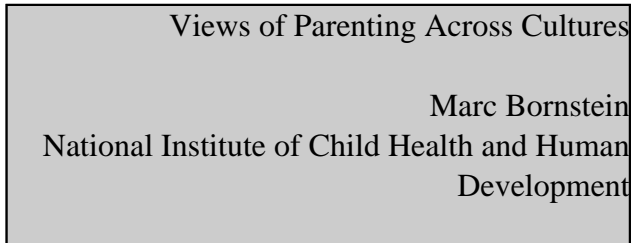


Invited Address: Have Your Cake and Eat It Too

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If you are gathering evidence to form your own response to the nature vs. nurture question, becoming familiar with the most current cross-cultural findings is a must. Specifically, looking at child development across cultures is essential to building a strong argument. At the APS Annual Convention, Marc Bornstein, National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, presented studies of parenting across cultures that provided evidence for both universal and culture specific mother-infant interactions that influence child development around the globe.

“Much, if not all, of behavior needs to be seen within a socio-cultural context,” Bornstein argued. As soon as research turned to analyzing cross-cultural data, the new findings undermined universality of Arnold Gesell’s systematic, yet monocultural, studies on child development. “Current studies show that babies in other cultures deviate from American infants both with respect to the stages and the timing of motor development,” Bornstein noted. “Psycho-motor achievement among European-American infants actually falls at the lower end of international comparisons.”

Bornstein’s talk centered on the pattern of mother-infant interactions across cultures. Six domains — physical (scaffolding psychomotor development), nurture (meeting biological needs), social (engaging emotionally), material (providing variety of toys), didactic (explaining the external world), and language (speaking to a child) — served Bornstein as an organizational framework for data collection. These central dimensions “can be identified as a prominent, perhaps, universal core,” he explained.

Bornstein illustrated the six dimensions of parenting with Renoir’s paintings of mothers and infants, and explained that according to his findings, “American mothers basically engage in the same range of behaviors that the Mrs. Renoir did in 19 th century Paris .”

The key question Bornstein addressed was what kind of scientific model could best describe the interplay of the parenting behaviors contained within the six domains. Are the patterns consistent across cultures? Do the six domains exist independently of one another (modular model), or do they cohere in a single dimension (one factor model)? “Our focus was on the level of lived experiences that are key to understanding parenting and child development,” Bornstein said.

Bornstein videotaped mother-infant routine interactions at home noting the rates of occurrences per hour. He used the “mutually exclusive and exhaustive coding system” to provide the most accurate description of parent and infant behavior. Bornstein conducted his study in the United States and then

extended his research to fifteen other countries. Each time, the methodology was consistent with the domestic experiment.

According to Bornstein, parenting differs across the cultures in every one of the six domains. For example, “Italian mothers speak much more to their infants than Belgian mothers,” and US mothers are in the middle of this distribution.

“Mothers in different cultures show some striking similarities in interacting with their infants,” but at the same time they “interact in culturally specific ways,” Bornstein noted.

Bornstein proposed a bi-dimensional model of parenting that is expressed in six domains. One underlying factor (dyadic focus) accounts for positive correlations among nurture, physical, social, didactic and language domains. The second factor (extradyadic focus) describes the positive relationship of didactic and material scores and negative relationship of nurture. “Theorists who see parenting as more unified and those who see parenting as more multidimensional are both correct,” he said. “You can have a cake and eat it, too.”

Bornstein challenged the assumption that “the overall level of parenting affects children’s overall functioning.” “Mothers and infants show specificity and attunement among behaviors,” he said. For instance, mothers who encourage physical development raise infants who achieve higher levels of physical development. To explain this relationship Bornstein formulated what he called a Specificity Principle: “*Specific* experiences parents provide children at *specific* times exert *specific* effects over *specific* aspects of child growth in *specific* ways.” “This is why our field is so difficult,” he laughed. Nevertheless, Bornstein’s research adds to the evidence for the strong nature and nurture interplay in human development.