Cultural manifestations of infant caregiving

Lee, Albert

2019

Lee, A. (2019). Cultural manifestations of infant caregiving. *Parenting: Science and Practice*, 19(1-2), 130-132. doi:10.1080/15295192.2019.1556018

<https://hdl.handle.net/10356/144877>

<https://doi.org/10.1080/15295192.2019.1556018>

This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in *Parenting: Science and Practice* on 01 Feb 2019, available online:
<http://www.tandfonline.com/10.1080/15295192.2019.1556018>.

Downloaded on 26 Apr 2023 21:38:36 SGT

Abstract

Hechler et al. (2018) showed that prenatal behaviors predict the quality of postnatal caregiving practices. Adding to their arguments and findings, the present commentary discusses the possible role of culture in caregiving. Considerations of cultural norms, ideologies, and values may take the scientific understanding of infant caregiving to a new stage.

Cultural Manifestations of Infant Caregiving

Hechler et al. (2018) showed that prenatal behaviors predict the quality of some forms of postnatal caregiving practices. By extending investigations to the prenatal domain, this research has colored the developmental science of parental caregiving with a more comprehensive look and, thus, is interesting and important in its own right. The present commentary aims to complement this work with considerations of cultural diversity and, in particular, how parental norms, ideologies, and values across cultures may manifest in the relationships between prenatal and postnatal caregiving behaviors of infants.

There is ample evidence that cultures differ markedly in the way people construe the self (e.g., independence vs. interdependence construal of the self; Markus & Kitayama, 1991) and the bigger social contexts in which they are embedded (e.g., individualism vs. collectivism; Triandis, 1995). For decades, both accounts have provided a theoretically coherent ground for a host of psychological, emotional, and behavioral differences across cultural groups, from basic mental processes such as categorizations and allocation of attention all the way to complex social phenomena such as the sense of self, assumptions of responsibilities, morality, familial values, parenting styles, and more. This body of literature, typically grounded in comparisons between populations in the East (e.g., Chinese, Japanese, Koreans) and West (e.g., Americans, Australians, Canadians), leads one to speculate if caregiving of infants is no exception.

So what may be the theoretical junctures where caregiving of infants meets culture? If caregiving of elderly provided any clue, past studies have shown that daughters and sons in collectivist societies (vs. individualistic societies) would take care of their parents with greater support from their relatives and close friends, as opposed to placing all responsibilities on their own shoulders (Knight et al., 2002). Such differences are commonly attributed to norms and

ideologies across cultures: Distinct from the emphasis on independence and individualism in Western cultures, non-Western cultures are more interdependent in nature with a stronger emphasis on the pursuit of collective goals and sharing of responsibilities among in-group members. Likewise, filial values in Asian cultures mandate that the caregiver role of parents should be taken by the oldest son of the family and his wife (e.g., Lee & Sung, 1998), a practice far less common in many Western cultures whereby caregiving responsibilities are expected to be distributed fairly among siblings upon consent. If these findings are any sources of insight into parental caregiving, it is that the quality of postnatal support received by a child is predicted not only by the behaviors of mothers and fathers, but also by the strength of their interpersonal bonds with in-group members (e.g., whether the parents are in cordial terms with their parents, siblings, and friends, at least enough for them to help out with caregiving). More broadly, these findings also lead to the fundamental question of whether the term “parental caregiving” would take on a whole different meaning in collectivist societies simply because in these cultures, key aspects of parental responsibilities are not necessarily fulfilled by the parents but their closed ones.

Suppose it is true that the quality of postnatal caregiving is indeed driven not only by the mothers and fathers but also by their in-group members, at least in some cultures. If so, what implications does it have for the links between prenatal and postnatal caregiving, as Hechler et al. (2018) have shown? Do one’s prenatal caregiving skills matter as much if, let say, one’s parents and close friends are experts in soothing crying infants? The answer may be yes and no to the extent that the proposed cultural diversity argument holds. Digging deeper, would the quality of interpersonal network be another key predictor of postnatal caregiving, but more so for some cultural groups and less so for others depending on their construals of the self? Recognition

1
2
3 of one's deficits in infant caregiving can be emotionally devastating for parents but again, would
4
5 a different pattern emerge if culture and interpersonal network were taken into account? Adding
6
7 to Hechler et al. (2018) discussion on generalizability, empirical data for or against these
8
9 speculations can strengthen the theoretical links between research on caregiving and culture and
10
11 take our understanding of prenatal and postnatal caregiving to a new stage.
12
13
14
15
16
17
18
19
20
21
22
23
24
25
26
27
28
29
30
31
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39
40
41
42
43
44
45
46
47
48
49
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

References

Hechler, C., Beijers, R., Riksen-Walraven, M., & de Weerth, C. (2018). Prenatal predictors of postnatal quality of caregiving behaviour in mothers and fathers. *Parenting: Science and Practice, 18*(4), XXX-XXX.

Knight, B. G., Robinson, G. S., Crystal, V., Flynn Longmire, C. V., Chun, M., Nakao, K., & Kim, J (2002). Cross cultural issues in caregiving for dementia: Do familism values reduce burden and distress? *Ageing International, 27*, 70-93.

Lee, Y-R, & Sung, K-T (1998). Cultural influences on caregiving burden: Cases of Koreans and Americans. *The International Journal of Aging and Human Development, 46*(2), 125-141.

Markus, H. R., & Kitayama, S. (1991). Culture and the self: Implications for cognition, emotion, and motivation. *Psychological Review, 98*(2), 224-253.

Triandis, H. C. (1995). *Individualism and collectivism*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.