Sensitive Parenting as Universal Ideal:

Beliefs About Sensitive Parenting Among Mothers in Zambia and Mothers from a Minority and Majority Group in The Netherlands

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Abstract

Empirical evidence shows that maternal sensitivity and child attachment are universal phenomena and cross-cultural differences in its quality have been examined extensively. However, less is known about cultural differences or similarities in maternal beliefs about sensitive parenting. The current study tested the hypothesis that mothers from Zambia, Moroccan immigrant mothers in the Netherlands and Dutch mothers generally have similar beliefs about sensitive parenting. The total sample consisted of 75 mothers with at least one child between 6 months and 6 years old. Maternal views about an ideal mother assessed with the Maternal Behavior Q-Sort (Pederson, Moran, & Bento, 1999) showed high agreement between the groups of mothers. In addition, in all groups of mothers the sensitivity beliefs showed strong overlap with the notion of a highly sensitive mother as described by experts in the field of child and family studies. These findings suggest that sensitive parenting is seen as ideal across cultural and ethnic groups, which implies that it might be possible to use the same interventions and measurements for maternal sensitivity in different ethnic and cultural contexts.

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Introduction

Every woman who becomes a mother is different. Mothers all over the world have their own unique personalities, values, history of experiences, cultural background and personal circumstances. All these things shape her ideas about parenting and her beliefs about how to be a good mother for her child. These parenting beliefs, or parental ethnotheories, refer to conceptions about what constitutes effective child rearing (LeVine, 1988; Keller, Voelker, & Yovsi, 2005) and are related to developmental goals (LeVine, 1974; Richman, Miller, & LeVine, 1992). Parenting beliefs are reflected in parenting behavior, of which maternal sensitivity is an important aspect. Emerging from her extensive observational study in Uganda in the mid fifties (Ainsworth, 1967), Mary Ainsworth described the concept of maternal sensitivity as a mother's ability to be aware of and perceive a child's signals, to interpret them correctly, and to respond to these signals promptly and appropriately (Ainsworth, Bell, & Stayton, 1974). Using this concept, research has shown a high correlation between maternal sensitivity and positive developmental outcomes in the child. One of these outcomes is attachment quality. According to attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969/1982), every child around the world has the inborn tendency to become attached to his or her primary caregiver, mostly the mother. The child uses the mother as a safe haven in times of distress and as a secure base from which to explore when stress is low. The quality of the attachment relationship highly depends on the mother's sensitivity, as shown by several studies reporting on the (causal) link between sensitive parenting and attachment security (de Wolff & Van IJzendoorn, 1997; Bakermans-Kranenburg, Van IJzendoorn & Juffer, 2008). A secure attachment relationship seems to be the normative pattern around the world (Van IJzendoorn & Sagi-Schwartz, 2008). Other related positive child outcomes of maternal sensitivity are for example emotion regulation and cognitive competence (Cassidy, 1994; Riksen-Walraven & Zevalkink, 2000). The associations between sensitive parenting and child outcomes are also found across different ethnic and cultural groups (Mesman et al., 2011; Van IJzendoorn & Sagi-Schwartz, 2008).

However, less is known about the maternal beliefs about sensitive behavior. What are mothers' beliefs about sensitivity and to what extent do mothers from different cultural and ethnic groups agree or disagree in their views about sensitive parenting? Although cultural and ethnic differences in maternal sensitivity are frequently found (Mesman et al., 2011), very few studies have been conducted to investigate maternal

beliefs about sensitive parenting across cultures yet. This study is designed to test the hypothesis that maternal beliefs about sensitive parenting are similar across different cultural groups. In this study we examine these beliefs in Zambian mothers, Dutch mothers, and Moroccan immigrant mothers in the Netherlands.

Universal applicability of maternal sensitivity

By replication of the Ugandan results in their Baltimore study, Ainsworth and Witting (1969) found support for a universal applicability of the concept of maternal sensitivity. In addition, some of the constructs underlying this concept can be seen as logical consequences of an evolutionary adaptation of humanity and therefore as universal. For instance awareness of signals of the child which assumes availability and proximity of the mother. Both are necessary to protect and feed the child, which are basic needs in every culture in order to survive. In addition, universality of responsiveness is shown in the tendency of mothers from all over the world to respond to a child's signal quickly, in order to enhance the chance of survival of their offspring (Keller, Lohaus, Völker, Cappenberg, & Chasiotis, 1999; Kärtner, Keller, & Yovsi, 2010).

Despite the universality of the general level of responsiveness among mothers, interpretations of a child's signals are subject to cultural differences (Mesman, Van IJzendoorn, & Bakermans-Kranenburg, 2012). There are also cultural differences in the way mothers express their tendency to be responsive (Bornstein et al., 1992; Kärtner et al., 2008). For example, Gusii mothers from Western Kenya are mainly physically responsive to their children in contrast to European-American mothers who prefer verbal and visual responsiveness (Richman, et al., 1992). Also German mothers focus more on personal interaction and vocal stimulation in contrast to Nso mothers from Cameroon who prefer proximal care like body contact as parenting practices (Keller, Voelker, & Yovsi, 2005). These differences in parental behaviors may arise from specific ideas about what a child needs and different child-rearing goals, which are guided by cultural beliefs (Super & Harkness, 1996). In Western cultures, fostering self-dependence and individualism are seen as important components of child-rearing, while in most non-Western cultures the emphasis is on interdependence and collectivism (Harkness, Super, & Van Tijen, 2000).

There are some empirical studies that suggest a functional relationship between parental beliefs, parental behavior and the development of the child. Parenting behavior that is influenced by specific cultural beliefs about childrearing is found to promote

culturally desired developmental outcomes. For example, initiating proximal caretaking in the form of regular body contact with infants has been found to be related to obedience at the age of two years in children of Cameroonian Nso farmers (Keller, Yovsi et al., 2004). Both proximal caretaking and obedience are highly valued in interdependence and collectivistic cultures like that of the Nso farmers (Keller, 2007). Likewise, distal parenting in the form of gaze and vocal stimulation is related to an earlier development of the autonomous self-concept in toddlers from Greek urban middle-class families. Greece is an example of an independent culture in which both distal parenting and toddler's autonomy are of great value (Keller, 2007; LeVine, 1994).

Thus, although the availability and the level of responsiveness of the mother seem to evolve from evolutionarily processes and are therefore similar across cultures, the interpretation of signals and how a mother responds to these signals depends on the cultural context. In other words, conformity in beliefs about these core elements of sensitivity does not automatically translate in similar parenting behaviors. In addition, whether a response can be interpreted as sensitive or not is also influenced by cultural context. The same response that is appropriate and satisfying for a child in one culture, can be misplaced and lead to less positive child outcomes in another culture. Not the content, but the influence of the mother's response on the child's behavior is what determines whether the response was sensitive or not (Ainsworth, Bell, & Stayton, 1974; Mesman, Oster, & Camras, 2012). In this sense, different maternal responses can be equally sensitive depending on the cultural context.

Maternal sensitivity: The role of minority and majority status

If cross-cultural differences in parenting behavior can be explained by different parenting goals and beliefs, it may be expected that the same association is true for sensitive parenting behavior and sensitivity beliefs. Cross-cultural similarities in sensitivity beliefs may lead to overlap in *sensitive* parenting behaviors in mothers from different cultural background. However, differences in sensitive behavior are existent across cultural groups (Mesman, Van IJzendoorn, & Bakermans-Kranenburg, 2012). Therefore, there need to be other explanations for the differences in sensitive behaviors of mothers for different cultural backgrounds. In addition to cultural factors, other contextual factors may influence sensitive parenting behavior. According to Kohn's conceptual model of parental values and maternal behavior (1963), parents from different social classes differ in their values and beliefs about parenting which results in

different parental behavior. The fact that social class and ethnicity are often highly interrelated may partly explain the relationship found between ethnic background and parental sensitive behavior. Generally, parental sensitivity is found to be lower in ethnic minority families. However, this association often disappears or becomes substantially smaller when low socioeconomic status is controlled for (Yaman, Mesman, Van IJzendoorn, Bakermans-Kranenburg, & Linting, 2010; Mesman, Van IJzendoorn, & Bakermans-Kranenburg, 2012). An explanation for this finding can be found in the Family Stress Model (Conger et al., 1992, 1993), which assumes that stress factors in the family such as economic hardship or lack of social support produce more strain on the family, which leads to higher parental emotional distress. This, in turn, impacts their parenting behaviors and may cause non-optimal parental behavior (Conger & Donnellan, 2007). This model may be especially true for families from ethnic minority groups, who generally face more socioeconomic stress than families from majority groups (National Poverty Center, 2009). Empirical support for the applicability of the Family Stress Model to ethnic minority families comes from several studies including African Americans (Conger et al., 2002) and Chinese Americans (Benner & Kim, 2010).

However, some studies still find an effect of minority status on sensitive behavior after controlling for socioeconomic status. This indicates that other factors besides socioeconomic stress play a role as well. Other stressors like living in an unsafe neighborhood, single motherhood and teenage pregnancy are also more common in ethnic minority groups compared to ethnic majority groups (Mather, 2010; Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau, 2009), and have been found to have a negative impact on parenting behaviors (Riksen-Walraven & Zevalkink, 2000). In addition, ethnic minority families may have to deal with stressors that specifically arise from their minority status like discrimination, illegal status or acculturation stress. There is some evidence that mothers who just arrived in a country are more anxious in their child rearing behaviors than those who settled earlier (Van IJzendoorn, 1990). Given the influence of this broad range of family stress factors on parenting behavior, it is important to take these into account when explaining findings of lower maternal sensitivity in ethnic minority mothers.

Maternal beliefs about the securely attached child (AQS) and the optimal sensitive mother (MBQS)

Although sensitivity *behaviors* of mothers can differ across cultures and ethnic groups, it should not automatically be assumed that this is caused by a difference in maternal *beliefs* about sensitive parenting. As mentioned, differences in sensitive behavior can be caused by a difference in cultural interpretations of a child's signal or by external stress factors that result in non-optimal parental behavior. The major role of culture also applies to maternal beliefs in general. For example, parental beliefs about whether young infants can be spoiled or not and beliefs that underlie disciplining methods are highly influenced by cultural context (Lansford et al., 2005; Burchinal, Skinner, & Reznick, 2010). However, although *general* maternal beliefs about parenting may differ across cultures and ethnic groups, *specific* beliefs about the core elements of sensitive parental behavior including availability and responsiveness appear to be universal and may result in similar sensitivity beliefs among mothers from different cultures and ethnic groups.

Nevertheless, the attachment relationship between mother and child is a dyadic relationship in which both parties have their specific contribution. So not only mothers' views of their own parenting behavior, but also their ideas about how an ideal child should behave are important. In their cross-cultural-study, Posada et al. (1995) focused on maternal beliefs about aspects of the child's behavior and examined whether cultural differences in developmental goals result in different maternal views of how an ideal child should behave regarding secure base behavior. To address this issue, they conducted a study in which mothers from seven different cultures were asked to describe their view of an ideal child. In addition, experts from the same seven cultures were asked to describe their view of an optimal securely attached child. To do so, an adapted version of the Attachment Q-Set (AQS) was used. The AQS was originally developed to describe the extent to which the behavior of a child contains secure-based behavior (Waters & Deane, 1985). This can be assessed by relating the behaviors of children aged 0-4 years to the profile of an optimally secure attached child, as described by experts in the social research field. As a variation on the original intent of the AQS, Posada et al. (1995) used this instrument to gain insight into cultural similarities and differences regarding how mothers think an ideal child should behave and compared these findings with the experts' views of a securely attached child. The correlations between the AQS descriptions of the mother from different cultural groups were high (range r = .33 - .58) and also the experts highly agreed in their view about the hypothetical most securely

attached child (range r = .74 - .94). In addition, the mothers' descriptions of the ideal child correlated highly with the experts' views of an optimal securely attached child (range r = .67 to .91), showing that mothers and experts from different cultures have highly similar beliefs about the importance and characteristics of secure-base behavior in young children (Posada et al., 1995).

The present study is inspired by the study of Posada and colleagues (1995) and uses the Maternal Behavior Q-Sort (MBQS) to examine the extent in which mothers from different cultures and ethnic backgrounds have different or similar beliefs about sensitive parenting. The MBQS was originally developed to assess a mother's interactive behavior with the child indicating the extent she fits a prototypically sensitive mother (Pederson, Moran & Bento, 1999). Using the MBQS and the AQS, Pederson et al. (1990) found mothers of more securely attached infants to behave in a more sensitive way than mothers from less securely attached infants. In the present study the MBQS is, just like the AQS, treated in a different way than it is originally designed to and used to assess maternal beliefs of the ideal mother. In addition to this, these maternal beliefs are compared to the views of experts in child development and attachment theory of an ideal sensitive mother. While the study of Posada et al. (1995) focused on one side of the dyadic relationship between mother and child; namely the contribution of a child's behavior to the quality of the attachment relationship, this study will take the other side of this relationship into account. By measuring maternal beliefs of how the behavior of an ideal mother should look, the present study will contribute to a more full understanding of the establishment of the dyadic relationship between mother and child.

Maternal beliefs: Other possible influences

To test whether similarities or differences in maternal beliefs are due to factors other than ethnicity or social position, the following background variables are examined: age of the mother, number of children, maternal educational level, family income and the importance of religion in child rearing. Previous research has shown that maternal age is related to parental behavior, with younger mothers at greater risk for a harsh parenting style (Lee & Guterman, 2010). Given the relation between values and beliefs and parenting practices (Kohn, 1963), the effect of ethnicity on maternal beliefs of sensitive parenting may be explained by differences in maternal age between the ethnic groups. Also the number of children in a family could influence the relation between ethnicity and maternal beliefs, given the fact that having many children is more common in

specific cultures or ethnic groups. Consequently, this brings more responsibilities and possibly more family stress, which may result in parenting beliefs that converge less with Ainsworth's concept of sensitive parenting. Family income has been shown to be a strong mediating and moderating factor in the relationship between ethnicity and parental *behavior* (Bakermans-Kranenburg, Van IJzendoorn, & Kroonenberg, 2004). Since parental behavior and parental beliefs are strongly connected (Kohn, 1963; Luster, Rhoades, & Haas, 1989), it may also be that family income is a mediator in the relation between ethnicity and parenting *beliefs*. Another socio-economic factor that is examined in this study is maternal education. Educational level is not only related to parental skills, knowledge and cognitive strategies that facilitate parenting behaviors, but also shapes values and beliefs that will be applied in parenting (Brody & Flor, 1998; Davis-Kean, 2005; Eccles, 2005). For this reason, differences in educational level between the ethnic groups may be an explanatory factor for differences in maternal beliefs about sensitive parenting. Finally, religion is a factor that significantly influences parental beliefs (Shor, 1998). Research about the specific influence of religion in child rearing shows contradictory findings. On the one hand, corporal punishment may be acceptable and more manifest in some religious groups (Wiehe, 1990), and is found to be related to less sensitive parenting (Mulvaney & Mebert, 2007). On the other hand, religious involvement is found to be associated with more positive parent-child interactions (Wilcox, 1998) and less inconsistent parenting (Brody, Stoneman, Flor, & McCrary, 1994), which both relate to sensitive parenting behavior. However, most findings show some influence of religion on child rearing, which makes it important to consider differences that mothers attribute to the importance of religion in childrearing as a possible moderator in the relation between ethnicity and maternal beliefs about sensitive parenting.

Cultural background: Zambian, Dutch and Moroccan immigrant mothers

Zambia, an independent country since October 1964, demographically lies in Southern Africa; east of Angola and south of the democratic republic of Congo. The population of Zambia includes 14 million people, from which 1.4 million live in the capital city Lusaka. The total population can be divided into more than 70 different tribes and although the official language in Zambia is English, more than 72 different African dialects are spoken. Almost the half of the population is aged between 0 and 14 years (Central Intelligence Agency, 2013). A main characteristic of the traditional African

child care includes carrying the child on the back, where the child sits in an upright position facing the back of the mother, resting in a typical Zambian cloth, named ‘chitenge’. To place the child in this position it is gripped by one arm and swinged over the shoulder, after which the mother places the chitenge under the back of the child, passes it over one shoulder and knots it in the front. In the first few months, the infant is located in this position most of the day and sleeps with the mother at night, resulting is almost constantly physical contact and stimulation (Mooya, 2012). When the child grows older, the child is still often carried on the back in order to transport the child. This way of handling and carrying a young infant is also seen in the Moroccan culture but highly contrasts with parenting practices common in Western countries, where the frequency and intensity of physical contact between mother and child is much lower (Goldberg, 1972). In this study, Zambian mothers were compared to Moroccan immigrant mothers and Dutch mothers from different educational backgrounds. Although Zambian and Moroccan mothers may be more similar regarding parenting practices, the fact that the Moroccan mothers form a minority group in the Netherlands gives the opportunity to compare different cultures as well as mothers from a minority versus majority groups. Most Moroccan families migrated to the Netherlands around the 1960’s, looking for a job and a better life. Nowadays they form one of the largest ethnic groups in the Netherlands and their population is still increasing due to second-generation immigrants (Distelbrink & Hooghiemstra, 2005). Parenting practices in the Moroccan culture are influenced by their collectivistic background, in which parenting goals like obedience and loyalty to the family are more valued than in the individualistic Dutch culture where focus is on independence and autonomy of the child. The collectivistic values from the Moroccan culture are found to remain important in later-generation immigrants (Arends-Toth & Van de Vijver, 2003; Phalet, & Schönpflug, 2001). The individualistic ideology in the Netherlands results in more distal parenting practices and a focus on visual instead of physical contact (Kärtner, Keller & Yovsi, 2010). Taken together, by inclusion of mothers from two majority groups (Zambian and Dutch) and one minority group (Moroccan), comparisons in sensitivity beliefs can be made between cultures and with regard of being part of a minority or majority group. In addition, Zambian and Moroccan mothers can be compared with Dutch mothers with different educational backgrounds.

The current study

The main goal of this study is to investigate whether beliefs about sensitive parenting are different or similar between Zambian mothers, Dutch mothers and Moroccan immigrant mothers in the Netherlands. Furthermore, specific background variables will be tested in relation to maternal sensitivity beliefs. In view of the universal applicability of the sensitivity construct, the evolutionary basis of some of the elements of this construct, and the cross-cultural similarity in beliefs about children's secure-base behavior found by Posada et al. (1995), it is hypothesized that mothers from different cultures and ethnic groups generally have similar beliefs about sensitive parenting.

Method

Participants

The total sample consists of 75 mothers: 45 Dutch majority mothers, 15 Moroccan mothers living in the Netherlands, and 15 Zambian mothers living in the capital city of Zambia. All mothers were recruited via convenience sampling or the so called 'ancestry approach'. The Moroccan mothers were second-generation immigrants born in the Netherlands or first generation immigrants who immigrated to the Netherlands before the age of 11. The Dutch group of mothers consisted of 45 women equally distributed across low, middle and high educational levels. The data from the Dutch and Moroccan subgroups was collected in a study conducted at the department of Child and Family Studies at the University Leiden. The administering of the measure (MBQS) with the Moroccan and Dutch mothers took place in their homes, communicating in Dutch. The Zambian participants were either students from the University of Zambia or friends of the students or known people from outside the university. The meetings with the Zambian mothers were conducted in English; the language ability of all Zambian mothers was fluent *(n = 12)* or moderate *(n = 3).* All mothers had a least one child aged between 6 months and 6 years. The age of the total sample of mothers ranged from 21-46 years with an average of 32 years *(SD* = 5.47*).* The average number of children was 2, with a minimum of 1 and a maximum of 6 children *(SD* = .90*).* [Table 1]

Procedure

The Zambian mothers were invited to the University of Zambia or were visited at home to participate. Background information about the study was given to the mothers before starting the procedure *(Appendix 1)*. They were given opportunity to ask questions. All mothers gave written consent before participating and were asked to fill in a form with contact details and a questionnaire. After these proceedings the MBQS was introduced to the mothers. An investigator was present to answer questions during the whole procedure. It was explicitly stated to the participants that no right or wrong answers were possible. Questions about the content of the items of the MBQS were answered according to a standard protocol.

Measures

Maternal Behavior Q-Sort

The Maternal Behavior Q-Sort (Pederson & Moran, 1990) was used to assess the views of mothers from different ethnic backgrounds as to what constitutes an 'ideal' mother. The MBQS is a set of 90 cards, with a description of a specific maternal interactive behavior on each card; for example, 'responds immediately to cries/whimpers' (item 64) or 'notices when her child smiles and vocalizes' (item 1). Originally the MBQS was developed to assess maternal sensitivity behavior during a 2 or 3 hour home-observation of interaction with her child. The 90 items of the MBQS focus for example on the extent to which mothers show contingent, coherent and warm responses to infant behaviors and signals (Tarabulsy, Provost, Bordeleau, et al., 2009) and are based on Ainsworth's construct of maternal sensitivity (Ainsworth, Bell & Strayton, 1974).

For the current study the 90 cards were used to assess the beliefs about the ideal mother from mothers of different ethnic backgrounds. Therefore, the items on the cards were reformulated and simplified to make them understandable for mothers with different educational levels. The mothers were asked to distribute the cards into nine stacks of ten cards each. On their left hand they had to stack cards that did not fit their views of an ideal sensitive mother and on their right hand they made a stack of cards that fit their views of an ideal sensitive mother really well. To simplify the procedure the mothers were first asked to distribute the 90 cards into three stacks, namely: 'Do not fit the ideal mother at all', 'Don't know if it fits an ideal mother' and 'Fits an ideal mother really well'. It was strongly emphasized that the descriptions on the card were not about the mothers' own behavior but referred to what an ideal mother should do or should not

do. After the mothers made three stacks they were asked to distribute the stacks further into nine smaller stacks. The last step was to evenly distribute the cards among the nine stacks so that in the end each stack contained ten cards exactly.

A maternal sensitivity belief score can be derived from the collected data, this score is the correlation between the mothers' Q-sort and a criterion sort. The criterion sort used in this study is provided by a group of ten Dutch academic experts on child development and the attachment theory. The Dutch criterion sort is highly correlated to the original criterion sort provided by Canadian experts (r = .94) (Emmen et al., 2012). The MBQS has shown a predictive association with attachment security (Van IJzendoorn, Vereijken, Bakermans-Kranenburg, & Riksen-Walraven, 2004). In addition, adequate convergent validity of the MBQS has been shown by correlating maternal sensitivity scores with scores on other measures of maternal sensitive behaviors like the Ainsworth scales (Moran et al., 1992).

Questionnaire

The questionnaire consisted of different parts, which can be divided into cultural and background variables.

Cultural variables

The questionnaire contained 9 items concerning maternal attitudes toward sensitivity in child rearing. These items were measured with a 5-point scale ranging from 'completely disagree' (1) to 'completely agree' (5). In addition, the mothers were asked about their religion and the importance of religion in parenting by means of a self-developed instrument (VIPP-TR study, University Leiden). The 4 items used were measured with a 5-point scale ranging from 'totally disagree' (1) to 'totally agree' (5). Finally, the mothers were asked 16 questions about values regarding collectivism and individualism. This 7-point scale measured the extent to which the mothers fit the ideas of vertical collectivism, vertical individualism, horizontal collectivism and horizontal individualism (Triandis & Gelfand, 1998).

Background variables

The questionnaire is also used in order to gain background information from the participants; for example mothers were asked to fill in number of children, age of children, age of the mother, country of birth, spoken language ability and educational

level. To assess the social economic status the mothers were asked questions about employment (mother and father) and family income. For the Zambian mothers there was an added part that consisted of questions concerning the presence of specific properties in the participants' home like a car, flushable toilet or television.

Results

Differences between groups in background variables and sensitivity belief score

Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics for each group of mothers. One-way ANOVAs were used to test whether there are significant differences between the groups regarding background variables and sensitivity belief scores. Subsequently, LSD tests were used for post hoc comparisons.

For maternal age, the Zambian mothers and the Dutch mothers with a low education were significantly younger than the Dutch mothers with a high education. No differences were found in average number of children of the mothers from the different groups. The mean educational level for both the Zambian and the Moroccan mothers was higher compared to the low-educated Dutch mothers and lower compared to the high-educated Dutch mothers. As expected, the average family income of the high-educated Dutch mothers was higher than that from all other groups. Concerning religion in childrearing, two separate analyses were done, one using the whole sample and one with religious mothers only. For the whole sample, both Zambian and Moroccan mothers considered religion to be more important than the Dutch mothers, regardless of level of education. No significant differences between the Zambian and Moroccan mothers were found. Among the religious mothers, Zambian and Moroccan mothers were found to perceive religion as being more important than the high-educated Dutch mothers.

The Zambian and Dutch mothers differed significantly on the mean sensitivity belief score, regardless educational level of the Dutch mothers. Dutch mothers had higher scores on the sensitivity beliefs variable than Zambian mothers. Higher sensitivity belief scores were also found for the Moroccan mothers compared to Zambian mothers and significantly lower scores were found for the Moroccan mothers compared to high-educated Dutch mothers. After subdividing the whole sample (N = 75) into low- (n = 22), middle- (n = 26) and high- (n = 27) educated mothers the mean

sensitivity belief scores did not differ significantly between groups, $F(2,72) = 1.84$, $p = 0.17$. Mean sensitivity belief scores also did not differ between low educated ($n = 6$) and high educated ($n = 9$) Zambian mothers, ($p = .83$).

Composite sorts of the ideal sensitive mother in different groups

Composite sorts for the different groups were constructed to investigate whether mothers from the different groups had similar ideas about an ideal sensitive mother. Each composite sort consists of the average score from the fifteen separate sorts from each group. As shown in Table 2, all composite sorts correlated highly with each other, which means that the mothers from all groups had largely similar ideas of how an ideal mother should behave. The highest correlation was found for the middle-educated and low-educated Dutch mothers ($r = .98$), and the lowest correlation for the high-educated Dutch mothers and the Zambian mothers ($r = .92$).

All composite scores of the mothers highly correlated with the composite score of the experts (range $r = .84$ - $.90$), indicating a large concordance in the views of the experts and the mothers about how an ideal mother should behave, and also showing that mothers' views of the ideal mother correspond to the experts' notion of the highly sensitive mother. However, the correlations found between the composite sorts of the different groups of mothers were significantly higher than the correlations between the composite sorts of the mothers and the composite sort of the experts.

Differences in maternal view of the ideal sensitive mother within and across groups

To answer the question whether mothers' views of an ideal mother differed more across than within groups, correlations between all pairs of sorts on the MBQS were calculated within and across the groups, which are shown in Table 3. The mean correlations of the mothers' views of the ideal mother within groups ($M = .74$, range = .61 - .80) were found to be similar to the mean correlations across groups ($M = .72$, range = .64 - .79), indicating that the views of the mothers from the different groups were not more divergent than the views of the mothers within the same group.

Concerning the experts, the mean correlation within the experts group was a little higher ($M = .88$, range = .80 - .92) than the mean correlations between the experts and mothers ($M = .71$, range = .63 - .77), which shows that the experts themselves had more similar views of an ideal sensitive mother compared to the views of experts and mothers.

However, both correlations are still high which means that the experts and mothers highly agreed in their views of an ideal mother.

Differences across groups on item level

Independent samples t-tests were performed to determine whether there are differences in how characteristic Zambian mothers found each item for the ideal mother, compared to the mothers from the other groups. To correct for the number of tests conducted, we only looked at items with a significance level of $p < .01$, which yielded 13 items with significant differences that are shown in Table 4. Independent samples t-tests were also used to determine if there were items on which mothers from all groups had highly similar scores. Three items were highly similar between all groups ($p > .90$), namely item 16; *"During ongoing interactions, misses, slow down or back off signals from child"* ($M = 2.56$, $SD = 1.02$), item 51: *"Provides age appropriate toys"* ($M = 7.01$, $SD = 1.12$) and item 55:*"Respects child as an individual, i.e. able to accept child's behavior even if it is not consistent with her wishes"* ($M = 5.37$, $SD = 2.18$).

Correlations between background variables and sensitivity belief scores

To explore the relation between background variables and sensitivity belief scores correlations were computed and are shown in table 5. A dummy variable was constructed for ethnicity, namely 'Zambian' (1) vs. 'other' (0). A significant correlation was found between ethnicity and sensitivity belief score. Zambian mothers had a significant lower sensitivity belief score than mothers with a Moroccan or Dutch ethnicity. No other background variables were correlated with sensitivity beliefs but there were some significant correlations between the other background variables. First, ethnic background was found to be correlated with religion in child rearing in the whole sample, showing that Zambian and Moroccan immigrant mothers found religion in child rearing more important compared to the Dutch mothers. This correlation was not longer significant when only the religious mothers from the sample were selected, $r\ (48) = .22$, $p = .12$. Significant correlations were also found between the age of the mothers and family income and between age of the mothers and educational level. Older mothers had a significantly higher family income and a higher educational level. In addition, older mothers had significantly more children than the younger mothers. Finally, a significant correlation was found between maternal educational level and family income. Mothers with a higher educational level had a significantly higher family income.

Because the subgroups of the Zambian and Moroccan mothers include all educational levels, a correlation between sensitivity belief score and educational level was calculated within the Zambian and Moroccan subgroup. For both the Zambian and the Moroccan mothers, no significant correlations were found between sensitivity belief scores and education level, r (14) = -.001, p = 1.00; r (14) = .40, p = .14.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to investigate cross-cultural similarities and differences in maternal beliefs about sensitive parenting. To address this issue, comparisons of the beliefs about the ideal mother were made between Zambian mothers, Dutch mothers and Moroccan immigrant mothers in the Netherlands. Consistent with the hypothesis that mothers from different cultural backgrounds generally have similar beliefs about sensitive parenting, high overlap was found in the sensitivity beliefs of the mothers from all groups, showing that the mothers strongly agreed about the characteristics of the ideal mother. In addition, the sensitivity beliefs of the mothers from all 3 ethnic groups showed a high convergence with the experts' views of a highly sensitive mother. This finding is in line with the study by Posada et al. (1995), who found moderate overlap in maternal views of an ideal child in mothers from seven different countries, and high overlap between these groups of mothers and experts' views of secure base behavior in children.

However, contrary to the main hypothesis, a significant difference was found in the beliefs about the ideal mother between the Zambian mothers and the mothers from the majority and minority group in the Netherlands, with these last two groups showing more overlap with the experts' views of an ideal sensitive mother compared to the Zambian mothers. There may be several explanations for these findings. First, the differences between the Zambian mothers and the mothers with a Dutch or Moroccan ethnicity might be due to cultural differences in parenting style. Item analysis showed that Zambian mothers differed significantly on some items that refer to the use of an interfering parenting style. Interfering parenting consists of maternal behaviors that do not take the child's autonomy into account, shows little respect for the child's wishes and/or interferes with the activities of the child (Ainsworth, 1969). These behaviors refer to the opposite of Ainsworth's definition of sensitivity. In the current study Zambian mothers evaluated item 59: "*let the child carry on with appropriate activity without*

interruption" as less fitting for the ideal mother compared to the mothers from the other ethnic groups. In addition, item 82: *"physical restriction of the child's movements while in proximity"* was viewed as less inappropriate parenting behavior by Zambian mothers compared to the mothers from the other ethnic groups.

These differences in maternal views regarding interfering parenting behavior might arise from culture-specific differences in the interaction patterns between mother and child. In Zambia, like in most African cultures, there is a great emphasis on physical contact between the mother and her infant or young child (Goldberg, 1972). Mothers carry children on their backs when going somewhere and while performing most of their daily tasks. It may be that this physical focus leads to a more interfering parenting style, but this explanation is purely speculative and future studies should examine this possibility. Although Lansford et al. (2005) found a more frequent use of physical discipline in African families compared to different Western and non-Western cultures and other studies reported more interfering parenting practices in African American than in European American families (McLoyd & Smith, 2002; Ispa, Fine, Halgunseth, Harper, Robinson, Boyce, et al., 2004), the influence of a stronger emphasis on physical contact between mother and the child on interfering parenting practices has not been studied yet and awaits empirical verification.

An interesting result however, is that Zambian mothers did not differ on all items that refer to interfering parenting behavior. For example, they highly agreed with the Moroccan immigrant- and the Dutch mothers on item 55:*"Respects child as an individual, i.e. able to accept child's behavior even if it is not consistent with her wishes"*, which is a clear indicator of Ainsworth's definition of sensitivity. However, high agreement on this item does not imply that the mothers from the different groups have the same idea about the concrete behaviors that show respect for their child's autonomy. Maternal behavior that differs in content can still be equally sensitive depending on the needs and responses of the child (Ainsworth, Bell, & Stayton, 1974; Mesman, Oster, & Camras, 2012).

An alternative explanation for the differences found between the maternal sensitivity beliefs of Zambian mothers and mothers with a Dutch or Moroccan ethnicity may be found in factors that were not measured or analyzed in the study, such as single motherhood (Riksen-Walraven & Zevalkink, 2000). Single mothers in Zambia face a social stigma which may result in psychological distress (Barrett & Turner, 2005). This in turn may, just as economic stress, negatively influence parenting behavior and

maternal beliefs about the ideal mother. In addition, statistics show that single motherhood is as high as 25-27% in Zambian families (DHS, 1997) compared to 6,7% in Dutch families (RIVM, 2011) and approximately 10% in Moroccan families who migrated to the Netherlands (NJI, 2013). Therefore it is encouraged that future studies examine the effect of single motherhood on maternal sensitivity beliefs.

In line with previous research, a significant difference was found in the sensitivity beliefs between the Moroccan immigrant mothers and the high-educated Dutch mothers. Moroccan mothers showed less overlap with the experts' notion of the ideal sensitive mother than Dutch mothers with a high educational background, but were similar in their sensitivity beliefs to the Dutch mothers with a low or medium educational background. This is consistent with the findings of Mesman, Van IJzendoorn and Bakermans-Kranenburg (2012) in their literature review on observed sensitivity in ethnic minority families. They found that parental sensitivity is generally lower in families with an ethic minority background than in ethnic majority families, with socioeconomic status (SES) as an important explanatory factor. SES is a broad construct which can be assessed with several indicators from which family income and educational level are the most commonly used. Berlin et al. (2002) found a strong influence of parental education on sensitivity, whereas Emmen et al. (2012) found empirical evidence for an influence of family income level on maternal sensitivity beliefs. Therefore, the significant difference in level of education between the Moroccan mothers and the high-educated Dutch mothers could be a possible explanation for the differences found in the sensitivity beliefs between these two groups. More years of formal education might shape the mothers' ideas and beliefs of what her child needs and how she should behave to meet these needs. However, in the current study sensitivity beliefs were not significantly different between low-, middle- and high- educated mothers in the total group. This indicates that differences in maternal sensitivity beliefs cannot be fully explained by educational level in this study and other explanatory factors need to be considered. For example, mothers from a low or medium SES background might experience more parenting stress than mothers from a high SES. In addition, research shows that low SES is related to less access to sources of social support (Dodge, Petit, & Bates, 1994). Social support is found to operate as a buffer in times of stress, which specifically results in more positive caregiving attitudes and practices compared to parents experiencing the same stress levels without access to sources of social support (Belsky, 1984; Andersen & Telleen, 1992; Burchinal, Follmer, & Bryant,

1996). It is plausible that a lack of social support not only negatively influences parenting practices, but also results in parenting beliefs that are less consistent with Ainsworths' description of a sensitive mother. Thus, the differences found in sensitivity beliefs between the Moroccan and Dutch mothers from a low and middle educational background compared to Dutch mothers with a high education might be explained by more stress due to less social support, but further research is needed to confirm this hypothesis.

The results also showed that there was somewhat more overlap in maternal views of the ideal mother between the groups of mothers than between the mothers and the experts' views of the highly sensitive mother. This discrepancy can be understood in light of the extensive education the experts have had regarding child development, which might have caused a slightly different view of how the ideal mother should behave in the experts compared to the mothers. Nevertheless, in all groups of mothers the overlap in the maternal views of an ideal mother and the experts' view of a highly sensitive mother was still high, indicating that the mothers' beliefs of an ideal mother highly converged with the experts' notion of the highly sensitive mother. The finding that the maternal views of the ideal mother were not more divergent across the groups of mothers than within groups of mothers confirms the hypothesis that mothers from different cultures generally have similar beliefs about sensitive parenting. When we relate this to the overlap with the experts' views of a highly sensitive mother it can be assumed that sensitive parenting is seen as ideal in Zambian mothers and mothers from a minority and majority group in the Netherlands.

The results of the current study should be interpreted in the light of some limitations of the study. The primary limitations can be found in the sample characteristics of the study. First, a small sample size may have caused a lack of power in the analyses leading to a lack of significant findings. Secondly, the use of a convenience sampling method could have resulted in limited representation of the target population. Other factors that might have reduced the representativeness of the samples include the facts that the Moroccan and Zambian mothers were not selected on educational level and the Zambian mothers represented mainly highly educated mothers. Future studies should include larger and more heterogeneous samples to investigate the role of education in maternal beliefs about sensitive parenting across cultures. Third, all Zambian mothers were recruited from the capital city of Zambia, so no mothers from rural areas were included in the study. It would be interesting to see whether there are

differences between groups of mothers living in the same country, but who are different with regard to living in an urban or rural environment. Especially in Zambia, the lifestyle of mothers living in urban areas is very different from those of mothers living in rural areas. For example, mothers in rural areas more often live in extended families where grandparents and other family members are highly involved in parenting the child (Tembo, 2007). Some men head for the towns to find work, while the women stay behind to take care of the children. The main tasks that need to be performed by the women include fetching water, collecting wood for cooking and cooking itself, growing food for the family and making local crafts to sell. This is in contrast with mothers living in urban areas, who are more often educated and more often have a job outside the home while a maid is looking after the household and the children during the day. In addition, urban parenting practices more often have been adapted as a result of contact with Western cultures (Mooya, 2012). Such differences in lifestyle may influence mothers' views of how an ideal mother should behave. Also, the fact that the data from the Zambian mothers was collected by a Western student could have biased the responses of the mothers, who were not very used to communicating with a person from outside their community. Finally, although the minority and majority groups living in the Netherlands were seen as two culturally different groups, all mothers from the minority group had been living in the Netherlands their whole life or migrated to the Netherlands before they were 11 years old. Therefore they were familiar with the parenting behaviors that are most common in the Netherlands, what might explain the similarity in the maternal views of an ideal mother in the minority and majority group. Future research could include more recent first-generation immigrants to examine cultural differences in beliefs about sensitive parenting.

Despite the methodological limitations of the study, the results provide important information for future research and practice. The overall finding of the study offers evidence that there is cross-cultural agreement in maternal sensitivity beliefs. This implies that mothers from different ethnic groups have the same ideas about how an ideal mother should behave. For this reason, attachment-based interventions with the focus on enhancement of maternal sensitive behavior may be used in different cultural settings. Also measurements that asses the maternal sensitive behavior may be used in different ethnic groups and countries that are culturally very different. However, further research should examine to what extent specific adaptations in the content of

interventions and instruments are needed for application in different cultures and ethnic groups.

Suggestions for future research on maternal sensitivity beliefs include the measurement of observed maternal sensitivity and attachment quality of the child in a longitudinal design. Multiple measurements over time can give insight in the direction of effects between maternal sensitivity beliefs, sensitive parenting behavior and developmental outcomes in the child. Extending the assessments to fathers will give more insight in the specific beliefs and behaviors that fathers from different cultures have regarding sensitive parenting. With reference to the Zambian context, it would be recommended to extend the assessments to caregivers in orphanages as well, since approximately 1.3 million Zambian children are orphaned, many of who growing up under the guidance of institutional caregivers (Biemba et al., 2008). A final recommendation for future research is to examine the possibility of a relationship between extensive physical contact between mother and child, as is common in most African cultures, and maternal sensitivity beliefs that fit less Ainsworth's comprehensive description of maternal sensitivity.

Taken together, the findings of the current study underscore the universality of the concept of sensitivity and confirm the idea that sensitive parenting is seen as ideal across cultures. Regardless of differences in cultural or ethnic background and the consequences for how mothers specifically interpret a child's signals, there is cross-cultural agreement in mothers' beliefs that sensitive responsiveness is very important in interactions with young children.

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Appendix A

Table 1
Descriptives of background variables and sensitivity belief scores

	Zambian	Moroccan	Dutch low	Dutch middle	Dutch high	*F*	*p*	Post Hoc (LSD)
Maternal educational level								
M (SD)	2.93 (0.88)	3.33 (0.82)	1.87 (0.35)	3.00 (0.00)	4.60 (0.51)	39.50	.000	Dh > Z, M, Dm, Dl
Range	2-4	1-4	1-2	3	4-5			Z, M, Dm > Dl
Family income [a]								
M (SD)	5.20 (1.70)	4.92 (1.38)	4.84 (0.90)	5.13 (1.19)	6.47 (0.92)	4.01	.006	Z, M, Dl, Dm < Dh
Range	2-7	2-7	3-6	3-7	4-7			
Maternal age								
M (SD)	30.07 (6.91)	32.20 (4.80)	29.20 (3.32)	34.20 (4.52)	35.93 (4.71)	4.73	.002	Dh > Z, M, Dl
Range	21-40	23-40	25-35	26-41	28-46			Dm > Z, Dl
Number of children								
M (SD)	2.33 (1.50)	2.40 (1.06)	2.07 (0.26)	2.13 (0.35)	2.13 (0.83)	0.37	.829	
Range	1-6	1-5	2-3	2-3	1-4			

Table 1
(continued)

	Zambian	Moroccan	Dutch low	Dutch middle	Dutch high	*F*	*P*	Post Hoc (LSD)
Religion in child rearing (whole sample) [b]								
M (SD)	17.07 (4.04)	17.00 (2.37)	6.93 (8.71)	8.20 (8.65)	5.07 (5.96)	10.78	.000	Z, M > Dl, Dm, Dh
Range	4-20	12-20	0-20	0-20	0-16			
Religion in child rearing (if religious) [c]								
M (SD)	17.07 (4.04)	17.00 (2.37)	14.86 (6.31)	15.38 (4.87)	10.86 (3.08)	2.86	.034	Z, M > Dh
Range	4-20	12-20	4-20	6-20	8-16			
Sensitivity belief score								
M (SD)	.64 (.15)	.72 (.11)	.76 (.04)	.74 (.04)	.79 (.05)	5.90	.000	Z < Dh, Dm, Dl, M;
Range	.29-.80	.36-.84	.69-.82	.67-.80	.73-.87			Dh > M

[a] Zambian *n* = 15, Moroccan *n* = 12, Dutch low *n* =13, Dutch middle *n* = 15, Dutch high *n* = 15.

[b] Zambian *n* = 15, Moroccan *n* = 12, Dutch low *n* = 15, Dutch middle *n* = 15, Dutch high *n* = 15

[c] Zambian *n* = 15, Moroccan *n* = 12, Dutch low *n* = 7, Dutch middle *n* = 8, Dutch high *n* = 7

Appendix B

Table 2

Pearson correlation coefficients among composite sorts a of the hypothetical ideal mother

	Zambian	Moroccan	Dutch low-educated	Dutch middle-educated	Dutch high-educated
Zambian	-				
Moroccan	.93	-			
Dutch low-educated	.93	.97	-		
Dutch middle-educated	.93	.97	.98	-	
Dutch high-educated	.92	.96	.97	.97	-
Dutch experts	.84	.88	.88	.86	.90

[a] composite sort = the average sort per group.

Appendix C

Table 3

Mean correlations among mothers' and experts' 90-items Q-sort descriptions of the ideal mother both within and across groups

	Zambian	Moroccan	Dutch low-educated	Dutch middle-educated	Dutch high-educated	Dutch experts
Zambian	**.61 (.19-.84)**					
Moroccan	.64 (.22-.85)	**.71 (.24-.84)**				
Dutch low-educated	.66 (.23-.85)	.74 (.30-.89)	**.79 (.64-.90)**			
Dutch middle-educated	.66 (.24-.83)	.74 (.30-.88)	.78 (.60-.89)	**.77 (.68-.86)**		
Dutch high-educated	.67 (.25-.84)	.74 (.27-.90)	.79 (.63-.90)	.78 (.60-.90)	**.80 (.70-.91)**	
Dutch experts	.63 (.25 -.80)	.71 (.31-.86)	.74 (.62-.85)	.72 (.59-.85)	.77 (.63-.90)	**.88 (.80-.92)**

Appendix D

Table 4

Items on which Zambian mothers differ significantly from other mothers

Item [a]	*Zambian M(SD)*	*Other M (SD)*	*Post hoc*
5. "Awkward and ill at ease during intimate interactions with child"	2.60 (1.12)	1.62 (.96)	Z > Dh, Dl
17 "Content and pace of interaction set by M rather than according to child's responses"	2.47 (1.25)	4.18 (1.30)	Z < M, Dh, Dm, Dl
19 "Places child in another room when child is in a bad mood or cranky"	2.93 (2.49)	4.35 (1.69)	Z < Dm
26 "Responds immediately to cries/whimpers"	6.40 (1.80)	4.88 (1.39)	Z > Dm, Dh
32 "Non-synchronous interactions with child, i.e., the timing of M's behavior out of phase with child's behavior"	4.27 (1.67)	3.17 (1.25)	Z > M, Dm, Dh
37 "Interferes with appropriate activity if it is likely to get child messy"	5.87 (2.17)	4.08 (1.12)	Z > M, Dl, Dm, Dh
57 "Shows delight in interaction with child"	6.67 (1.23)	7.88 (1.11)	Z < Dl, Dh
59 "Lets child carry on with appropriate activity without interruption"	4.80 (1.42)	6.38 (1.29)	Z < M, Dm, Dh
62 "Interprets cues correctly as evidenced by child's response"	5.93 (1.79)	7.78 (1.21)	Z < M, Dl, Dm, Dh
65 "Responds to child's signals"	5.87 (2.13)	7.22 (1.24)	Z < Dh
68 "Interactions appropriately vigorous and exciting as judged from child's responses"	5.53 (1.41)	6.92 (1.37)	Z < Dm, Dh
81 "Spontaneously expresses positive feelings to child"	7.60 (1.06)	8.50 (0.91)	Z < Dl, Dh
82 "Physically restricts child's movements while in proximity"	4.47 (1.92)	2.07 (1.02)	Z > M, Dl, Dm, Dh

[a] Items shown are the original formulated items, instead of simplified items used in this study.

Appendix E

Table 5
Correlations sensitivity belief scores & background variables

	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.
1. Sensitivity belief score	-							
2. Ethnic background (Zambian versus other)	-.44**	-						
3. Maternal educational level	.17	-.10	-					
4. Family income [a]	.17	-.06	.48**	-				
5. Maternal age	.06	-.21	.33*	.31*	-			
6. Number of children	-.20	.07	-.01	.02	.51**	-		
7. Religion in child rearing (whole sample) [b]	-.20	.41**	-.12	-.09	-.01	.23	-	
8. Religion in child rearing (if religious) [c]	-.08	.22	-.28	-.24	-.07	.19	-	-

[a] $N = 70$, Zambian $n = 15$, Moroccan $n = 12$, Dutch $n = 43$.

[b] $N = 72$, Zambian $n = 15$, Moroccan $n = 12$, Dutch $n = 45$.

[c] $N = 49$, Zambian $n = 15$, Moroccan $n = 12$, Dutch $n = 22$, for family income Dutch $n = 20$.

* $p < .01$

** $p < .001$

Appendix F

Background information about the study given to the participants

Parenting in different cultures

Parents from different cultural backgrounds and different countries may have very different ideas about how children should be raised. In research to date, the focus has been on cultural differences in general ideas about parenting. For example, how parents think about rules and punishment. These studies were mostly about school-aged children and teenagers. We still know very little about what parents from different cultures and countries find important in the day-to-day parenting of young children, meaning baby's, toddlers, and preschoolers.

What would we like to research?

We would like to know more about parenting ideas that have to do with young children in various countries. This may help to develop parenting support programs that fit the parenting culture of the specific country or culture. Supporting parents of young children can really help parents to provide better care for their children. And good early care helps children develop in a positive way. Knowing more about the parenting ideas in different cultures can also help us to understand what certain parenting behaviors really mean and how this meaning may depend on the culture that children grow up in. We have already done this research in five different cultural groups in the Netherlands and we are now working on doing this research in Turkey, Portugal, Chile, Kenya, and Zambia.

How are we going to do our research?

We would like to ask parents of young children (6 months to 5 years) from different cultures and countries to indicate what they do and do not find important for parenting young children. To this end, we visit parents at their homes and show them cards with statements that describe day-to-day parenting behaviors. Parents can put these cards on different stacks. Some stacks with cards that they do not find so important and some stacks with cards that they find very important for parenting young children. This takes about an hour and a half. We would also like to ask these parents to fill in a questionnaire about their families (number of children, age of the parents, etc.) and about their cultural values. This will take about 15 minutes.