

Beyond the nuclear family: an evolutionary perspective on parenting

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There has been a recent shift in the evolutionary behavioural sciences towards the view that parenting in our species is cooperative, and that mothers require help from others to raise children successfully. This shift is not yet reflected in psychological models of parenting, which still emphasise the centrality of the nuclear family. This emphasis is problematic both because it neglects the importance of alloparents, and because it assumes the fathering role is consistent across societies. While paternal investment is often substantial in our species, it also shows considerable ecological variability. This article highlights recent, cross-cultural research on the cooperative nature of human 'parenting', and illustrates the flexible nature of both parenting and alloparenting across human societies.

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Introduction

Parenting in our species is intensive, cooperative and flexible. Human newborns are altricial (helpless), requiring intensive investment, and childhood is long, probably due to the development of skills necessary for the complex subsistence strategies humans adopt [1]. In recent years, the hypothesis that such intensive investment is only possible through cooperative 'parenting' has become established in the evolutionary behavioural sciences: help from allomothers, who may be fathers, grandmothers, siblings and/or other individuals, is required to rear children [2]. Human psychology is adapted, therefore, to a system of parenting where mothers are 'first among equals' in a range of individuals who 'parent' the child. Cooperative childrearing may be a human universal, but the behavioural flexibility of our species, including variation in subsistence, marriage and residence patterns, and relying

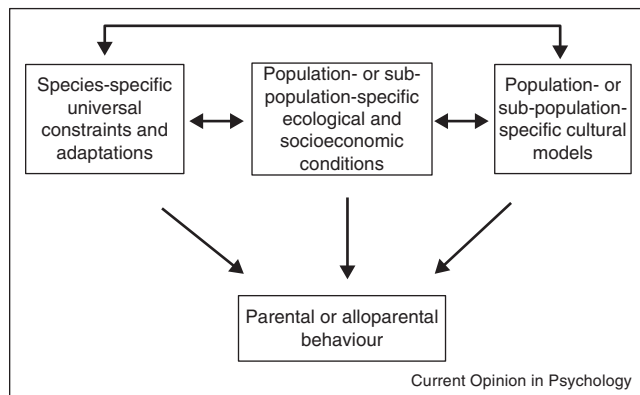
heavily on social learning, means that the nature of parenting (from mothers and others) varies within and between societies. This article highlights recent research on the cooperative nature of human parenting, emphasising the flexibility of parenting and alloparenting. The theoretical framework underlying this article builds on LeVine and colleagues' [3] model (Figure 1). This assumes parenting/alloparenting shows some species-wide, universal patterns, but also varies, within and between populations, as the result of adaptive adjustment of parenting behaviour to particular ecological conditions (phenotypic plasticity [4,5]), as well as cultural variation in parenting behaviour (which may or may not be adaptive).

Alloparenting

The mother is the primary caregiver to human newborns, and throughout the vast majority of human history was vital to the infant's survival at least until the infant was capable of surviving without breastmilk [6]. But the weight of empirical evidence now demonstrates that alloparenting, of both infants and older children, is common and has beneficial effects on children [7]. This suggests that too much emphasis has been placed in Western psychology on the parenting role of the mother, in exclusion to other carers. Henrich and colleagues have criticised psychologists for over-emphasising research on WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialised, Rich and Democratic) societies [8]. Recent research has explicitly criticised psychological models of parenting and child development for this same shortcoming — in particular, for developing models of mother–infant attachment that rely too heavily on cultural norms of parenting as observed in the Western middle classes around the middle of the 20th century, the period when influential theories about parenting were developed [9]. Family structures were rather weird in WEIRD societies at this time: an extreme form of the nuclear family was considered normative, where family units consisted of mother, father and children; other family members often lived some distance away; and there was an unusually rigid division of labour where mothers were considered largely responsible for reproductive labour and fathers for productive labour. Evolutionary theories of parenting based on a narrow slice of humanity are problematic, and the challenges to these theories presented by cross-cultural research have recently been clearly articulated [10,11,12].

Human family systems are unusually flexible [13]. Some form of pair-bond is typical, but mothers and fathers may

Figure 1



Parental or alloparental behaviour is influenced by our species-specific constraints and adaptations, but is also shaped by adaptive responses to ecological conditions and by cultural norms. These three levels can be hard to separate (some cultural models may be the result of adaptive responses to ecological conditions, for example), and there are feedback loops between all three (both ecology and culture influences our genetic make-up).

Modified from LeVine *et al.* [3].

be monogamously, polygynously or, occasionally, polyandrously partnered, and may or may not live in the same household; extended families are common, where mothers live with, or in close proximity to, grandparents and are embedded in social networks rich in other kin; and, while divisions of labour exist, they are such that women are often responsible for substantial subsistence labour [14]. Such family organisation both requires, and allows for, substantial allomaternal care of children, so that children may form attachment relationships with several individuals [15]. Family relationships may vary flexibly within populations, as well as between them, so that parents and alloparents can optimise their investment across all dependent children, and in response to the children's needs and their own ability to invest [16].

A longitudinal study of Aka foragers in central Africa demonstrates just how flexible parenting can be, even within a homogenous hunter-gatherer society [17]. While it has been known for some time that even infants are cared for by multiple caretakers in hunter-gatherer societies, research on the Aka shows that the caretaking activities of fathers, grandmothers, siblings and other individuals are responsive both to the mother's needs and the availability of other sources of help. The grandmother is the most important allocator, but care from other social network members can be substituted in her absence [18^{*}]. Allocarers also reduce mother's allocation of time to childcare and energy expenditure, as predicted by the cooperative breeding hypothesis [19]. Part of this repertoire of flexible parenting may be the ability of parents to delegate responsibility to other individuals entirely. Elsewhere in Africa,

foster care by kin has been interpreted as 'dispersed cooperative breeding', which allows mothers to strategically reduce investment in certain children while ensuring children are cared for those with a vested interest in raising them ([20] see also [21,22]).

Allomaternal care is a human universal. Grandparenting is still common in WEIRD societies [23]: across 11 European countries 44% of grandparents provided childcare for their grandchildren, with some variation across countries (the figure was 63% in the UK [24]). Some variation in grandparental investment in WEIRD contexts can be explained through biological factors: genetic relatedness between grandparents and grandchildren matters [25]. Grandparenting can also help women balance their productive and reproductive demands [26], and can be substituted for paternal care [27], as in Aka foragers. Some variation may be a response to different cultural and policy regimes in different parts of Europe, however: grandparents more commonly provide intensive childcare in regions of Europe where conservative family norms are widespread and formal (state-provided or paid-for) childcare is less readily available [28^{*}].

One common carer in non-WEIRD societies is not available to WEIRD mothers: older children. This is partly because low fertility means that young children have fewer older siblings to care for them, but also because children are expected to devote time to their education instead of contributing to household labour [29]. This may have significant implications for child development, if children no longer gain valuable childcare experience and social skills by caring for their younger siblings. Recent research has turned from investigating the impact of care on children to investigating how carers themselves are influenced by parenting relationships [30,31^{*}]. The health consequences of parenting are not always positive, but some cognitive benefits have been demonstrated [32,33]. A lack of experience with childrearing may influence subsequent parenting practices in adult life given our species' reliance on social learning [34], even, perhaps surprisingly, for key parenting practices such as breastfeeding [35,36].

Fathering

Allomaternal care may be a human universal, but paternal investment is not. Recent modelling of the evolution of human life history suggests cooperative breeding and broad cooperative networks may be the most plausible explanation for our species' life history strategy [37]. These results contradict earlier models emphasising the importance of monogamy and paternal provisioning. Human fathers often invest in their offspring [38], more so than the fathers of most species, but there are circumstances under which fathers invest little or nothing. Recent work explaining this variation builds on research by evolutionary biologists Kokko and Jennions [39,40^{**}],

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