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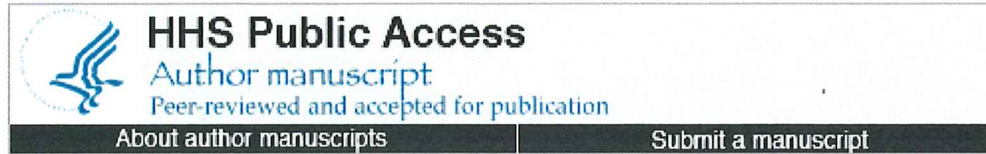


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# Culture, Parenting, and Zero-to-Threes

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## Abstract

Perhaps the most important single thing that a parent does for a child is determine the culture into which that child is born. This essay addresses parenting, culture, and the intersection of the two. The study of parenting in culture is one of similarities and differences in parental cognitions and practices and their meaning. Illustrations are provided for each.

On the basis of detailed observations, Arnold Gesell, America's premier pre-WWII pediatrician, conceptualized motor development in infancy as under biological control. However, Gesell only studied middle-class European American infants. Subsequent research conducted on infants from different cultural groups sharply challenged Gesell's biological determinism. For example, African, Iranian, Dutch, and Balinese infants were observed to differ with respect to the stages and timing of motor development when compared to the middle-class European American infants. Culturally informed research suggests that psychomotor development in infants is not driven exclusively by biological forces but rather is shaped systematically by childrearing practices that vary by culture. When African infants are reared following European American practices, they do not show the motor advances of peers reared using traditional African practices. Even domains of child development under seeming biological control are plastic, within limits, to parenting and culture.

## Parenting

In its most general instrumental sense, parenting is care of the young in preparing them to manage the tasks of life. Parents afford childhood experiences and populate the environments that guide the course and outcome of children's development (Bornstein, 2002, 2006; Collins,

Maccoby, Steinberg, Hetherington, & Bornstein, 2000). During the first 1,000 days of life, more than 100 billion neurons develop and connect to configure brain networks through interactions of genetics, environment, and experience (Couperus & Nelson, 2006). Of course, biological parents contribute directly to the genetic makeup of their children, but parent*ing* is expressed in cognitions and practices. Parents' cognitions are their ideas, knowledge, values, goals, and attitudes and serve many functions; they generate and shape parental behaviors, mediate the effectiveness of parenting, and help to organize parenting (Darling & Steinberg, 1993; Goodnow, 2002; Holden & Buck, 2002; Murphey, 1992; Sigel & McGillicuddy-De Lisi, 2002). Even more salient in the everyday life of young children are parents' practices – the actual environments and experiences parents provide. Most of infants' and young children's worldly stimulation stems directly from interactions they have with parents.

## Culture

However, infants do not grow up, and adults do not parent, in isolation, but in multiple contexts, and one notable context of infant development and parenting is culture (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Culture (however notoriously difficult to define) can be conceived of as distinctive patterns of norms, ideas, values, conventions, behaviors, and symbolic representations about life that are shared by a collection of people, persist over time, guide and regulate daily living, and constitute valued competencies that are communicated by mature members of the social group to new members. Thus, every culture is characterized, and distinguished from other cultures, by deeply rooted and widely acknowledged ideas about how one needs to feel, think, and act as a functioning member of the culture. In essence, cultures prescribe certain beliefs and behaviors in their members and proscribe others. Culture is conveyed along two key currents. First, *thematicity* is the repetition of the same cultural idea across mechanisms and contexts and has special importance as an organizer of behavior (Quinn & Holland, 1987). Second, *normativeness* is the majoritarian prevailing view on some cultural issue. Different cultures possess different beliefs and engage in different behaviors that are normative for them (but are not necessarily normative in another culture). Repeatedly encountering thematic and normative cognitions and practices helps to organize children's development around culturally acceptable values.

Central to a concept of culture, therefore, is the expectation that specific groups possess distinct beliefs and behave in unique ways with respect to their parenting, and culture conditions whether particular caregiving promotes the effective transmission of cultural values (Bornstein & Lansford, 2010). Cultural norms encompass expectations for how parents treat children and how children should behave toward adults as well as the goals for children's socialization. For example, in the United States personal choice is firmly rooted in principles of liberty and freedom, is closely bound up with how individuals conceive of themselves and make sense of their lives, and is a persistent and significant construct in U.S. American parenting. Children of parents who behave in culturally normative ways likely encounter similar values in settings outside the family (e.g., in the community) that reinforce their childrearing experiences.

## Culture, Infant Development, and Parenting

The majority of existing research in infant development and parenting springs from a so-called WEIRD (Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic) cultural database (like Gesell's), and in the past scholars have tended to generalize conclusions about infants and parents without paying adequate attention to circumstances and limitations imposed by culture (Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010). A pervading critique is that, traditionally, research in this field has tended to describe developmental constructs, structures, functions, and processes in accordance with Western ideals (Bornstein 2010; Henrich et al., 2010). However, cross-cultural comparisons show that virtually all aspects of infant development and parenting are informed by culture: Culture influences who, when, and how to care for children, what parents expect of children, and which behaviors parents should encourage and reward or discourage and punish. For example, parenting differs in mothers and fathers (and for girls and boys), and mothers and fathers divide the labor of caregiving and engage children by emphasizing different types of interactions, mothers providing more direct care and fathers serving as playmates and supports (Barnard & Solchany, 2002; Parke, 2002). But different cultures also distribute the responsibilities of parenting in different ways. In some cultures, fathers assume complex and continuing responsibilities for children ("house husbands"); in others, fathers are treated as irrelevant social objects ("honored guests"). Furthermore, many cultures throughout the world, multiple caregiving is the norm, and young children spend large amounts of time with caregivers other than parents, including siblings, non-parental relatives, and non-familial adults. All these "social parents" are entrusted with child caring, the important task of rearing children to be culturally competent mature members of their respective society.

There has emerged, then, definite "need and significance" for an enlarged cultural approach to understanding infant development and parenting (Piaget's, 1966, p.3, words). Descriptively it is invaluable for revealing the full range of infancy and parenting. Studies of infancy and parenting across cultures also furnish a check against an ethnocentric world view of each. Acceptance of findings from any one culture as broadly "normative" of infant development or of parenting is too narrow in scope, and ready generalizations from them to infants or parents at large are misplaced. Comparison across cultures is also valuable because it enhances our appreciation of the processes through which genetics and biology fuse with environment and experience. Awareness of alternative modes of infant development and parenting enhances intelligence of the nature of each.

Throughout history, parents have been informally concerned with how to influence their offspring in desired ways as well as how their neighbors do. The Athenians expressed intense interest in Spartan childrearing practices, and social anthropological inquiry since has often included accounts of child life and caregiving. Notably, the Whitings' *Six Cultures* project incorporated observations of children, interviews with mothers, and ethnographic notes to describe children's early development and parenting practices in India, Japan, Kenya, Mexico, the Philippines, and the United States. From these early ethnographic roots, studies of culture, parenting, and development have grown to occupy an increasingly important position in social and behavioral science. Authors from different lands are uniquely situated to provide faithful so-called "emic" perspectives on child development and parenting in their respective cultures. Javanese adults treasure young children, sometimes for their instrumental value, as guarantors that parents will be cared for in old

age, or because of religious dictum, as values underlying Javanese culture are influenced by the teachings of Islam, which admonishes that children are gifts from God. The Javanese adage places a 3-fold onus on parents—*asih, asah, and asuh*—to love, guide, and care for children.

Generational, social, and media images – culture – of caregiving and childhood play formative roles in generating parenting cognitions and guiding parenting practices. Culture-specific influences on development and parenting begin long before children are born, and they shape fundamental decisions about which behaviors parents should promote in their children and how parents should interact with their children. Cultural variation in infant development and in parenting beliefs and behaviors are impressive, whether observed across societies in different parts of the world or among different ethnic groups in one society. Indeed, having experienced culturally unique patterns of caregiving is a principal reason that individuals in different cultures are who they are and often differ so from one another. Culture helps to construct childhood and parenting, and culture is maintained and transmitted by influencing parental cognitions and shaping parental practices.(Bornstein & Lansford, 2010). For example, European American mothers value individual autonomy, and Puerto Rican mothers value connected interdependence, a contrast that relates to mothers' actual caregiving: Where European American mothers use suggestions and other indirect means to structure their young children's behavior, Puerto Rican mothers use more direct means of command, physical positioning, and restraints (Harwood, Schoelmerich, Schulze, & Gonzalez, 1999).

Parenting embeds cultural models and meanings into basic psychological processes which maintain or transform the culture. Reciprocally, culture expresses and perpetuates itself through socialization and development of the next generation. Parents bring certain cultural proclivities to interactions with their children, and parents interpret even similar characteristics in children within their culture's frame of reference; parents then encourage or discourage characteristics as appropriate or detrimental to adequate functioning within the group. The United States and Japan are both child-centered modern societies with equivalently high standards of living and so forth, but U.S. American and Japanese parents value different childrearing goals which they express in different ways. U.S. American mothers (as suggested) try to promote autonomy, assertiveness, verbal competence, and self-actualization in their young children, whereas traditional Japanese mothers try to promote emotional maturity, self-control, social courtesy, and interdependence in theirs.

In an illustrative cross-cultural study of parenting cognitions, we asked mothers of infants and toddlers in seven cultures (Argentina, Belgium, France, Israel, Italy, Japan, and the United States) to evaluate their own competence, satisfaction, investment, and role balance in parenting and attribute their successes and failures in parenting to ability, effort, mood, parenting task difficulty, or child behavior (Bornstein et al., 1998). Systematic country differences emerged in both self-evaluations and attributions that were consonant with cultural orientations. For example, Argentine mothers rated themselves relatively low in parenting competence and satisfaction and blamed their parenting failures on their lack of ability; their insecurity about mothering appeared to be consistent with the relative lack of social supports, particularly help and advice about childrearing available to them. By contrast, Belgian mothers rated themselves as highly satisfied with their caregiving, which might be expected in light of Belgium's strong childcare supports provided to parents.

In an illustrative cross-cultural study of parenting practices, we recorded, analyzed, and compared mother-infant interactions in 11 countries (Argentina, Belgium, Brazil, Cameroon, France, Israel, Italy, Japan, Kenya, South Korea, and United States). Our aims were to observe mothers and their infants under ecologically valid, natural, and unobtrusive conditions, and so we studied their usual routines in the familiar confines of their own homes. We videorecorded mother-baby dyads and then used mutually exclusive and exhaustive coding systems to comprehensively characterize frequency and duration of six domains of maternal caregiving (nurture, physical, social, didactic, material, and language) and five corresponding domains of infant development (physical, social, exploration, vocalization, and distress communication). One question we asked concerned cultural similarities and differences in base rates of parenting in the six caregiving domains. Mothers in different counties differed in every domain assessed. Moreover, mothers in no one country surpassed mothers in all others in their base rates of parenting domains. The fact that maternal behaviors vary significantly across these settings underscores the role of cultural influence on everyday human experiences, even from the start of life.

The emerging "story" from cultural investigations of infant development and parenting is largely one of similarities and differences in cognitions and practices and their meaning. Some demands on parents are culturally universal. For example, parents in all societies are expected to nurture and protect young children. Other demands vary greatly across cultural groups. For example, the goals for parents in primitive hunter-gather societies differ from those of parents in developed industrialized societies.

## Cultural Differences

Parents in different cultures often possess ideas, approach parenting tasks, and value parenting outcomes differently. They also differ in their opinions about the significance of specific competencies for their children's successful adjustment, in the ages they expect children to reach different milestones or acquire various competencies, and so forth. The contrast between the United States and traditional Japan given earlier illustrates this kind of difference. Parents in different cultures can differ radically in what they value. Parents in most societies speak to babies and rightly see them as comprehending interactive partners long before infants produce language, but parents in some societies think that it is nonsensical to talk to infants before children themselves are capable of speech and so do not speak to them (Dixon, Keefer, Tronick, & Brazelton, 1982; Ochs, 1988; Richman, Miller, & LeVine, 1992). Parents in some cultures believe that play provides important development-promoting experiences and think of infants and young children as interactive partners and play with them; parents in other cultures see play primarily to amuse; and parents in still other cultures do not include play in their job description. Some toddlers everywhere are shy. However, traditional Chinese and Canadian parents think of shyness differently, and their responses to shyness differ and have different consequences. Traditional Chinese mothers have warm and accepting attitudes, whereas Canadian mothers are more punitive. Later in school, shy Chinese children do better academically and are rated more positively by their teachers and peers, in contrast to shy Canadian children who fare worse (Chen, Rubin, & Li, 1995; Chen, Rubin, Li, & Li, 1999). Of course, beliefs do not always map to behaviors directly, but the two coexist in complex ways, and cultural meaning assigned to each is critical.

One set of investigators studied childrearing values in mothers of young children from Greece, Taiwan, and the United States (Tamis-LeMonda, Wang, Koutsouvanou, & Albright, 2002). They identified four broad categories of values: decency (values emphasizing character), proper demeanor (values emphasizing appropriate relatedness and behaviors), self-maximization (values emphasizing the development of self potential and individuality), and sociability/lovingness (values emphasizing affective and social dimensions of relatedness). Cultural differences in all value categories emerged, echoing the unique cultural frameworks of the three societies. Similarly, expected developmental timetables in new mothers in Australia of Australian versus Lebanese heritage differ, showing that culture shapes mothers' expectations of their children's growth much more than other seemingly more immediate factors, such as experiences observing their own children, comparing them to other children, and advice from friends and experts (Goodnow, Cashmore, Cotton, & Knight, 1984). Mothers in rural Thailand do not know that their newborns can see, and often during the day swaddle infants on their backs in a fabric hammock that allows the baby only a narrow slit view of ceiling or sky (Kotchabhakdi, Winichagoon, Smitasiri, Dhanamitta, & Valyasevi, 1987). Indeed, culturally defined beliefs are so powerful that parents sometimes act on them as much as or more than on what their senses tell them about their own children. Parents in Samoa, for example, reportedly think of young children as having an angry and willful character, and, independent of what children might actually say, parents consensually report that their children's first word is *tae*, Samoan for "shit" (Ochs, 1988).

## Cultural Similarities

Much theoretical and empirical emphasis today is placed on cross-cultural differences, but many developmental milestones, parenting strategies, and family processes are also similar across cultures. Thus, some prescriptions and proscriptions are universal and cross cultures; an example might be the requirement for parents (or specified parent surrogates) to nurture and protect children (Bornstein, 2006). Most mothers approve of desirable qualities, such as achievement, and disapprove of undesirable qualities, such as improper demeanor (Ng, Tamis-LeMonda, Godfrey, Hunter, & Yoshikawa, 2012). When African American, Dominican immigrant, and Mexican immigrant mothers in the United States were asked to report the qualities they deem desirable or undesirable in children aged 1, 14, and 24 months, they spontaneously referred to a common set of qualities, including self-maximization and connectedness. In the cross-cultural study of practices referred to earlier, we asked whether relations between parent-provided experiences and behavioral development in young infants are similar or different (Bornstein et al., 2012). Across cultures, mothers and infants show similar attunement and specificity. Mothers who encourage their infants' physical development more have more physically developed infants; mothers who engage infants more socially have infants who pay more attention to them; mothers who encourage their infants more didactically have infants who explore more properties, objects, and events in the environment, as do babies whose mothers outfit their environments in richer ways. Specific correspondences in mother-infant interaction patterns were widespread and similar in different cultural groups.

In the end, all peoples must help young children meet similar developmental tasks (talking, walking), and all peoples (presumably) wish physical health, social adjustment, educational achievement, and economic security for their children, and so they parent in some manifestly similar

ways. These similarities may reflect universals (in the sense of being common) even if they vary in form and the degree to which they are shaped by experience and influenced by culture. Evolutionary thinking appeals to the species-common genome, and the biological heritage of some psychological processes presupposes their universality as do shared historical, social, and economic forces (Harris, 2001; Norenzayan & Heine, 2005). Modernity has witnessed a worldwide pattern of change toward urbanization, media exposure, and Westernization that cumulatively contributes to greater homogeneity and dissolution of traditional cultural patterns. Globalization presents parents today in different cultural groups with many similar socialization issues and challenges. Furthermore, the mechanisms through which parents likely affect children are universal. Social learning theory points to the pervasive roles that conditioning and modeling play as children acquire associations that subsequently form the basis for their culturally constructed selves. By watching or listening to others who are already embedded in the culture, children come to think and act like them. Attachment theorists propose that infants and young children everywhere develop internal working models of social relationships through interactions with their primary caregivers and that these models shape children's future social relationships. With so much contemporary emphasis on identification of differences among peoples, it is easy to forget that nearly all parents regardless of culture seek to lead happy, healthy, fulfilled parenthoods and to rear happy, healthy, fulfilled children.

## Cultural Meaning

The cultural approach to infant development and parenting has as one main goal to evaluate and compare culture-common and culture-specific modes of growth and caregiving. Language illustrates its essential duality. An evolutionary model posits a language instinct from the perspective of an inborn and universal acquisition device (most infants will learn to speak), but diversity of environmental input plays a strong role in the acquisition of every specific language (infants in different language communities learn to speak the language of their community).

A given parenting belief or behavior may have the same effect or different effects in different cultural contexts. Likewise, different parenting beliefs or behaviors may have the same effect or different effects in different cultural contexts. Consider the 2×2 in Figure 1. When the same form, parenting cognition or practice, serves the same function and connotes the same meaning in different cultures, it likely constitutes a *cultural universal*. For example, caregivers in (almost) all cultures routinely adjust their speech to very young children making it simpler and more redundant, presumably to support early language acquisition; child-directed speech constitutes a universal that adults find difficult to suppress. The same parenting cognition or practice can also assume different functions in different cultural contexts. This illustrates their *plasticity*. For example, in some cultures mutual eye contact sets the stage for interpersonal communication and social interaction, but in others mutual eye contact signals disrespect and aggression (Attneave 1987; Trevarthen, 1998; True, Pisani, & Oumar, 2001). Different meanings attached to particular behaviors can cause adjustment problems for children whose parents expect them to behave in one way that is encouraged at home (e.g., avoiding eye contact to show deference and respect) when children find themselves in contexts where adults attach different (sometimes negative) meanings to the same behavior (e.g., appearing disrespectful and unengaged with a teacher at school). Conversely, different parenting cognitions and practices may connote the same meaning or serve

the same function in different cultural contexts, denoting *context specificity*. For example, in some cultural groups parents show affection predominately through their tone of voice, whereas in others parents demonstrate affection physically. In northern India, a mother's peeling an orange for her young child is a sign of deep caring. Different displays serve the same function of making children feel loved, valued, and approved of by parents in their respective cultures. Interrelatedness and autonomy are important in all cultures, but the ways in which parents foster them in children vary as a function of the contrasting values and goals that exist in different cultures (Greenfield, Suzuki, & Rothstein-Fisch, 2006; Morelli & Rothbaum, 2007). In essence, wholesome relationships are central in all cultures, but they can assume different forms as a function of diverging cultural emphases on individuation and accommodation. Finally, when different parenting cognitions or practices serve different functions or meanings in different settings, it is evidence for *cultural specificity*. Cultures differ in the value they place on some different parenting practices that will promote desirable qualities and behaviors in children (Mistry, Chaudhuri, & Dietz, 2003). For example, mothers in China and India emphasize authoritative and authoritarian parenting practices in ways that relate to relative differences in their goals of social and emotional development and family honor (Rao, McHale, & Pearson, 2003).

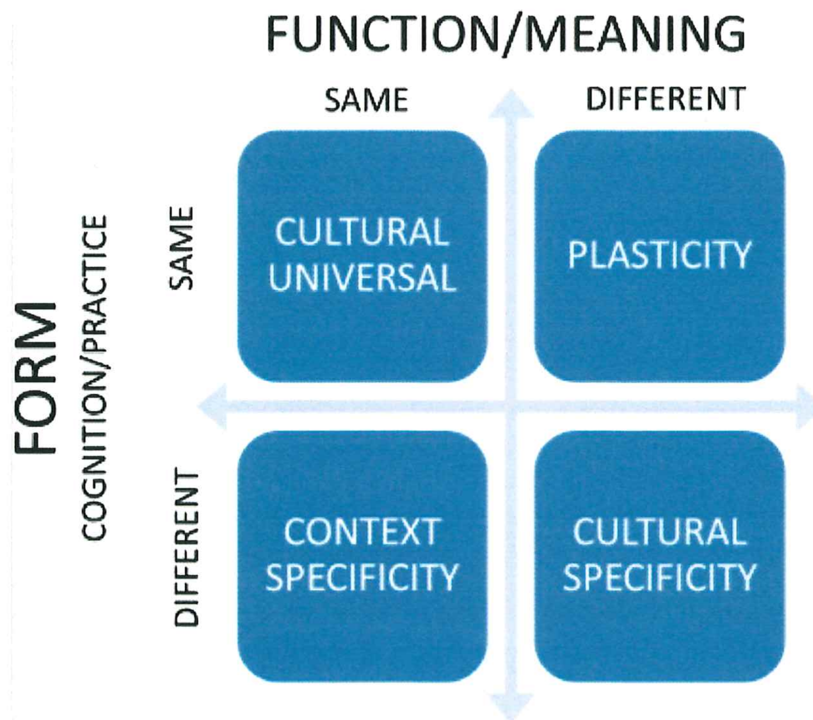


Figure 1

The tradeoff between form in terms of parenting cognition or practice and cultural function or meaning.

Insofar as some systematic universal relations obtain between how people parent and how children develop, the possibility exists for identifying some "best practices" in how to promote positive parenting and child development. Legal cases involving such scenarios sometimes invoke cultural evidence: One judge dismissed a case in which a mother made small cuts on the cheeks of

her two sons to signify that the boys had been initiated into her native tribe (Coleman, 2007; Fischer, 1998). Ear piercing illustrates a parenting practice that is normative in some cultures and that may physically hurt young children in the short-term and permanently alter their appearance; nevertheless, parenting that countenances ear piercing is not defined as abusive, and there is no presumption that it has long-term negative effects on children's physical and mental health.

In brief, understanding parenting cognitions and practices and their meaning requires situating them in their cultural context (Bornstein, 1995). Culture informs not only about quantitative aspects but also about the qualitative meaning of parents' beliefs and behaviors. One of the most powerful moderators of the impact of experience on children's development is the cultural context in which the experience occurs. Context gives meaning to a belief or behavior. Thus, the same attitude or action may yield different outcomes in different cultural contexts because it assumes a different meaning in each. Understanding culture augments understanding the mechanisms of parenting by demonstrating the roles of cognitions and practices that are influenced by culture.

## Conclusions

Parenting is a blend of intuition and tuition. Parents sometimes act on their intuitions about caregiving. For example, almost everywhere parents speak to their infants even though they know that babies cannot yet understand language. However, parents also acquire understandings of what it is to parent effectively by living in a culture. Parents in different cultures receive many different kinds of guidance about how to rear children properly, whether by direct training, example of their own parents, as suggestions from family and friends, or through books of advice. Insofar as parents belong to a culture and subscribe to particular conventions of that culture, they likely follow prevailing "cultural scripts" in childrearing.

The cultural study of infant development and parenting might be beneficially understood in a framework of necessary versus desirable demands. A necessary demand is that infants and parents communicate with one another. Normal interaction and children's healthy mental and socioemotional development depend on it. Not unexpectedly, communication appears to be a universal aspect of parenting and infant development. A desirable demand is that infants and parents communicate in certain ways adapted and faithful to their cultural context. Cultural studies tell us about infants' and parents' mutual adjustments in terms of universally necessary and contextually desirable demands. Neither parenting nor children's development occurs in a vacuum: Both emerge and grow in a medium of culture.

Cultural variation in childrearing philosophies, values, and beliefs mediates differences in childrearing practices. So, parents in different cultures may structure environments, make experiences of one sort or another available, and interpret the meaning, usefulness, and so forth of different aspects of their environments differentially based on their culture. In what may be called the "standard model," cultural expectations regarding what is acceptable and what is not shape parents' caregiving cognitions that in turn shape their childrearing practices and ultimately children's experiences and development (Figure 2).

Figure 2

The Standard Model

Parents of each generation are charged with the particular and continuing task to enculturate the next generation, that is to prepare it for the physical, economic, and psychosocial situations that are characteristic of their culture. This is an exciting time for cultural studies of infant development and parenting. Researchers are no longer satisfied simply to document exotic cultural differences. Instead, research is increasingly focused on when and why links between parenting cognitions and practices and children's development are culturally general versus culturally specific as well as which aspects of culture moderate parenting cognitions and practices, how they do, and how they shape development from infancy.

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## Biography

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