

## 5 Bonding and belonging beyond WEIRD worlds: rethinking attachment theory on the basis of cross-cultural anthropological data

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### **Introduction**

Henrich, Heine, and Norenzayan (2010) have complained that the majority of psychological statements claiming universal validity are actually based on empirical studies of samples consisting exclusively of WEIRD (*W*estern, *E*ducated, *I*ndustrialized, *R*ich, and *D*emocratic) people – that is, people who form a very particular and small part of the world population.<sup>1</sup> This criticism also applies to the attachment theory formulated by the psychoanalyst and pediatrician John Bowlby (1969), and further developed by his student Mary Ainsworth (Ainsworth, 1967; Ainsworth, Bell, and Stayton, 1974; Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters *et al.*, 1978), that continues to hold – despite increasing criticism – a central position in developmental psychology. One major criticism addresses the “cultural blindness” of attachment theory (LeVine and Norman, 2001; Otto, 2011; Rothbaum, Weisz, Pott *et al.*, 2000). Although Bowlby (1982, p. 50) certainly considered the cultural context to be important in his conceptions and Mary Ainsworth laid the foundations of her work in a study carried out in Uganda, neither John Bowlby nor Mary Ainsworth nor subsequent attachment theorists have paid any systematic attention to culture and integrated this into the theory as a decisive element (Otto, 2011).

<sup>1</sup> Henrich *et al.* (2010) have shown that the bulk of the database in the experimental branches of psychology, cognitive science, and economics is about Western, and more specifically American, undergraduates. He and his coauthors analyzed the leading journals in six subdisciplines of psychology between 2003 and 2007 and found that 68% of subjects came from the USA and 96% from Western, industrialized countries. The majority of samples (80%) were composed solely of undergraduates in psychology and the make-up of these samples appeared to reflect the country of residence of the authors: 73% of first authors were at American universities and 99% were at universities in Western countries. “This means that 96 per cent of psychological samples come from countries with only 12 per cent of the world’s population” (Henrich *et al.*, 2010, p. 63).

In this chapter, I shall critically examine some central hypotheses of attachment theory and draw on empirical data from an Indonesian society to show how these assumptions are based on Eurocentric axioms that transfer in only a very limited way to other cultural contexts.

### **Attachment theory**

Attachment theory focuses on the prolonged period of helplessness in human infants – that is, on infants' biologically given need to elicit their mothers' or caregivers' protection and care. According to Bowlby (1969, 1982), attachment behaviors such as smiling, crying, clinging to, or approaching the mother are rooted in evolution, providing a survival advantage by increasing mother–child proximity and thus maximizing the beneficial outcomes a mother can provide. Bowlby assumes that the attachment behavioral system is activated primarily by stress either arising within the child (e.g., pain, hunger) or induced by external cues (e.g., an unfamiliar person, a loud noise, etc.). Caregivers normally respond intuitively to infant stress signals and help their infants to regain their physical and mental equilibrium through appropriate caring behaviors. According to Bowlby, a child's attachment builds up over several phases during the first year of life. Whereas, initially, in the “preattachment” phase (first–sixth week of life), infants can switch caregivers with hardly any problems arising, the following 6 months reveals an increasingly close attachment to one or more caregivers (“attachment in the making”) that then consolidates as the infant becomes increasingly mobile after the seventh or eighth month of life and reveals clear contours by the age of 1 year (“clear-cut attachment”).

Bowlby postulates that the kinds of attachment experienced in early infancy are represented mentally in an “internal working model” that decisively influences the child's further socioemotional development and her own ability to form attachments.

Mary Ainsworth, a student and colleague of John Bowlby, extended this theoretical model and made it accessible to empirical analysis. While engaged in field research in Uganda, she observed everyday mother–child interactions and, above all, how children react when the mother suddenly disappears from their reach and sight. Ainsworth established that the children's reactions could be classified into three groups: most children reacted to the mother's disappearance with pain of separation (crying) and to her reappearance with signals of joy (laughter, crawling towards the mother), before soon going back to exploring their environment from the secure base of their mother's presence. Ainsworth described these children as being securely attached. Some children displayed no emotions at

all either when their mother disappeared or reappeared; they seemed to be unimpressed by their mothers' presence or absence, and simply carried on doing whatever they were doing. Ainsworth called this group the "insecure-avoidant" (anxious-avoidant) children. A further proportion of the children reacted excessively and contradictorily (simultaneously sad and angry) to their mother's disappearance and exhibited very ambivalent behavior when she returned – that is, equally consoled and angry, both clinging to the mother and spurning her. Ainsworth classified these children as having an "insecure-ambivalent" (anxious-resistant) attachment. Later, Ainsworth tried to replicate these findings in the USA, but found that 1-year-old American children who were at home – that is, in a familiar environment – were not upset when their mothers left them. Therefore, she developed an experimental design, the so-called strange situation, which is a kind of minidrama with fixed sequences: children and their mothers are invited to an unfamiliar laboratory where the children are first confronted with a stranger in the presence of their mothers. In a later sequence, the mothers leave the child alone with this stranger.<sup>2</sup> According to attachment theory, the child's reactions to the departure and the return of the mother provide indications regarding the child's attachment security, the type of attachment. The strange situation became the central methodological paradigm in psychological attachment research. However, as Otto (2011, p. 410) emphasizes, this represents a paradox, because during the course of the attachment research hype of subsequent years, the method originally developed as an adaptation to the US context was transferred to the greatest range of different cultures:

Since then, hundreds of babies with the most different socio-cultural background have had and continue to have their attachment behavior classified according to the Strange Situation although the appropriateness of the procedure for the specific context mostly remained untested. (Otto, 2011, p. 410, translated)<sup>3</sup>

Using the strange situation in their American study in Baltimore, Ainsworth *et al.* (1978) found a correlation between children's attachment security and maternal interaction style: children who were handled sensitively by their mothers displayed a high attachment security in the strange situation, whereas those with less sensitive mothers more

<sup>2</sup> The strange situation is always videographed, thus making it easy to reproduce and assess.

<sup>3</sup> LeVine and Norman (2001, p. 129) suspect that the attractiveness of this method "is due to its evolutionary rationale, its convenient and reliable assessment procedure (the videotaped Strange Situation), and its clinically interpretable categories (secure–insecure, optimal–suboptimal, sensitive–insensitive) – all features that are problematic from an anthropological point of view."

frequently displayed insecure attachment behavior. This “maternal sensitivity” forms a key concept in the attachment-theory approach and is defined according to Ainsworth through (1) the reliable perception and (2) correct interpretation of the child’s signals, as well as (3) appropriate and (4) prompt reactions by the mothers.

The central theses of the attachment theory formulated by Bowlby and Ainsworth can be summarized into four key assumptions (Rothbaum *et al.*, 2000; Otto, 2011, p. 399):

- (1) *Universality*: all neonates (except those with major neurophysiological damage) develop an attachment to their attachment figure or figures during the first year of life.
- (2) *Sensitivity*: the most important precondition for infant attachment security is sensitive parental behavior.
- (3) *Normativity*: the majority of children in all societies develop a secure attachment; uncertain attachments are found in only up to 40% of cases.<sup>4</sup>
- (4) *Competence*: attachment security leads to a more competent coping with further socioemotional and cognitive developmental tasks, whereas the other two insecure-avoidant forms of attachment are taken to be suboptimal preconditions for further child development.

The pattern of attachment consistent with healthy development is that of secure attachment, in which the individual is confident that his parent (or parent figure) will be available, responsive, and helpful should he encounter adverse or frightening situations. With this assurance he feels bold in his explorations of the world and also competent in dealing with it. This pattern is found to be promoted by a parent in the early years especially by a mother being readily available, sensitive to her child’s signals, and lovingly responsive when he seeks protection and/or comfort and/or assistance. (Bowlby, 1988, p. 166)

In the following, I shall use ethnographic data from an Indonesian society to critically discuss the central assumptions of attachment theory sketched above. I shall start descriptively, by giving an insight into the most important aspects of the socialization practices and parenting models among the Makassar in Indonesia along with the attachment models to be found in this society. Based on this material, I shall consider the implications of the sensitivity and competence hypotheses and discuss how far the strange situation is an appropriate method for studying attachment

<sup>4</sup> In their definitive American study, Mary Ainsworth and her colleagues used the strange situation to gather data from 106 one-year-old children from Baltimore. They found the following distribution of attachment styles: 66% securely attached children, 12% anxious-resistant children, and 22% anxious-avoidant children (Ainsworth *et al.*, 1978). This distribution was confirmed in later cross-cultural studies (e.g., van IJzendoorn and Kroonenberg, 1988) and is now taken to be the standard normal distribution.

behavior in societies whose social, economic, and familial structures are organized in completely different ways from those of WEIRD people and whose children thereby grow up under completely different socialization conditions and demands. I shall supplement this discussion with some ideas on the role of childhood agency. This has received hardly any attention in attachment research, although I believe it represents a significant analytical dimension with which to distinguish societal attachment ideologies from actual practices.

### **Beyond mothers: an ethnographic example**

Recent developmental and attachment research, above all, in cultural psychology, has already stressed repeatedly that mothers cannot always be viewed as the child's central reference person and therefore *attachment figure* in all societies. In many cases, a larger social grouping – mostly in the form of multigenerational families – in which not only aunts, uncles, and grandparents but also, particularly, older siblings play a decisive role, is responsible for rearing children (“alloparenting” or “multiple caregiving”).<sup>5</sup> Gottlieb (this volume) gives a fascinating picture of how Beng children from the Ivory Coast grow up in extended family groupings.

The relations described by Gottlieb strongly match socialization conditions among the Makassar, a hierarchically organized Islamic society indigenous to the Indonesian island of Sulawesi. There are about 2 million Makassar, who subsist on rice cultivation in the interior and fishing and sea trade on the coast. The following description is based on several field studies that I carried out between 1984 and 2007 in a prototypical highland village in the Gowa district of south Sulawesi. The main source of income in this village is rice cultivation.<sup>6</sup>

Following birth, mother and infant spend their first 4–6 weeks together in the closest possible contact. During this postnatal period, neither may leave the house; they remain completely indoors where they are cared for and receive visitors. They are allowed to leave the house only after going through a purification ritual, the *atturungeng* (BM).<sup>7</sup> This is

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Hrdy (2005).

<sup>6</sup> Most of the data presented here were gathered during two 1-year periods of field research (1984–5; 1990–1). During later field visits, I noticed no changes from the conditions described here in rural contexts, although I did not use these visits to systematically study changes in the forms of socialization.

<sup>7</sup> Terms in the local language, Bicara Mangkasara, are marked by the abbreviation *BM*, while idioms in the national language of Indonesia, Bahasa Indonesia, are marked by the abbreviation *BI*.

generally carried out 40 days after the birth (and hence also after the end of post-birth vaginal discharge) and markedly extends the radius of activity for both mother and infant.<sup>8</sup> After this transitional ritual, the mother returns more and more to her usual activities, particularly in the agricultural context, and the circle of reference persons for the infant greatly increases. If a household has enough young and strong female workers at its disposal, a mother may spend a comparatively long period of time with her baby; otherwise, grandmothers, older aunts, sisters, or young girls in the extended family take over the care. Depending on the size of the household and the mother's productive tasks, she will often spend only the breast-feeding times with her infant. However, here as well, it is not unusual for other women who are also currently breast-feeding to take over when the mother cannot be present. It is also common practice for grandmothers or older aunts to give infants their breasts to suckle in order to help them sleep, to calm them when distressed, or also simply as gestures of tenderness and intimacy.<sup>9</sup> Hence, right from the start, infants have close bodily contact with several reference persons. Basically, babies and infants are cared for proactively; that is, caregivers respond immediately to the smallest signals from the infant so that it is never exposed to long-lasting stress or has any need to communicate its discomfort with any vehemence. Screaming and crying babies are correspondingly a rarity, and generally encountered only in cases of illness. Until they themselves become mobile, babies and infants are mostly in bodily contact with their caregivers; they are carried around or transported in a baby sling on the hip or back. They are laid down in small hammocks or on cushions only to sleep, but, even then, they are always within direct reach of their caregivers. At night, children always sleep alongside their reference persons, infants preferably with their mothers, but, after they have been weaned, with various other reference persons. Basically, even adult Makassars never sleep alone. This all indicates that the local conception of a sensitive approach to infants is founded essentially on bodily

<sup>8</sup> *Atturungeng* means, literally, "to climb down." This refers to the fact that mother and infant first climb down from the traditional stilt house during the rite. The ritual involves various purificatory washings to cleanse the mother of impurity and drive away malicious powers. It reintegrates the woman, who has recently given birth and was in a liminal phase, into society; names the neonate; and welcomes her or him to society (see also Rössler, 1987, pp. 34–5).

<sup>9</sup> In Makassar society, infants are generally breast-fed for at least 2 years *ad libitum* and receive additional food from 6 months onwards. Weaning is generally very "gradual" with mothers increasingly denying the breast to the infant and declaring it to be "dry." However, the child generally retains the other "breast partners" for a long time. One can frequently observe 5–6-year-old children being given their grandmother's or aunt's breast to suckle when they seek intimacy or consolation.

based interaction and communication processes between reference person and child. The focus is literally on directly “feeling” children’s needs from their slightest expressive signals, so that caregivers can respond before a child becomes clearly distressed. Put briefly, the Makassar do their best to anticipate and avoid negative stress, so that infants have few chances of developing and expressing the emotions of discomfort, anxiety, and fear – which Bowlby views as primary emotions of the attachment system.<sup>10</sup>

Infant care in Makassar society is organized to enable women to combine both productive and reproductive tasks. In a subsistence economy in which female work is a crucial economic factor, cultural childcare models in which mothers are the primary/sole attachment figure would be absolutely counterproductive. Meaningful systems here are so-called alloparenting or multiple caregiving models in which rearing children is a communal task. Although these have been described repeatedly, particularly in comparative cultural psychology, their consequences for attachment theory, in my opinion, have not been analyzed systematically (see also Keller, this volume; Meehan and Hawks, this volume; Otto, this volume). My premise is that multiple caregiving systems lead to forms of attachment that Bowlby and Ainsworth’s theory is unable to handle and that cannot be assessed and portrayed with the inflexible strange-situation method. An important step would be to start by determining the decisive patterns and ideologies of attachment in the different multiple-caregiving systems. In Makassar society, for example, grandmothers/grandparents are very decisive attachment figures for infants. According to local conceptions, young children and old people belong close together. “Only the aged have the necessary patience for young children” is the corresponding local maxim, and grandparent–infant dyads are an everyday picture in Makassar villages (Figure 5.1).

Samplings of time allocation have shown that in purely rice-farming households, infants who need intensive supervision (from the age of 2–3 months to 2–3 years) spend far more time (two-thirds) with grandparents or great-aunts and great-uncles than with their own parents, who are occupied mostly in work in the fields. This togetherness frequently develops into very close and long-term emotional attachments.<sup>11</sup> According

<sup>10</sup> For a criticism of the bias in Bowlby’s focus on negative emotions in his attachment theory with the consequence that the assessment of maternal sensitivity is based primarily on the response to negative signals from the child, see Otto (2011, p. 416); see also Keller, Völker, and Yovsi (2005).

<sup>11</sup> The close relationships between the oldest and the youngest are also reflected in many childhood memories of adults. It is nearly always the grandparents, great-aunts, or great-uncles who play the primary roles in these narratives.



Figure 5.1 Grandparent–infant dyad during everyday life in Makassar villages (© Birgitt Röttger-Rössler, photographer Martin Rössler).

to the local ideas, infants require, above all, patient, constant, attentive, loving, and indulgent care. The older generation is considered to be predestined for this form of emotional attention, which is called in the Makassar language *a'laju-la'ju*. Parents, it is said, are generally too active and too involved with their own concerns for this.<sup>12</sup> A frequently observed scenario in daily life is that infants who are upset, have fallen over, or simply seek closeness will prefer their grandmothers or great-aunts to their mothers when both are present. However, they may also turn to older siblings, other relatives living in the household, or even nonrelatives who have become significant reference persons for the child. In my opinion, the active role of the child, the child's agency, plays a central, though

<sup>12</sup> In the Makassar conception of emotions and emotion terminology, *a'laju-la'ju*, the patient, considerate, caring, and indulgent love of young children attributed primarily to grandparents, is distinguished from *rimang*, a more child-rearing and caring form of affection/love of adults for young children. This – generally less patient – attachment emotion is considered to be characteristic for the affective attitude of parents or older siblings towards children (see, for more detail, Röttger-Rössler, 2004, pp. 170–1).



scarcely acknowledged, role in the formation of emotional attachments. From the multitude of reference persons available to Makassar children in their large, multigeneration families, they take a thoroughly active role in choosing their main reference person by preferring to affiliate with specific persons. According to local conceptions, it is completely “natural” for children to attach themselves to those who match them best in terms of temperament and character. The biological parents are in no way considered to be predestined for this; there is no “mother love” ideology. In other words, according to Makassar beliefs, children in no way have a primary need for their mothers or biological parents in order to grow up well. In contrast, the many conversations and interviews in which I discussed child-rearing ideas were dominated by the idea that being attached closely to a mother whom the child does not match in terms of temperament and character can impair development because of the inevitable tensions and conflicts. A child should be reared primarily by those who best fit her “essential nature” (BI: *sifat*). Local conceptions permit irreconcilable essential natures in parents and children and do not conceptualize close emotional parent–child attachments as being a quasi-naturally given “automatism.” Likewise, differences in the intensity of parental affection to individual children are taken for granted as logical and unavoidable consequences of the incompatibility of essential natures.

These ideas are accompanied by a care system that is not only personally but also spatially highly flexible. For example, many young children also change home with their chosen main reference partner – that is, they leave the household of their biological parents. If an older sister or cousin to whom a child has attached herself closely gets married, the child will often move to the bride’s new home as well. Frequently, a child’s grandparents will move from one child’s household to another and then take the grandchild to whom they have a special closeness with them.<sup>13</sup> The

<sup>13</sup> We can back this up with some data. According to the household survey carried out by my husband and colleague Martin Rössler in a sample of 50 households (from the total of 180 households in the village studied) for the years 1990/1 and 2005, 11% (1990/1) or 10.5% (2005) of the households contained children who were living not with their parents but with their grandparents or other close relatives. A total of 41% of the households in the sample consisted of multigenerational families. This percentage remained more or less constant over the years, even when the multigenerational households naturally changed their constitution constantly through births and deaths. However, the remaining 59% of households in no way consisted of nuclear families; they simply did not contain at least three generations. It is important to note here that the borders of a house or household are permeable; they do not coincide with family borders. As a rule, close relatives, parents and children, or siblings live in the immediate vicinity of each other. In other words, a child’s everyday interaction partners are spread across several houses.

freedom of choice available to even very young children is enormous. I was able to document several cases in which children as young as 2 years – such as little Pia – decided with whom they wanted to live: Pia had spent the first 2 years of her life with her parents in the house of her mother's family. When her parents moved to a small town and took her with them, Pia suffered greatly due to the separation from her grandmother and insisted on returning to her. After only a few weeks, the parents gave in to the child's demands and brought Pia back to her grandparents, with whom she then grew up, seeing her parents only occasionally. Cases such as that of 3-year-old Baso are also typical. He frequently visited his grandparents in the neighboring village together with his mother and his older siblings. Although he had never stayed there for any length of time before, when visiting the grandparents one day at the age of 3 years, Baso simply announced that he did not want to go back home with his parents but to spend a few days with his grandparents. These few days turned into several years.<sup>14</sup>

This changing of household communities on the basis of close emotional ties between children and specific adults has to be distinguished from what are likewise highly flexible patterns of fosterage and adoption. Frequently, children from poor households grow up with more affluent family members (generally siblings or first-degree cousins of one of the parents) in other villages who then take on full financial responsibility for these children. They not only feed and clothe them but also organize their education and, later, their marriages. The children contribute their labor by helping exclusively in the fields or in the household of their foster family, and not their biological family. These types of fosterage motivated primarily by economic privation are informal. That is, they are not accompanied by legal duties and rights (such as rights of ownership and inheritance, etc.). In the Makassar context, the latter – that is, legalized and officially registered adoptions – are generally carried out only by affluent, childless couples, who thereby gain children as heirs and prevent any conflicts over inheritance. Here as well, it is always the children of relatives who are adopted; however, they do not have to live with the adoptive parents when they prove to have “irreconcilable essential natures.” Thus, children can exert a decisive influence on where they primarily live and with whom they want to have their closest ties. In short, the Makassar use what Bowie (2004b, p. 9) calls an “additive model of parenthood” – that is, they do not polarize biological and social parenthood. Adoptive parenthood coexists with biological parenthood; it does not aim to replace or deny biological parenthood, and is therefore

<sup>14</sup> See Bodenhorn (2000), who reports similar findings among the Iñupiat in north Alaska.

not threatened by it. Practices of fosterage and adoption similar to the system described here are widespread and well confirmed in anthropological literature (Bodenhorn, 2000; Bowie, 2004a; Brady, 1976; Carroll, 1970; Terrel and Modell, 1994; Young, 2000).

All this reveals that children are perceived not as the personal “property” of their biological or socially legal parents in Makassar society, but as part of a large, transgenerational group of relatives (this is also the case with the Cameroonian Nso – see Otto, this volume), within which – and this is the decisive aspect – children can negotiate the choice of the persons to become their central attachment figures, and this is already decisively negotiable for young children as well.

From an anthropological perspective, such flexible multiple caregiving and fosterage systems are interpreted as meaningful social and environmental adaptations (Bowie, 2004b; Young, 2000). Sharing children among kin is a major risk-minimization strategy – in both economic and social-psychological terms. First, multiply and transgenerationally shared caregiving allows women to invest their labor and productivity in economic tasks (in this case, working in the fields), and, particularly in subsistence economies, this is absolutely essential to the survival of the community.<sup>15</sup> Second, fosterage arrangements lower the economic burden on families with many children or few resources, and the various attachments/close emotional ties to several reference persons ensure the emotional security of children if they lose important attachment figures through, for example, death – which is in no way a secondary concern in societies with high mortality rates.

A further significant aspect is that children are encouraged actively to enter into a multitude of relationships and build up their own alliances from an early age. The personal networks of relationships that individuals build up over the course of their lives are decisively important for their economic and social security. Relatives are viewed basically as the most preferable and most reliable relationship partners. The bilateral kinship system of the Makassar grants every individual what is finally an almost incomprehensible number of persons with whom they are related on either the paternal or maternal side. The formation of personal alliance systems within this major social resource is therefore of great importance. The more active relationships with relatives an individual has at her disposal, the more networks of reciprocity in which she is embedded, the more secure, and finally the more successful she will be. Hence, what counts are the enacted kin relations. Kinship is just a potential, a social

<sup>15</sup> On the economy of the Makassar, which was still very much subsistence-oriented in the 1980s and 1990s, see Rössler (1997).

resource. Relatedness among kin is always the outcome of everyday practices, of “small, seemingly trivial, or taken for granted acts like sharing a meal, giving a dish of cooked food . . . dropping into a nearby house for a quiet chat, a coffee or a betel quid” (Carsten, 2000, p. 18).

A willingness to communicate and the ability to reach out actively to others and form a multitude of personal relationships are viewed as decisive social competencies in this society. Those who are less sociable (BI: *yang tidak suka bergaul*) are thought to be disturbed and are pitied. In line with such values, children are trained to develop their communication skills and encouraged to reach out to different individual relatives, to attach themselves to them, and to sleep in their homes. Sleeping over in others’ houses has a generally high status in Makassar society: spending the night together symbolizes closeness and togetherness; correspondingly, adults who wish to consolidate their relationships also encourage the other party to stay for the night (BI: *bermalam*) in their houses.<sup>16</sup> Children who affiliate narrowly with only one or two reference persons, who react defensively or anxiously to others, and who never want to sleep in other houses are viewed accordingly in the local conceptions as being socially incompetent and abnormal (BI: *bukan biasa*).

However, after roughly the third year of life, clear borders are imposed on the strongly encouraged sociability in the child. The main developmental task for children at this age is to learn social differentiations. Children now have to learn that they can no longer approach all people frankly and freely, but should be reserved and shy (BI: *malu*) towards people they do not know and generally respectful to all older persons. From now on, they successively have to learn the complex social etiquette required by the hierarchic structure of their society. The first step is to recognize the seniority principle: the child must address all people who are older in years – including older siblings – with specific, graded forms of respect.<sup>17</sup> When it comes to complete strangers, the child has to behave in an extremely reserved way.

At the same time, that is, at the age of 3 years, Makassar children begin increasingly to spend their time in same-aged peer groups and move

<sup>16</sup> Refusing an invitation to spend the night is generally conceived as an affront and a rejection of the offer of friendship. During our field research in Sulawesi, this was often a major problem for me and my husband: we did not want to reject anybody, but we also did not want to have to spend every single night in other people’s houses.

<sup>17</sup> On the level of language, this goes hand in hand with the acquisition of lexical etiquette. The Makassar language – like all Indonesian languages – possesses a comprehensive “honorific subsystem” with different forms of address and reference, personal pronouns, and so forth for different social rank dyads. See Rössler and Röttger-Rössler, 1988; Yatim, 1983; see also Errington, 1988.

outside the direct reach of adults. Until they enter school (in the sixth to seventh year of life), they spend their days in a way that is scarcely regulated by adults and only supervised loosely. Younger children (aged 3–5 years) are told not to stray too far away from the village or the parental houses, or to do so only in the company of older siblings. Otherwise, children are left to themselves; they are first introduced to domestic chores playfully; and then, from the sixth year of life onwards, increasingly systematically (once school is over). These considerable free spaces for children provide a kind of protective zone within an increasingly complex social world in which children from the age of 3 years onwards have to learn to rank themselves and behave adequately. The markedly hierarchic social structure and the seniority principle that places everybody on a higher level than the children except for their peers and younger children requires them to engage in complex social classifications and to acknowledge and take into account a multitude of social differences and distances of rank in their interaction with adults. Cultural psychology uses terms such as “power distance” (Hofstede, 2001; Hofstede and Bond, 1988) or “interpersonal distance” (Matsumoto, 1996; Triandis and Gelfand, 1998) when referring to such vertically arranged structures of social inequality that stress values such as obedience, respect, and deference and expect all children after a certain age to display these. Children aged 3 and older can interact as equals – that is, in a spontaneous, lively way disregarding social etiquette – only with their peers.<sup>18</sup> For adults as well, relations to peers and persons of the same sex remain the only hierarchy-free spaces throughout life, and this is why they attach great importance to peer relationships.

### **Significance for attachment theory**

In the following, I shall draw on the ethnographic description above and start by criticizing the strange situation as the main instrument for assessing attachment qualities before going on to discuss the problematic sensitivity and competence assumptions in attachment theory. In the second part of the discussion, I shall address childhood agency – a much neglected aspect in attachment research that, in my opinion, needs to be introduced as a major analytical dimension in attachment research.

<sup>18</sup> However, the close ties that young children have built up with various adult relatives do, to some extent, remain unaffected by this. In other words, children can continue to act relatively freely with these persons, although they still have to show them the necessary forms of respect.

*Strange situation – a strange method*

There are several reasons why using the strange situation as the main method for assessing attachment qualities seems to be questionable if not completely inappropriate when it comes to adequately assessing forms of attachment that – as shown in the ethnographic example sketched above – deviate strongly from the parameters of the Western European and US middle-class structures for which the method was developed.

One central deficit is the marked mother bias of the strange-situation design. To take appropriate account of conditions in Makassar society, it would actually be necessary to start off by collecting a sociogram of reference persons for each child being tested. For children whose primary attachment figures in daily life are not their mothers, it seems rather meaningless to test them only together with their mothers as in the majority of strange-situation studies – including those carried out in Indonesia by Zevalkink, Riksen-Malraven, and van Lieshout (1999, 2001), which I shall take a closer look at in the following.

Zevalkink *et al.* studied attachment patterns in the Sundanese of west Java, who belong to one of the largest ethnic groups in the Indonesian archipelago. They studied forty-six mother-child dyads with the strange situation. The sample was composed of nineteen dyads from lower-middle-class families and twenty-seven dyads from families with low socioeconomic status (SES) who had migrated only recently from rural areas to the city of Bandung.<sup>19</sup> Zevalkink *et al.*'s (1999, pp. 28–9) analysis produced the following results on the four types of attachment (ABCD) differentiated in attachment theory: the majority of children (52.2%) were classified as securely attached (type B) in line with the global distribution reported in the meta-analyses by van IJzendoorn and Kroonenberg (1988); 19.9%, as insecure-resistant (type C); a further 19.9%, as insecure-disorganized (type D); and 6.5%, as insecure-avoidant (type A), which deviates strongly from the global distribution of 21.0% (Zevalkink *et al.*, 1999, p. 30). These findings were then related to the social context of the families of origin, revealing that all the insecure-resistant children came from low-SES families and the majority of disorganized children came from extended families (Zevalkink *et al.*, 1999, pp. 33, 35). Regarding the mother-child relations in the low-SES families, Zevalkink *et al.* (1999) found some contradictions. The study's initial

<sup>19</sup> Socioeconomic status (SES) was defined by the family income, parental occupational status, and educational level of both parents. This means that in low-SES families, parents were employed as unskilled or semiskilled laborers and had a basic level of education. In lower-middle-SES families, parents had skilled-labor or white-collar jobs and had completed secondary education (Zevalkink *et al.*, 1999, p. 25).

participating observations (before the experimental part) carried out in the individual family homes – that is, in the children’s familiar everyday environment– had given an impression of sensitively responsive mothers. However, this could not be reproduced in the test. In the experiment itself, in which every mother–child dyad was initially given five tasks, such as a jigsaw puzzle or building a tower with cubes in structured play episodes, the same mothers were less sensitive towards and supportive of their children. “We found that the quality of maternal support for insecure-resistant children was relatively high at home, showing a picture of an involved mother, who, however, behaved more irritated and hostile towards the child in the structured play session than other mothers” (Zevalkink *et al.*, 1999, p. 36).<sup>20</sup>

Nonetheless, this discrepancy did not lead the authors to question the suitability of an experimental design that had transformed sensitively acting mothers in the home environment into “hostile mothers” in the “strange situation” of the experiment. Instead, they evaluated the maternal sensitivity at home as a pragmatic behavior in response to the impoverished living conditions of the low-SES families, and the initial maternal sensitivity was deconstructed as being only apparent:

Mothers of resistant children lived in significantly poorer physical conditions than the other mothers. Under these conditions it is more dangerous for the child’s well-being to put the child on the ground to play (e.g., mud floor, open kitchen fire). Therefore, even inside the home these mothers needed to carry their children more often than other mothers. This physical closeness may have made the resistant children relatively at ease at home, which may have made their mothers look more competent in responding to the child’s signals. But our finding . . . shows that, in other respects, they lacked fundamental competence in caring for their children’s well-being. (Zevalkink *et al.*, 1999, p. 36)

In my opinion, this interpretation reveals an unreflected transfer of Western European middle-class ideals of maternal behavior. The quality of maternal sensitivity is evaluated here mostly in terms of the supportive maternal behavior in the experiment, with a calm, confident attitude that encourages and helps children to solve the task for themselves being viewed as a clear indicator of “maternal competence.” The authors completely ignored the fact that the mothers in the low-SES families (from which all the children categorized as insecure-resistant came) had recently migrated to the city of Bandung from rural regions, and therefore came from contexts in which mother–child interactions and hence

<sup>20</sup> See also Zevalkink and Riksen-Walraven (2001). This cross-cultural study of maternal behavior in structured play sessions gives a further, more detailed description of the Sundanese experiments.

the corresponding competence models are determined by completely different socioeconomic demands and structures. Mothers from the low-SES families, who carry their infants continually close to their bodies in order to perform various productive tasks and duties while simultaneously always being able to react promptly or proactively to their child's signals, display a behavior adapted to their socioeconomic conditions that is correspondingly extremely competent and sensitive. Among the rural Sundanese, as among the Makassar, parental sensitivity may well be conceived as a direct, body-based "feeling." Intensive maternal play with young children (assisted by toys) is not an element of this milieu-specific parenting model, and it is correspondingly not very surprising that mother and child did not know how to deal confidently with this strange task in the test. The unfamiliar artifacts used in the test will also have played a major role. Manufactured toys are completely unusual in a rural context. For example, a simple jigsaw puzzle, which I had brought with me for my own children, was a source of general amazement. The Indonesian children did not know what to do with it, and even adults with secondary education were either incapable of, or had great difficulty in, putting together a simple, 60-piece puzzle. It is very likely that such context-insensitive objects markedly increased the uncertainty and stress of the mothers (and thus of their children as well). Another major factor is that the low-SES mothers – due to the hierarchical orientation of Sundanese society – certainly felt insecure and inferior to the European researcher, and this may well have further disturbed their behavior. In my opinion, such context factors distort the power of the results and thereby the utility of this method. The quality of maternal sensitivity during the videotaped structured play sessions was assessed with five 7-point rating scales developed by Erickson, Sroufe, and Egeland (1985). These assessed

supportive presence (i.e., expression of positive regard and emotional support for the child), respect for autonomy (i.e., recognition of child's individuality and motives), hostility (i.e., expression of anger, discounting or rejection of child), structure and limit setting (i.e., adequacy of mother's attempts to communicate her expectations with regard to child's behavior and enforce her agenda adequately), and quality of instruction (i.e., the degree to which instructions are timed to the child's focus, stated clearly, paced at a rate that allows comprehension, and graded in logical steps understandable to the child). (Zevalkink *et al.*, 1999, p. 27)

These formulations show that pedagogic ideals from the Western European middle classes are being generalized and set up as a standard of sensitive parental behavior. Just as in the rural Makassar, the essential encouragement of the child's striving for autonomy through deliberate and thoughtfully administered instructions was probably far from the



ethnotheories on ideal parental behavior among the low-SES families. Young children need to be protected, cared for, fed, and monitored so that nothing untoward happens to them and so that they lack nothing. To promote their development through targeted pedagogic measures is not an element in this model that views learning or the acquisition of competencies primarily as a “natural” maturation process and less as a product of parental instruction. Further on, I shall show how significant the culture-specific conceptions of the way in which children learn are when appraising parental behavior.

It is not surprising that the categorizations based on these criteria resulted in a more positive picture of the children from lower-middle-class families in Zevalkink *et al.*'s sample. They were mostly classified as securely attached. These comparatively affluent families, in which the parents held skilled-labor or white-collar jobs and a higher level of education, were characterized, according to Zevalkink *et al.* (1999, p. 25), by a marked “‘Western lifestyle’, ‘Western’ values and high educational aspirations for their children.” Toys along with the tasks and implicit expectations linked to the test scenario will have been far less of a “strange situation” for these mothers.

It is also worth looking at Zevalkink *et al.*'s (1999, p. 36) finding that the majority of children classified in the insecure-disorganized type of attachment (D) came from extended families. The authors suspected that the reason for this “overrepresentation of disorganized children in extended families” was that the presence of further members of the family could have hindered the formation of a secure attachment to the mother. This may well have been the case. As shown for the Makassar, children in multiple caregiving contexts have far more potential attachment partners than those in nuclear family systems, in which the focus is generally on the mothers. However, one has to ask whether this has negative consequences for the children, or whether it is correct to classify children as insecure-disorganized when they display behavior suggesting such a classification in artificial interactions with their mother – who may well not be their main reference person. The unreflected transfer of the ideal of the mother as the most important, best, and “most natural” reference person for her children is particularly striking here. However, in their attempt to interpret this finding, Zevalkink *et al.* even go one step further and suspect that mothers in extended families are exposed to a greater risk of mental illness, and that this, in turn, prevents them from being sensitive mothers:

For instance, Pakistani mothers in extended families have been found to be at a greater risk for both depression and anxiety (Shah and Sonuga-Barke 1995). Like Pakistani mothers, Sundanese–Indonesian mothers are perhaps also at a greater

risk for developing depression and anxiety when living in an extended family. This may be reflected by their low quality of support towards their children compared to mothers of other children. (Zevalkink *et al.*, 1999, p. 36)

Without wanting to discuss the Pakistani study cited here in any detail, we should consider that what is possibly a higher prevalence of depression among women in Pakistan certainly correlates not just with living in extended families but also with such diverse factors as gender roles, the status of daughters-in-law in virilocal residence, and so forth. This cannot simply be transferred from one “non-Western” society to another. However, apart from this, I find the latent depreciation of conditions that do not comply with the WEIRD standard (nuclear family, mother ideology, education focus, emphasis on child autonomy) in this reasoning to be highly problematic.

It seems to be generally questionable how far one can assess attachment securities with the strange situation in societies in which secure attachments do not consist primarily in close ties to the mother but in a *multitude of attachments*. A major task for a context-sensitive, cross-cultural attachment research would be to develop a set of methods that permits an adequate assessment of the concepts and forms of attachment in societies with multiple caregiving systems.

#### *Children's agency – a neglected dimension*

Children who grow up in societies such as that of the Makassar with multiple caregiving systems frequently have far greater opportunities to contribute personally to shaping their relationships than children growing up in the narrow nuclear families that are so typical of the Western European or American middle and upper classes. The latter possess far fewer interaction partners and, as a result, fewer attachment opportunities – without even considering that they do not possess a comparable autonomy for shaping their relationships due to their completely different kinship and parenting models. According to the dominant Western conceptions, children “belong” to their biological parents, who have a legally protected right to custody over them – something that they may lose only after confirmation that they are no longer able to ensure their child's well-being. A close emotional bond between parents and child, particularly between mother and child, is taken to be biologically determined, and this is why the biological parents – as long as they are physically and mentally fit – are considered to be the best caregivers for their children.

Psychological research has given hardly any consideration to the different consequences that these different cultural models have for children's agency. This casts doubt on a central paradigm of research in cultural

psychology that distinguishes between “socio-centrally” oriented societies and those with an “individual-centered” orientation. Markus and Kitayama (1991), who introduced these concepts to psychology, postulated that these different societal orientations each correlate with a specific self-concept: the “interdependent” and the “independent self.” They proposed that interdependence involves “seeing oneself as part of an encompassing social relationship and recognizing that one’s behavior is . . . to a large extent organized by what the actor perceives to be the thoughts, feelings, and actions of others in the relationship” (Markus and Kitayama, 1991, p. 27). The antithesis to this is the independent self of so-called individualistically oriented cultures, which are essentially the Western European and Euro-American societies. To clarify the “independent self,” cultural psychology frequently cites the social anthropologist Clifford Geertz – as do Markus and Kitayama – who characterizes this self as “a bounded, unique . . . center of awareness, emotion, judgment, and action organized into a distinctive whole and set contrastively both against other such wholes and against a social and natural background” (Geertz, 1975, p. 48). In the field of developmental psychology, it has been particularly Heidi Keller who, in an impressive series of empirical studies, has shown that these different orientations and self-concepts in a society are accompanied by different parenting goals, strategies, and styles:

The model of independence incorporates a roughly equal interactional exchange between parent and infant, assigning the infant wishes, desires, and wants that need to be taken seriously. The concept is child centered and nurtures the infant’s individuality. The model of interdependence incorporates a hierarchical, role-defined social model with the parental responsibility to monitor health, teach life skills, and stimulate growth and development. As such, the model is adult centered and assigns the infant the proper place in community. The model of interdependence is closed and community controlled with the consequence that intracultural variability is low. The independent model, on the other hand, embodied more personal variability with individual nuances to the general pictures. This attitude reflects the importance of individual choices. However, mothers with an independent cultural model also share the universe of meaning and feel that their worldview is part of an established knowledge system. (Keller, 2007, p. 138)

These classifications, which have been replicated consistently in a host of cultural psychological studies (Hofstede, 1980, 2001; Triandis, Bondtempo, Villareal *et al.*, 1988), are based on ideal orientations; that is, they relate predominantly to the normative blueprints that various societies possess on the relation between the individual and the community. Nonetheless, there is generally a strong discrepancy between a

society's norms and values and the everyday social reality, and this discrepancy is finally the motor that drives social change. Although conceptual models, norms, and values shape social institutions and real social behavior in many ways, they never do this completely. From the perspective of children's scope for autonomy and agency, there is a clear need to qualify the concepts of the "independent" and "interdependent self" or the "power distance" with which cultural psychology tries to portray differences in the ideal basic orientations of various societies. If we look at the daily lives of children in an average Western European family, we can see that they have far less real scope for autonomy, even though children's individuality and autonomy are a central value in Western European child-rearing concepts. As pointed out above, this is due in part to the different family structures. The typical nuclear family in Western Europe with only a few members generally does not even give young children the opportunity to choose attachment figures other than their parents. In addition, the dominant discourse in society and the institutions entangled with it assigns parents the role of the "natural" and therefore automatically best caregivers for children and correspondingly grants them a legally codified right of custody.<sup>21</sup>

However, the markedly lower action scope of children in Western European societies compared to the Makassar is qualified quite fundamentally by two further factors. First, whereas, as we have seen, Makassar children can move around the village and the surrounding fields with their peers with hardly any adult "interference" as soon as they are sufficiently mobile and have an adequate grasp of language (by about the age of 3 years), Western European children are, almost without exception, supervised, guided, and led by adults – be it in the parental home, in day care, or in preschools. This is particularly the case in the urban context, whereas children in rural environments often have a somewhat larger freedom of movement because of the sufficient amount of free space available to them.<sup>22</sup> In my opinion, the different degrees of social institutionalization and the accompanying centralization of child supervision have yet to receive enough attention in cultural psychological research. Viewed from the perspective of children's agency, children in Makassar society have much more free space that is controlled only peripherally by adults

<sup>21</sup> In this context, one should recall the length of the processes needed to take custody away from parents or one parent if they are unable to care appropriately for, or even deliberately injure, their child.

<sup>22</sup> See Keller, Lohaus, Kuensemüller *et al.* (2004), who also stress that the differences between rural and big-city life-worlds seem to have a more fundamental impact on socialization practices and parenting styles than differences between cultures.

than children in Western Europe. Hence, on the level of concrete, everyday behavior, children in the hierarchically structured Makassar society – which is clearly one of the “power distant/vertical societies” that demands that children show adaptation, respect, obedience, and a subjugation of their own interests in the presence of adults – clearly have more action scope. From the age at which Makassar children are increasingly required to show respect and obedience, they spend increasingly less time in the direct presence of adults – thereby greatly defusing this imperative. In the Western European majority societies, the autonomy of the child, the fundamental equality of children and adults, and democratic child-rearing principles are emphasized in theory, but, in practice, children are supervised almost 24 hours a day, and adults guide and constrain their activities. Despite the egalitarian pedagogic ethos, adults are *de facto* those in power who impose clear limits on children’s strivings for autonomy. In summary, children’s autonomy and equality are a social ideal that either does not correspond to social reality or is something that would be hard to achieve in the increasingly complex environments of highly technological societies with the growing risks these impose on their children.

The second factor that impinges directly on children’s action scope results from which ideas about childhood learning are generated within a particular culture; that is, the ideas about when, what, how, and through whom children should learn. Cultural beliefs regarding timetables for developing competencies vary widely between societies along with the ideas about what lessons children should learn and who is “in charge” of teaching them (Halberstadt and Lozada, 2011). With regard to children’s agency, it is the dominant ideas within a culture or social group on how children learn that are particularly crucial. Halberstadt and Lozada (2011, p. 162) distinguish between two prototypes here: (1) cultural belief systems in which it is assumed that children learn primarily “via maturation” – that is, quasi-automatically – and (2) belief systems that conceive learning as a process requiring systematic instruction and teaching. For example, Tamang mothers in Nepal (Cole and Tamang, 1998), Chinese mothers in Taiwan (Chen and Luster, 2002), and Mayan mothers in Yucatan, Mexico (Gaskins, 1996) believe that development is largely maturational and that children mainly grow up “naturally.” In contrast, the Chetri in Nepal (Cole and Tamang, 1998), the Nso in Cameroon (Keller, 2003), and the Javanese in Indonesia (Geertz, 1959), for example, believe that learning is a process that requires teaching (see also Halberstadt and Lozada, 2011, p.162). Societies in which it is assumed that learning does not function without instruction can be further differentiated according to who is primarily responsible for this instruction. For example, the Javanese consider that the main responsibility lies with

the parents, whereas the Kipsigis in Kenya (Super and Harkness, 1982, 1986) assume that children learn by observing and imitating others, particularly their peers (Halberstadt and Lozada, 2011, p. 162). Such factors influence the given ideas on parental tasks. However, cultures cannot be classified completely in either one or the other prototype. Instead, it has to be assumed that whether children acquire knowledge by themselves or through purposeful instruction depends on its content – that is, on which abilities and competencies the children should learn in the specific society. For example, among the Makassar, the social hierarchy and etiquette are learned primarily through purposeful child-rearing strategies, whereas children learn practical abilities along with the necessary knowledge of agriculture successively through learning by doing – that is, by helping in the fields and in the household. The contents of the complex oral literature, as well as local history and genealogical knowledge, are acquired by listening to adults, whereby the children themselves determine the tempo and extent of this learning. The same applies to the acquisition of the ritual knowledge that is related primarily to the traditional belief system.<sup>23</sup> Basic knowledge of Islam in the form of the ability to recite the Koran, in contrast, is learned in the form of explicit instruction from local imams.<sup>24</sup> At the age of 7 years, this learning is then extended by the school as a major educational institution teaching fixed and centralized contents that go beyond local horizons.<sup>25</sup> When they are not at school, which they have to attend in the morning during the primary school years, Makassar children can themselves determine to a large extent the content, extent, and tempo of what they want to learn in most domains. Hence, here as well, they have a major scope for autonomy and thus have much opportunity to develop individually (Figure 5.2).

In contrast, children in contemporary Western European societies are fixed into a tight time schedule of pedagogic leisure time and learning programs, and competence expectations. This begins in day-care centers and nurseries, which children often attend after their first birthday, and continues in an increasingly regulated form in preschools. Despite the high value assigned to children's autonomy in child-rearing concepts and

<sup>23</sup> The Makassar in the highlands of south Sulawesi practice a syncretistic Islam. In other words, elements of the earlier, pre-Islamic belief system continue to be significant and particularly shape agricultural rituals as well as rites of passage.

<sup>24</sup> From about the age of 8 years, boys and girls go separately to the imam twice a week for instruction in reciting the Koran. As a rule, this instruction continues for 2 years or until the children can recite the entire Koran, this occasion being marked by a religious ritual.

<sup>25</sup> In Indonesia, school is compulsory for a minimum of 6 years. Six-year primary schools have been set up in all larger villages.



Figure 5.2 Makassar children playing with bamboo sticks with two wooden wheels (© Birgitt Röttger-Rössler, photographer Martin Rössler).

parenting goals, children's scope is extremely restricted on the action level. Educators, pediatricians, developmental psychologists, and other specialists use their research and their expert knowledge to define which motor, cognitive, social, and emotional competencies a "normal" child should have at which age and how parents and educators should best promote this. Parents – and, above all, the mothers – are viewed by the binding Western European ethnotheories as those most responsible for the healthy bodily, mental, and emotional development of their children. This is something they should promote purposefully, and they can refer to a vast amount of self-help literature that will help them to fulfill this task.

Without going into more detail, this rather simplistic comparison should suffice to show that the central concepts of "interdependent versus independent selves and societies" in cultural psychology refer primarily to cultural ideologies and can take completely different – and even contradictory – accents in social practice. In my opinion, it is important to extend these models by systematically taking the children's action scope into account. Important dimensions for this are (1) how far children have a choice regarding their main reference person and can shape their

attachments themselves; (2) how far they have the opportunity to shape some of their time autonomously and outside the direct control of adults; and (3) how far they are also able to codetermine their learning tempo – that is, to influence when and to what extent they acquire which socially and culturally anticipated competencies. In a recent paper, Heidi Keller (2012) has also pointed to the wide-ranging *action autonomy* of children in various non-Western cultures with a strong interdependent or “communal” orientation (p. 13). She defines *action autonomy* as “an individual’s capacity to act in a responsible and self-controlled way with respect to fulfilling responsibilities and obligations” and distinguishes it from *psychological autonomy*. The first, she argues, mainly extends to activities that are socially expected and thus “may be performed without negotiations of one’s own and others’ intentions and wishes,” while the second refers to the “inner world” – that is, to the individual’s own aspirations, wishes, and intentions (p. 14). However, my above reported findings lead me to question this dichotomy. Does not the remarkable influence Macasarese children may exercise on the choice of who will become their closest attachment figure, how they spend their days together with their peers, and to what extent they engage in learning demonstrate that their own aspirations and wishes – their “inner world” – is ascribed an important role by the local society? On the other hand, do not the multiple social regulations, obligations, and expectations which children in educated Western, middle-class contexts have to meet constitute a kind of heteronomy, a clear limitation on their own intentions and thus on their psychological autonomy?

### Conclusion

The primary goal of my chapter has been to use ethnographic material from Indonesia to point to some “cultural blind spots” in attachment research. From my perspective, these are as follows:

- (1) *The persistence of a strong “mother bias” in attachment research – that is, a failure to pay attention to local attachment models.* Attachment research with its rigid adherence to the strange situation, which primarily tests the interaction between mothers and children, is inappropriate for societies such as the Makassar that are characterized by alloparenting or multiple transgenerational caregiving as well as strong fosterage systems and corresponding “models of additive parenthood.”
- (2) *The failure to take account of local ideas on what is a sensitive and appropriate way of handling babies and young children.* This also includes the neglect of culture-specific ideas on childhood learning, on adequate forms of instruction, and on who is responsible for these. I have



given a brief sketch of how the responsibilities for child rearing and instruction are distributed among the Makassar and numerous other societies, and have shown how they are in no way predominantly the responsibility of parents or mothers – without even considering how these responsibilities change depending on a child’s age. However, when the tasks of the parents or mothers in one cultural group are considered to lie primarily in body-centered care, feeding, and protection from danger, and not so much in a purposeful pedagogy, it is misleading to confront mother–child dyads with pedagogic play tasks in the strange situation – as I have shown in my criticism of the studies by Zevalkink *et al.* Experimental tasks dedicated to a Western European and middle-class-specific education ideal are completely inappropriate for reflecting the local conceptions of parental sensitivity and competence.

- (3) *The almost complete neglect of children’s agency.* My concern has been to show that the systematic consideration of children’s scope for autonomy offers an important analytical tool for assessing the discrepancy between societal ideology and social reality. In this context, I have argued that the central culture psychological concepts of “independent” or “individual-centered” versus “interdependent” or “socio-centered” societies become unconvincing from an agent- and action-centered perspective.

The importance of the different ethnotheories on children’s competencies and their adequate development is something that I have only touched on implicitly. An appropriate judgment of parental sensitivities can be made only in relation to local ideas on what children should be able to do when; that is, only against the background of the specific cultural and social competence concepts.

Judging the attachment, care, child rearing, and competence models of the “non-White Majority World” (Gielen and Chumachenko, 2004) on the basis of WEIRD standards and norms is – as the Cameroonian psychologist Bame Nsamenang (2011, p. 235) so rightly points out – a drastic form of “cultural imperialism.” It is time for psychological attachment research to face up to such criticism and develop culture-sensitive models and procedures. Books such as the present volume are an important and encouraging step in this direction.

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