

# Commentary: Recognizing our similarities and celebrating our differences – parenting across cultures as a lens toward social justice and equity

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Lansford (2022) has aptly and eloquently reviewed the vast scholarly research on cross-cultural parenting, situating parents in a cultural context; grounding the literature firmly in classic theoretical frameworks to assess universals and culture-specific behaviors; and highlighting the mechanisms that might explain cross-cultural similarities in the associations between parenting and child outcomes. Lansford concludes that similarities in parenting norms and behaviors across cultures reflect universally adaptive behaviors for children's development and that culture-specific differences are due largely to environmental constraints and affordances as well as cultural norms for expected behavior. This is an exemplar review that tells a clear story of what we have learned from the decades of research on this topic and lays the foundation for future scholarship. Specially compelling is Lansford's argument that we need to take stock of what we know about cultural variation in parenting and conduct more of this type of research because most of the literature on parenting does not represent the parenting practices of an increasingly diverse population. In this commentary, I provide some context for the value and potential pitfalls of cross-cultural research; discuss the importance of theoretically-driven research; discuss the benefits of cross-cultural research; and conclude with some ideas for future investigations.

## Contextualizing cross-cultural parenting research

Lansford (2021) argues that developmental scientists' increased interest in conducting cross-cultural parenting research is firmly rooted in two important trends. First, the science of parenting, based mostly on white western middle-class families (mostly mothers, my emphasis), standardized norms and expectations of select families at the exclusion of other ways of rearing happy and successful children. Second, given the increased cultural diversity within countries, our science of parenting that privileges white families seems biased, at best. Lansford points out that we have established normative and optimal trajectories of child development with research conducted with less than 10% of the world's population. Our beliefs about what is normative and optimal are

then based on research conducted with a fraction of the world's population, yet researchers conclude that these developmental trajectories are the same worldwide. The United States is projected to become a majority-minority nation by 2045, suggesting that we need to question our assumptions about the universality of existing findings and conduct research that reflects the actual diversity of children's and family's experiences.

Additionally, the current cross-cultural research does not include fathers and other caregivers such as grandparents or same-sex partners. We have built a science of parenting mostly based on mothering behaviors. Over the last couple of decades, we have made great progress in studying fathers and including them in studies of children's development, but still fathers are not fully integrated into the science of parenting proper. This is especially salient for ethnic minority fathers in low-income communities. In this regard, we have a long way to go. Comparisons between low-income families from different countries are also largely absent from current cross-cultural research. For example, comparing parenting practices of economically vulnerable families in the United States, with economically vulnerable families in Germany, is rarely if ever done. Comparing these families across societies might shed light on the universality of parenting in resource-limited conditions to uncover resilience and coping mechanisms across cultural groups. It would be informative to learn the mechanisms of resilience of poor families across different societies.

Like much of the literature on parenting conducted within cultures, cross-cultural research has focused primarily on white middle-class families, comparing, for example, middle-class British families with middle-class US families. This work has inadvertently strengthened our belief system that the parenting practices and norms and values of middle-class families, across cultural groups, are normative and optimal. Implicitly, this work has signaled that the parenting practices and behaviors of non-white, non-middle-class families are deficient or not conducive to children's growth and development. Consequently, there is a disproportionate amount of research on non-white, low-income families, the goal of which is to identify stressors or adverse conditions

that contribute to parenting behaviors that are a priori defined as non-normative and non-optimal. There is a parallel lack of research on low-income white families or middle-class black families that would allow researchers to disentangle the effects of race and class on parenting and that would challenge assumptions about which parenting practices, norms, and values are actually normative or optimal for children's development.

By focusing almost exclusively on the adversity and challenges of ethnic minority families, we indirectly devalue parenting norms and behaviors of non-white families and thus perpetuate negative stereotypes of non-white parents (Cabrera, 2012). Keeping these truths in mind, we need cross-cultural research that includes more non-western countries, but we also need research that includes fathers and other caregivers as well as low-income ethnic minority families across countries to better understand both the normative range of parenting behaviors and the challenges. Only when we have a better understanding of the full range of parenting behaviors across and within countries, can we better understand the multiple ways in which positive parenting across class and ethnicity can be linked to children's development.

Being mindful that the term culture encompasses everything one does and experiences, Lansford's review begins with a careful definition of the term culture. The exact meaning of the term "culture" has been debated in one way or another since the 1950s (Kroeber & Kluckhohn, 1952). More recently the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) (2002) described culture as: '... the set of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features of society or a social group, and that it encompasses, in addition to art and literature, lifestyles, ways of living together, value systems, traditions and beliefs'. Lansford makes two overlapping points. First, culture is defined as a constellation of beliefs, norms, and behaviors that drive cultural variation in parenting behaviors both within and between cultural groups. Parent's cognitions and behaviors regulate their day-to-day parenting and so shape how they care for their children (Bornstein & Lansford, 2010; Harkness et al., 2007). Second, culture is dynamic. The evolution of cultural norms, beliefs, and behaviors reflect individuals' (and groups') adaptation to changing environments and environmental changes responding to changing individuals/groups. However, the dynamic nature of culture has posed great challenges for scholars interested in measuring and assessing what aspects of culture stay the same and what aspects change more rapidly for which groups and under what conditions. This is evident in Lansford's examples of form and function. One can easily imagine a scenario where the form (e.g., smartphone use to monitor children's behaviors) becomes the function (e.g., ability to quickly

communicate) and vice versa in response to a particular phenomenon.

The motivation for a culturally richer understanding of parenting underlies most of the research reviewed in Lansford's article. Lansford addresses a set of key research questions: What is normative parenting in particular cultural groups and how does it vary with culture? What are the sources of cultural variation in parenting norms, values, and behaviors? How is culture reflected in parenting cognitions and practices of parenting? In cross-cultural studies of parenting, participants from different cultural or subcultural groups are observed, tested, and compared on some aspect (or aspects) of parenting. Given that culture is dynamic and involves beliefs, norms, and behaviors, the study of whether and why some behaviors are *universal* and shared across cultures, whereas others are *specific* to particular cultures is complex in at least two ways. First, even within a particular cultural group, there are many subcultural groups with corresponding differences in geography, and norms and beliefs, so *selection of subcultural groups* is important as the selected subcultural group may or may not represent the entire cultural group. Second, deciding *when* to compare cultural groups is important. As is evident from the studies Lansford reviews, most cross-cultural research commonly involves comparison of *one* cultural behavior, norm, or belief of a particular group at one particular point in time. Because cultures change over time, most cross-cultural comparisons should not assume that the selected behavior for study at one point in time will be the same behavior across time, but rather consider that behaviors are embedded in particular time frames (and sometimes particular place foci) for each culture. For example, the bulk of the studies on Latinx men assume that *machismo*, typically defined as an exaggerated pride in masculinity and perceived as power, is an indelible trait of Latinx fathers. But this narrative is based on studies conducted in the 1980s and 1990s that did not often consider contextual factors such as social class, immigration status, among others, that might have contributed to that view. Today, dramatic demographic shifts in family composition as well as changes in the sociocultural context of families have changed men's and women's views about family life, thus *machismo* may or may not be the most prevalent and adaptive belief system for contemporary Latinx parents. The point is that assuming that a cultural belief such as *machismo* that may have been normative in the 1980s is also normative today is misguided and just reinforces stereotypes. Third, parenting behaviors are often intercorrelated and, by focusing on only one (e.g., sensitivity), researchers might miss the ways in which correlated features of parenting (e.g., cognitive stimulation) shape that parenting behavior. Correlated patterns of parenting behaviors might be different in different cultural settings and might

account for cultural differences in parenting practices. These are important issues that should be addressed in future research.

### Theoretically-driven cross-parental research

It is especially useful to the field that Lansford (2021) describes in some detail the theoretical grounding of cross-cultural research on parents. These ecological models Lansford describes offer a useful frame for the breadth of studies she reviews. It was also particularly important to offer a mechanism to help explain a body of research that is not characterized by a cohesive framework. In essence, cultural-ecological models situate parent-child interactions in nested environments that include proximal (e.g., neighborhoods) and distal (e.g., beliefs, norms, laws) contexts that influence parent-child interactions. This framing is important to understand how cultural norms, beliefs, and behaviors get transmitted and communicated across generations through parents' behaviors and practices. For example, we could assess the 'developmental niche' of children growing up in the Midwest in the United States and compare this with the developmental niches of children growing up in Turkey. Theoretically, we might expect similarities and differences that account for observed differences in child outcomes. Children in different ecologies may nevertheless reach similar goals around citizenship, degree of socialization, and acting as cultural ambassadors.

Lansford highlights three critical elements of ecological theories that are not always emphasized in cross-cultural research: (a) parent-child interactions unfold in nested contexts that include both proximal and distal sets of beliefs, norms, and values; (b) children's developmental niche is a useful framework to describe how parental-child interactions are shaped by parents' cognitions and childrearing practices as well as by physical and social characteristics of the environment; and (c) examining the form (i.e., specific cognitions) and function (e.g., underlying meaning of cognitions) of parenting is a useful framework to understand differences and similarities across cultural groups. In the article, she provides a rich discussion of how these frameworks overlap and can be used to test for main and interaction effects.

Especially significant is how Lansford's discussion connects with firmly rooted understandings of how proximal and distal processes are helpful in explaining both differences and similarities among cultural groups within the United States. For example, García Coll and her colleagues (1996) developed the *Integrative Model for the Study of Developmental Competencies* in ethnic minority children (i.e., *Integrative model*) to better understand the set of *developmental competencies* (e.g., bilingualism) that are unique to ethnic minority children as well as the proximal (e.g., parenting behaviors) and distal (e.g.,

economic conditions) characteristics and processes of the family and community where children live. These factors include parents' social position; race-based factors, such as racism, victimization, and discrimination; family residential, economic, social, and psychological segregation; the quality of schools, neighborhoods, and health care facilities; family adaptive cultural factors, such as cultural legacies; child characteristics, such as age, temperament; and family structure, values, beliefs, and goals.

Expanding the *Integrative* model to the study of cross-cultural parenting research might give the field new insights into the challenges that marginalized families of color around the world face in rearing their children. For example, it might be helpful to compare parental sensitivity among Turkish immigrants in Germany, a marginalized ethnic group, to parental sensitivity among marginalized groups in the United States, such as African Americans, Native Americans, and Latin Americans. The *Integrative Model* is quite compatible with eco-cultural theories, but goes beyond them by including other aspects of the cultural group such as racism and discrimination that have known to have both intragenerational and intergenerational effects on parenting and children.

### Benefits of cross-cultural research and an eye toward future

The socio-cultural approach to parenting science is important for several reasons. First, it can give us a detailed account of the full variety of human parenting across cultural groups. Cross-cultural study asserts that groups of people possess different beliefs and engage in various behaviors that may be normative in their culture but are not necessarily normative in another culture. By uncovering what is universal and what is culture-specific, it has the potential to dismantle prejudices, situate one's own parenting in a broader repertoire of norms and behaviors, and perhaps learn from one another. Understanding how other parenting norms and practices result in healthy successful children might help us to have a more open-minded world view of parenting. Second, cross-cultural research can either support or refute important universals in child development; show the rich cultural diversity of cultural groups and how they change behaviors; and, increase an understanding of the transactional dance between biological and environmental variables and conditions. Third, it can leverage our methodological and conceptual tools to shed light on the variation within one's cultural group, perhaps resulting in more connection, unity, and acceptance among different subgroups.

As we look to the future, cross-cultural research on parenting can be positioned to improve our lives and understanding of human behavior in several ways. First, researchers should conduct cross-

cultural research in a wider range of cultures, beyond the 11% of studies from Europe and 2% from Africa, Latin, America, and the Middle East (cited in Lansford, 2021). But, how will this be accomplished? What infrastructure needs to be put in place? What funding mechanisms? Who makes this a priority? Second, researchers can position cross-cultural research to address the most important social issue of our time: how systemic racism and discrimination threaten the wellbeing of families and children. There is an urgent need to understand best practices of how to provide love and support, emotional guidance, and physical care to children who experience racism, exclusion, bigotry, and fear as well as to establish best practices for rearing children to navigate in an increasingly diverse world. These issues are universal and affect every parent in every culture. Third, future cross-cultural research should not assume that there is one way to be a family. The so-called nuclear family was a blip in time; it is not normative. We need to develop the research tools to study families as they are – combined, same-sex, bilingual, bicultural, recombined, nonbinary, etc. Fathers and other caregivers should not be excluded or added to research as an afterthought. Children being reared in contemporary families experience multiple caregivers in multiple settings and are exposed to a diverse set of experiences. Cultural research needs to shed light on the universals of parenting as well as culture-specific ways to rear children in an ever-changing world.

Lastly, the most important source of variation in parenting in our time is globalization. Scholars argue that globalization is perhaps the most significant influence in all human behaviors, including parenting. *Globalization* is defined as the growing interdependence of the world's economies, cultures, and populations, brought about by cross-border trade in goods and services, technology, and flows of investment, people, and information. The wide-ranging effects of globalization on individuals are complex. As with major technological advances, globalization can benefit a society as a whole, but it can also marginalize others. One of the most revolutionizing tools has been the mobile/smartphone, and social media platforms (e.g., WhatsApp). The United States is the world's larger internet user, followed by China, and India (Cirjak, 2020); men and women under 35, the demographic group most likely to be parents, were the heaviest users and a quarter of their time spent online was on social media. Internet globalization has revolutionized the culture of communicating, sharing, connecting, and parenting (e.g., increased monitoring of children's whereabouts). Despite its benefits (e.g., increased interconnectedness between communities and cultures), it has

some drawbacks (e.g., the spread of misinformation and encouraging predatory behavior) that can have effects on parenting and children in ways that have yet to be known. Globalization may prove to be the strongest source of homogenization of parenting behaviors resulting in increased universality. But, parenting in a borderless world where developments in the external environment can immediately impact the personal lives of families has the potential to fundamentally and profoundly change human development, including parents' cognitions and behaviors and practices.

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[Corrections made on 09 April 2022, after first online publication: Reference details for Lansford (2022) has been added in this version.]