showed that 58% of mothers showed predominantly insensitive behavior. This is in line with the literature on parenting styles in traditional countries such as Yemen tending to be more authoritarian (Dwairy, 2006). However, even though the majority of the mothers were insensitive, there were still individual differences in sensitivity where 34% mothers were predominantly sensitive to their children. A significant proportion of this variation within the sample (23%) could be explained by variations in educational level and social support. This confirms findings in previous studies (Mertesacker, Bade, Haverkock, & Pauli-Pott, 2004; Mesman, Van

**Table 1.** Correlations between sensitivity and other variables.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
Maternal sensitivity	–										
Looking at the camera	–.18	–									
Expressing insecurity	–.17	–.16	–								
Talking to children about being filmed	–.18	.05	.08	–							
Maternal interaction focused on chores	–.41**	.09	.17	.05	–						
Maternal physical contact with child	.14	.26*	–.18	.01	–.36**	–					
Maternal verbal contact with child	–.00	–.18	–.05	.24	.05	.23	–				
Maternal warmth	.65**	–.13	–.08	–.04	–.38**	.33**	.34**	–			
Maternal involvement with child	.18	–.01	–.09	.05	–.06	.40**	.53**	.41**	–		
Maternal education	.41**	–.12	–.04	–.06	–.33**	.09	–.07	.30*	.12	–	
Maternal social support	.35**	.02	–.13	–.01	–.13	.18	.04	.13	–.01	.30*	–

\* $P < .05$ ; \*\* $P < .01$ .



Ijzendoorn, & Bakermans-Kranenburg, 2012) and suggests that the sensitivity observations tapped into meaningful variations in parenting patterns in this sample. This is further corroborated by the nonsignificant correlations between sensitivity and camera-related behaviors, showing that camera shyness did not unduly affect sensitivity scores.

An explanation for the high percentage of insensitive and intrusive mothers in this study lies not only in the socioeconomic deprivation that characterizes this sample but may also be related to the difficult nature of the interaction task. This difficulty could have been created not only by the fact that some mothers do not spend much time together with their children as children often play outside during their day but also by the level of education of the mothers. More than half of the mothers (53%) had no education which made the task instructions difficult to comprehend. Many mothers asked their children to do mainly chores in front of the camera or interacted very little with their children. Therefore, in future studies, naturalistic observation method can be carried out with some practical improvements that can make it more naturalistic in the veiled context. One option could be to change the time of the home visit where children are usually at home. This often takes place in the evening when children are asked by their parents to return home and not play in the street anymore for safety reasons. During this time, many interaction activities take place where the child and the mother are together and interaction is more natural. Also during that time, mothers are usually finished with house work and therefore, more interaction is expected to happen when children are at home with them.

Another option is to rethink of the location of the naturalistic observation as it could vary much whether it is a rural or urban context. In rural areas, filming mother-child interaction could be more naturalistic if carried outside home, for example while a mother and her child are herding sheep, working in a farm or fetching water from wells. In the urban context, the interaction could be at home when a mother is feeding, bathing, or doing homework with her child.

In general, to make the observation as natural as it is in real life, it is advisable to think of ways to help mothers get used to the camera. This could be done by visiting the mothers several days and having the video camera on for longer hours until they forget about its presence and therefore may do more naturalistic things with their children. However, this would require extensive observation time and might also include long episodes of no interaction as children can spend their time away from their mothers outside as they would usually do.

A limitation of this study could be that it did not focus on some children's behaviors which did not resemble a real-life situation. Those behaviors could be due to that fact that some children had not seen a video camera in their lives before and were puzzled when looking at it. Another reason could be that the children treated the camera person and camera as guests and therefore, they needed to show respect and obedience. In the Arabic culture and in the Yemeni one in particular, honoring a guest is a way through which the family earns good reputation (Kotnik, 2005). To preserve this social demand is a task put on the shoulders of every family member including children. As a result of all of that, children may not have interacted naturally with their mothers as they usually would do which might have influenced the way their mothers interacted with them and therefore influenced mothers' sensitivity. Children's behavior in the naturalistic video observation needs to be further studied in the future.

To conclude, this study showed that video observation is feasible in a veiled context and yields meaningful information on individual differences in maternal sensitivity. Studying the impact of different video observation protocols on children's and mothers' behaviors in future research, as well as mothers' religious and cultural beliefs in relation to observed parenting, would be useful to gain more insight into the contextual factors relevant to observing parenting in the traditional Islamic communities.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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