

Cross-cultural study examines maternal attitudes and infant development

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The study looked at the variation in attitudes towards parenting across two samples of participants from different backgrounds, and found that cultural attitudes about parenting seem to relate to infant experience in some ways, but not others. Credit: Holden et al., CC-BY 4.0 (creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

Mothers in the samples from the U.K. and Uganda have different attitudes toward parenting, but while on a group level the experience and development of their infants sometimes aligns with parenting attitudes, surprisingly, it did not always show such variation, according to a new study published this week in the open-access journal *PLOS ONE* by Eve Holden and Katie Slocombe of University of York, U.K., and colleagues.

Early life experiences, including those shaped by parental behaviors, are known to affect infant learning and [development](#). There is considerable cultural variation in parenting practices, which may be underpinned by varying [attitudes](#) toward parenting and [infant development](#). Most studies examining how parenting impacts infant development rely on [attitude](#) questionnaires or observations of [behavior](#) in a single context. It has been unclear whether these attitudes or behavior snapshots are representative of behavior in broader contexts.

In the new work, the researchers studied 53 mother-infant dyads in the U.K. and 44 mother-infant dyads in Uganda. Mothers and their babies were followed for full eight-hour days at five time points, when the infants were 3, 6, 9, 12 and 15 months old. Data about parental attitudes and behaviors were also collected research sessions of up to four hours in participants' homes.

The study revealed that Ugandan mothers had, on average, more relational attitudes toward parenting, whereas U.K. mothers tended to more strongly focus on autonomy. This translated into certain differences in parenting behaviors: Ugandan infants received more distributed caregiving (i.e., more caregivers), more body contact with their mothers, and more proximity to mothers at night. However, attitudes toward specific behaviors did not predict infant experience in all contexts.

Contrary to the researchers' expectations, for instance, Ugandan infants

were not in closer proximity to their mothers during the day, did not have more people in proximity or more partners for [social interaction](#) compared to U.K. infants. Despite the U.K. [mothers'](#) greater focus on self-development, more of the Ugandan infants showed earlier physical development compared to U.K. infants.

The authors describe how "infants' early life environment varies cross-culturally in many important ways," but add that the findings highlight the importance of measuring behavior, rather than extrapolating expected behavior based on attitudes alone.

The authors add, "Most of us know that among our friends and family there can be a lot of variation in attitudes towards parenting—in our study we looked at this across two samples of participants from quite different backgrounds and looked at how attitudes may or may not match up to infant experience and development. We found that cultural attitudes about parenting seem to relate to infant experience in some ways, but not others—this shows the interaction between attitudes and infant experience is quite complicated and there could be many things that influence infant experience beyond parents attitudes."

More information: Maternal attitudes and behaviours differentially shape infant early life experience: A cross cultural study, *PLoS ONE* (2022). [DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0278378](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0278378)

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