

Some Thoughts on the Cross-Cultural Study of Maternal Warmth and Detachment

Author: Amighi, Janet Kestenberg, PhD

Publication info: Pre- and Peri-natal Psychology Journal 5. 2 (Winter 1990): 131-146.

[ProQuest document link](#)

Abstract: None available.

Full Text: Headnote ABSTRACT: A number of studies have suggested that maternal detachment is common in tropical societies which suffer from high infant mortality. The author's own research revealed evidence of both detachment and positive affect. She suggests that maternal behavior in all societies can be best characterized as exhibiting maternal ambivalence. In order to pursue this thesis, the paper conducts a very brief survey of a) maternity as presented in mythology, folk tales, and rituals, b) cases of direct and indirect infanticide, and c) examples of mother infant relationships in the cross-cultural literature. John Bowlby hypothesized that there is a universal and instinctive mother-infant bond among humans (quoted in Ainsworth 1967). Inspired by Bowlby, Mary Ainsworth conducted scheduled interviews and observation sessions with mothers of infants among the BuGanda of Uganda. Although she found secure mother-infant bonds in most cases, she found that kissing and cooing to infants occurred rarely and she only observed few instances of face to face mother infant interaction (1967). Using Ainsworth's data as well as his own, Robert LeVine (sometimes with Sarah LeVine) apparently sought to segregate two aspects of the mother-infant bond-one which involved the mother's concern with the physical survival of her infant and one which involved maternal warmth and/or concern with the emotional well being of her child. "In my own African experience and in the accounts of others from tropical places as diverse as Latin America and Indonesia, there is a general picture of infant care that emerges . . . (1977:23). Western observers, scientists, and amateurs alike, have tended to conceptualize this pattern as indulgence because of the demand feeding, the rapidity of response to crying, the absence of pressure for toilet training, the apparent quiescent contentment of the infants, the inference that the infant's "needs" are being taken care of. But the term indulgence as a folk expression in English also connotes an emotional attitude involving "affection," "warmth," and related attributes on the part of the caretaker, whereas the overt (my emphasis) behaviors indicating such an attitude are frequently minimal in the non-Western populations being observed (1977:23). In another publication, based on their own observations among the Gusii of Kenya, Ainsworth's study of the BuGanda, and other reports in the literature, the LeVines concluded that an emotionally detached mothering typified agricultural cultures of subsaharan Africa (LeVine and LeVine 1981). As LeVine suggested, there are many scattered reports in the literature of similarly "aloof mothers in other areas of the world, e.g. among the Mundurucu of Brazil (Murphy and Murphy 1985), shantytown Brazilians (Scheper-Hughes 1985), mothers of India (Seymour 1983, Minturn and Lambert 1964, cf. Rohner and Chaki-sicar 1983). In fact Robert LeVine went so far as to suggest that maternal aloofness is a typical pattern in agricultural societies of the tropics (1981). Such a pattern of maternal aloofness develops, according to LeVine, where infant mortality is high. In response to high death rates, mothers are more concerned to protect their infants against threats to their physical survival than meeting emotional needs. Furthermore, to protect themselves from the pain of coping with infant deaths, mothers develop an emotional detachment from their infants (LeVine 1981). Thus in the process of protecting both the survival of the infant and the psyche of the mother, maternal warmth is abandoned or reduced. However, some researchers, such as Kilbride and Kilbride (1981) and Harkness and Super (1980), report evidence of strong maternal affect in African societies. In my own observations of mother-infant dyads in southern Iran and Bali, I found evidence of both positive and negative affect, of both close bonding and distancing. These observations as well as my reading of the cross-cultural literature, has led me to conclude that the nature of mother-infant relationships, in the Third world and the Western world as well (although varying cross-culturally), is characterized less by maternal detachment than by ambivalence (see Kestenberg,

Kestenberg, and Amighi 1988). It is the purpose of this paper to begin an investigation of this thesis. As the title of this paper suggests, I will not offer a rigorous examination of the cross-cultural data. First of all, data on motherhood crossculturally is limited. Cross-cultural psychologists and psychologically oriented anthropologists have studied child rearing practices primarily for their effect on the child, rather than focusing on the mother as a topic of investigation herself (e.g. Minturn and Lambert 1964). Those who have studied the lives of women in other cultures have focused primarily on women's roles outside the domestic sphere, women as agricultural workers, women as traders, curers, rebels, etc. Although it would be worthwhile to investigate maternal affect in specific culture areas, given the limitations of the data, and my own inclinations, I have chosen to conduct a broad and necessarily cursory survey of maternal affect as reflected in: 1) folk tales, mythology and ritual, 2) cases of indirect and direct infanticide, and 3) studies of mother-infant relationships. **MOTHERS IN MYTHOLOGY, FOLKTALES, AND RITUAL** Given the difficulty of evaluating maternal affect as evidenced by disagreements in the literature, it might be useful to consider how cultures view maternal affect in the symbolic realm. Are mothers depicted in folk tales and mythology as loving and devoted, or cruel and heartless? Using folk songs of Andalusia, Gilmore demonstrates the ambivalent attitudes toward women in the culture (1988). He suggests that these attitudes derive from the young man's ambivalence towards his mother, the mother who has nurtured him and protected him and the mother who weans him and abandons him. Several European folk tales echo this theme. In "Cinderella," "Snow White," and "Hansel and Gretel," we find this common opposition of the good and the bad mother, often represented as two distinct personalities. Often, the kind gentle mother dies, abandoning her daughter (or daughter and son) to suffer under the hand of the cruel stepmother. It is interesting to note that the good mother is generally the mother of the hero or heroine in infancy, while the cruel stepmother is the mother of the adolescent. Often a fairy godmother appears whom we can see as either the symbol of the good mother who died and now returns, or as a grandmother or stranger who saves the adolescent. Although these stories focus on the heroine and her feelings of ambivalence towards her mother, as Zipes pointed out, they may also express the jealousy of the aging mother faced with her young and attractive daughter (1988). Outside of the European culture areas, the good mother- bad mother opposition is rarely found. There is a tale told among the Chaga of Kenya (Parrinder 1967) that roughly parallels this theme, but by and large non-European tales focus on other topics and leave motherhood unscathed. Motherhood is more often depicted in cross-cultural mythology, particularly in myths of creation. Great Earth Mother Goddesses have existed in almost all cultures. Before Allah in the Middle East was the goddess Allat, and portrayed in the Gilgamesh legends, the goddess Istar: in India there was Kali Maya: in Egypt the Earth Mother, Nut and her daughter Isis, mother of the heavens; in Japan the Sun Goddess Amma-lorasus et. al. These are goddesses of fertility and procreation, but they are also often responsible for death. The goddess Alal of the Ibo of Nigeria is both protector of the harvest and fertility and queen of the underworld. She is depicted with a child on her knee and a sword in her hand. The Mossi of Upper Volta use the same mask of an earth goddess at funerals and to protect their harvest (Parrinder 1967). There are many myths in which the good mother goddess creates life, and then turns evil and tries to destroy it, e.g. the story of Tlamat of Babylonia or the daughter of Re in Egypt (Colum 1930). The good mother and the evil mother of European folktales are often seen to coexist in one unpredictable goddess of birth and death in mythologies throughout much of the world. Any ambivalence that people of a given culture may feel towards mothers will generally be reflected in the mythology and rituals concerned with the blood of child birth and menstruation. The blood of the woman, (like woman herself), is commonly seen as both a source of danger and a blessing. Menstrual blood can have sacred healing qualities (Walker 1987). The first menstruation is often celebrated as the coming of age of a young girl. However, women who have post partum bleeding or are menstruating are often secluded in huts, or tabooed from touching certain foods or entering sacred places. Their look or their touch was and is widely seen to endanger the lives of men. Yet, women are often told that they are segregated because they have been weakened by child birth or menstruation-segregation is thus both for the health of the woman, so she can be a good mother, and to protect

society from the dangerous mother. In European culture, it was believed that menstruating women could cause meat to go bad, wine to turn, and bread dough to fall (Martin 1987). Among both the Chaco and the Yanomomo of South America, myths tell of the death of mankind, people sinking into the earth or drowning in floods when a menstruating girl broke the taboo and came out of her hut and was seen by men (Lizot 1985, Osborne 1968). Blood, both the symbol of life and the symbol of death, is often a primary aspect of womanhood. Clearly as Campbell has suggested, those who can give life, are seen as also able to take life away (1988). It is not only the destructive side of mother which must be feared. Mother love can also be threatening. In American as well as Persian culture, mothers often say, "I love you so much I could eat you up." (In Persian, "Let me eat you," Bokhoramet) is an expression of love. In a Persian creation myth, the first woman and man love their children so much they eat them. Again they bear children and eat them. God, seeing this unseemly beginning of humankind, finds it necessary to reduce parental love for children by $\frac{4}{5}$ so that they can survive (Hinnells 1985). Stories of maternal or parental abandonment of children are very common and found in many cultures. They may express parental ambivalence towards children. When told to children, they also serve as a warning to children concerning parental ambivalence. It is interesting that the parent is rarely portrayed as unequivocally evil, rather the abandonment is usually given a justification based on either problems of starvation or direct threats of the child against the parent. In other words, we are abandoning you, but with good reason. In the various Oedipus tales, it is foretold that the child will kill or replace the parent. In the Old Testament, infants are abandoned when their mothers have no food to offer them. Food is often a central issue. A Central Eskimo myth tells of a child who was abandoned after she seized upon the limbs of her parents to eat them. Instead they cut her up and put her in the ocean to become fish. In other words rather than eat them out of house and home (and limb) she herself was turned into food. In New Zealand and Hawaii, it is told that when the mother goddess bore her fifth son, she saw that there wasn't enough food for him so she tied her hair around him and gave him to the waves. The god of the sea saved him. His mother wasn't forgiven however, for when the boy grew up, he set out to pluck out the heart of the Goblin goddess, his ancestress (symbol of his mother?). In other words, (as in the Oedipus tales) retribution was taken against the abandoning father or mother, albeit indirectly. In conclusion, although we can find myths which tell only of a mother's love for her children, the preponderance of myths and tales depict an ambivalent maternal love, sometimes comforting, sometimes frightening-mother as both savior and destroyer. They seem to reflect the perspective of the grown up child viewing motherhood. Of the fears and feelings of the mother herself, myths tell us little, leaving us to speculate whether the characterization of ambivalent motherhood in mythology reflects the emotions experienced by mothers themselves. It seems likely that the repetition of these myths by mothers and fathers to children are an expression of their ambivalence. However, we now turn to from the symbolic realm to the apparently more concrete realm of behavior. CHILD NEGLECT AND INFANTICIDE Maternal infanticide, rare in nonhuman species, (who are only fertile during certain periods) is quite common among humans (who are fertile year round and must use cultural means of population control). In fact, infanticide has probably been practiced in all culture areas at some point in their history (Devereaux 1967). In an introduction to a collection of articles on infanticide, Hausfater and Hrdy (1981) describe the recurring conditions under which infanticide often takes place. Infants are abandoned or killed when raising them would entail: 1) a risk to the well being of a sibling (as in birth spacing), 2) expenditure of resources on an infant unlikely to survive, or 3) "undue" burden on the rest of the family such as the case of female infanticide where dowry payments are high or resources low. It can be inferred that women are often involved in the abandonment or killing of the baby since most cultures forbid male presence during childbirth. But what are the feelings and attitudes of mothers who kill or abandon their babies? Are their actions undeterred by emotions or bonding? Ethnographies tell us little, perhaps because such data are difficult to obtain. We might hypothesize that the infanticidal mother is expressing resentment against the new infant who is adding to her burdens or that an emotional detachment is evoked to permit her to abandon or kill her infant. Johnson described cases of native South American mothers who committed infanticide after a

difficult birth or difficult pregnancy (1981). We also know that maternal detachment is sometimes facilitated by definition of an infant as nonhuman before a certain event takes place, such as the naming ceremony, the first birth cry, or breast feeding, depending on the culture. However, such data is balanced by reports of mothers deploring the necessity to kill closely spaced infants, as among the !Kung (Shostak 1981) or the joy of an Inuit Eskimo explaining that due to a mild winter they had enough food and would not have to abandon their new daughter (Condon 1987). It is also significant that infanticide is not generally correlated with child abuse. In fact, in Korbin's book on child abuse from a cross cultural perspective, most authors describe the absence of idiosyncratic abuse in pre-western contact conditions even where infanticide was generally practiced (1981). It is difficult to reach any conclusion because the data are so scanty. Even novels by natives, such as the books by Achebe describe maternal pain on the death of an infant, but do not describe feelings associated with "throwing twins into the forest" (e.g. 1959).¹ We have a little more data on maternal attitudes in the cases of indirect infanticide or selective neglect. Nancy Scheper-Hughes offers some insight in her study of shantytown Brazilian mothers (1985). The group she studied had high rates of infant mortality which Scheper-Hughes attributed to conditions of poverty which in turn she suggested has caused maternal underinvestment. These Brazilian mothers nursed their infants for only a few months, rarely sought medical attention for failing infants and gave up on an infant which they deemed "doomed to die." Other authors describe similar situations among native South Americans (Johnson 1981), Australian Aborigines (Cowlshaw 1978) and Filipinos (Fernandez and Guthrie 1984). Dole describes an Amahuaca mother in Peru dealing with an infant who looked unlikely to survive. The mother ". . . frequently ignored its crying or shoved it impatiently away from her breast (Dole 1974:31 quoted in Johnson 1981:64). How do these underinvesting mothers feel and how do they behave in less stressed circumstances? Scheper-Hughes interviewed mothers who, malnourished themselves, complained that they were physically drained by nursing, that the infants were sucking out their life blood. Yet, they expressed pity rather than anger for the dying infant whom they did not feel it was possible to save. Their responses to the infants do not seem to reflect detachment, but rather a combined wish to mother with a wish to personally survive. Maternal investment in children who do survive and the children's view of motherhood is expressed in a moving story related by Scheper-Hughes. In order to save a dying infant, who was neglected by its mother, Scheper-Hughes took it under her care and gave it food and medical attention. Before leaving Brazil she gave the fairly healthy infant back to his mother who raised him. Years later when Scheper-Hughes returned to her research site, she interviewed the now grown up young man whom she had rescued. Treating him the same as other interviewees, she asked him who was the most important person in his life. He easily responded that it was his mother who was always there to comfort and support him. This case is remarkably parallel to the biblical myths which describe maternal abandonment, miraculous intervention and maternal renewal. Although the young man's response may have been shaped by a Brazilian ideology of self-sacrificing mothers more than his own experiences, this example and others similar to it, (e.g. Johnson 1981) force us to recognize a more complex picture of motherhood and maternal bonding than the data first suggested. In short we do not find a simple presence of or absence of bonding. A woman who abandons one baby, may lovingly raise another. An infant who is abandoned may be readmitted into the family. There is no easy dichotomy of "cruel stepmother" and "kindly" mother. Rather we see mothers trying to cope with the conflict between raising a child with all the burdens and joys it brings, and abandoning it, preserving resources for herself or her family.

MOTHER-INFANT BONDING AND RELATIONSHIPS There are more data available on the nature of mother-infant relationships in less dramatic circumstances. However, where there are more data, there is also more disagreement. In regards to both African and Asian Indian cultures, quiet controversies have already developed on the evaluation of maternity (Kilbride and Kilbride 1983, Harkness and Super 1980 versus LeVine 1981; and Rohner and Chaki Sircar 1983 versus Seymour 1983). In order to address the disagreements, we can focus on two questions: 1) what is the nature of motherchild relationship (from the child's perspective, the mother's perspective and behaviorally) and 2) how do we measure the relationships? The methodological question is the one which must

be dealt with first. Are the discrepancies in the cross-cultural literature based on a) differences in the nature of maternal affect cross culturally or b) on differences in measurement of affect? Landy (1959) in a statement similar to that of LeVine (1981) suggests that what has passed for indulgence is often really casualness based on maternal indifference. In his study of child rearing in Puerto Rico, he quotes a mother as saying, "I am a woman who works much and I hardly have time for . . . entertaining myself with my children (1959:99). Yet his following description is a bevy of somewhat contradictory valuations of maternal nurturance. For example, he says that most mothers are responsive to their infants' crying, however, the responsiveness may be due to fears that crying will make the child sick. Then he says that "... considering their endless round of onerous and time-consuming tasks, these mothers give a fair amount of time to their infants . . . though it is often a most cursory kind of attendance. However, a good deal of affection takes place . . . but since this is traditional it is not surprising... . These mothers are fairly warm towards their infants, though not excessively so." (Landy 1959:101). These ambivalent descriptions continue on. Such data are difficult to evaluate. However, if we seek more methodologically rigorous studies, we find that as reliability goes up, validity does not necessarily do so. Ainsworth's (1967) study of Ugandan infants was described in the beginning of this paper. Although she found low levels of eye contact, nuzzling, or cuddling between mother and infant, she made observations only during formally scheduled interviews in which mothers were probably preoccupied more with the interview than with their infant. We may question even more seriously the validity of the data of those psychologists studying mother-infant bonding cross-culturally who attempt to create laboratory conditions in the field. For example, Dixon et. al. isolated a mother and infant, putting the infant in an unfamiliar infant seat and asked the mother to get her infant's attention for thirty minutes. Then the thirty minutes of mother-infant interaction were videoed and scored for number of predetermined types of interaction (1981). Not only do we need more naturalistic studies which nevertheless incorporate some methodological rigor, but we also need a reconsideration of variables to be studied. Investigators have focused on mother-infant eye contact because eye contact is an important method of communication in our culture and has been emphasized by such psychologists as Daniel Stern as a fundamental factor in mother-infant bonding. Kissing and cuddling are often selected as behavioral units because they are deemed as indicators of affection in our culture. Few investigators attempt to discover emically defined measures of affect within a studied culture. In addition to cultural biases, we also suffer from methodological biases. We prefer to use predetermined behavioral units which are easily countable. Yet to what extent are we measuring affect when we count how many times per hour a mother touches or looks at her child? Does our focus on sampling methods lead to an underestimate of types of mother-child interaction which do not occur in regularly spaced units of behavior? Don't we neglect quality time as simply mother and infant falling asleep together? Alternative modes of mother-infant communication and expression of affect should be considered. Lewis and Ban (1977) in addition to time sampling of the usual six behaviors (hold, look, touch, smile, play, vocalize) studied mother-infant interaction. They counted how often a mother responded to an infant's behavior (smile, vocalization) with some gesture or look, and how often an infant responded to a mother. Although they found considerable frequency differences in behaviors between Zambian, Dutch, Senegalese, American, and Yugoslavian mothers, they found a similar pattern of interaction across these cultures. They wonder whether more similarities would not be found if more "proper" (p. 353) variables were used, (see also Fajardo and Freeman (1981) study of rhythmicity in mother-infant interaction). If we agree that we must broaden our range of behaviors studied in order to avoid ethnocentric measures (as well as judgments), in what direction should we go? I think the answer is offered to us in the findings of several studies that technological societies focus on distal forms of communication between mother and infant, such as looking, smiling, and vocalizing, while nontechnological societies focus on proximal modes such as holding, touching, and stroking (Brazelton 1977, Goldberg 1977, et. al. though cf. Kohner's study of the !Kung 1977). Because of our own familiarity with distal forms of communication we have neglected communications which occur in the holding, touching, feeling kinesthetic sphere and do not apply the appropriate measures of such types of

communication. The awareness of the significance of nonverbal communication is growing much faster than our methods for measuring it. Its importance is signified not only in reports of high degree of holding in nontechnological societies (and a need to understand the affects involved), but also in reports such as the one of an Inuit (Eskimo) boy that although he never shared his fears and hopes with his parents, never discussed with them his life and what he would become, he communicated with them in other ways. Working together, sharing the same room, they developed a sense of each other and belonging that was never communicated verbally (Condon 1987). It is difficult to redefine affect in a less culture bound way. Our culture influences both the way in which mother-infant bonding takes place as well as the way we perceive it taking place. Since American mothers have relatively low amounts of physical contact with their infants, it is likely that we will be more aware of and focus more on distal forms of interrelating, rather than kinesthetic ones. Furthermore, our evaluation of kinesthetic relationships is often culture bound. When I showed a film of Ibo mothers of Nigeria bathing infants to an audience of movement therapists in the United States, they almost uniformly judged the mothers low on affect because they handled the young infants without giving any head support and with seeming unconcern for the infant's "obvious" distress (being in almost continual startle reflex, though not crying). However, an Ibo mother who viewed the same film said that she could not judge the mothers' affect from the film because this is how all mothers bathe babies among the Ibo. She did not judge the infants to be in distress-"They're not crying, are they?" she pointed out. It is difficult to evaluate forms of bonding and separating in other cultures. As Benedict pointed out, members of nonwestern cultures have been horrified by our abrupt separation of mothers and infants at birth and by our isolation of infants in their own beds and own rooms (1932). On the other hand, we tend to condemn the abrupt weaning practiced among such cultures as the Mundurucu of South America. Clearly we cannot discover much about mother-infant bonding and interrelationships in other cultures if we take our measures only from our own cultural repertoires. The central message of anthropology has been that we must not try to understand a behavior in isolation from its culture context. For example, as the Kilbrides pointed out, private sphere behaviors of mothers may differ considerably from their public sphere behaviors (1983). As suggested in the Whiting and Whiting Six Cultures project, behavior should be observed in its natural setting (1975). The use of multiple measures in the study of mother-infant affect may help reduce the more serious methodological problems. A quantifiable standardized method with a low amount of cultural bias, such as the Kestenberg Movement Profile may be combined with informal interviewing of mothers and children and participation-observation techniques.² Going beyond methodological problems, what can we say about the nature of motherhood within the presently available literature? 1. We find that there is some variation in the course of development of affect. Although Bowlby has suggested the importance of the immediate post partum period for optimal bonding, (1973), it appears that bonding may begin earlier or later depending on cultural and individual circumstances. For example, in many cultures praise from kin and friends and early fetal movements may serve as early mechanisms for bonding. However in some cultures, e.g. among the Ifaluk, early fetal movements are not recognized and the first movements of the baby are taken as indications of the onset of labor (Lutz 1988). This difference in mother-fetus relations itself is an interesting topic for further investigation. In some cultures early bonding is postponed and the new infant is not accepted as human until after a specified event has taken place (as we described earlier). Among the Machiguenga of South America, the mother shows "a certain degree" (Johnson 1981:63) of indifference to the baby after birth. After the mother is attended to, then it is decided whether the baby should be raised or not. It is said that only after the mother nurses the child, which may not be until the next day, does she develop an attachment to it. A similar situation exists in several other cultures (e.g. among the Mohave Devereux 1961). The mother's own physical and emotional well-being appears to be a precondition for bonding (Brazelton 1976). Just as cultural rules may encourage a delay in bonding, they also may facilitate the development of bonding after the child is incorporated into the society. Mothers are often secluded in huts or special rooms with the new infant for a specified period. Although this is generally explained as part of menstrual taboos, it also has the

effect of giving the mother undisturbed time with her new infant. This seclusion may last a few days, such as among the Mundurucu (Murphy 1985), or for extended periods, such as among the Kalapalo (Bosso 1973). However extended periods may also emphasize the burdens of child rearing. Among the Ifaluk of Micronesia, mothers often express bad feelings towards their infants during their period of seclusion. They apparently complain about not being able to tend their gardens or other chores. However, the Ifaluk do not blame the mother for her ill temperament, but rather the others who have not offered her sufficient help (Lutz 1988). 2. In ethnographies (in contrast to controlled psychological investigations) where maternal attitudes are considered, there is often indication of mixed emotions towards the role of motherhood. Like the Mundurucu (Murphy 1985), mothers of many cultures express pleasure with having children but dismay with having too many. When mothers are pulled between the needs of child care and of subsistence activities, the latter generally is given preference. For example, Nerlove has found a positive correlation cross-culturally between the early use of supplementary feeding and women's involvement in subsistence agriculture (1974). The conflict between the two important female roles, of food provider and mother can lead to use of alternate caretakers which is sometimes taken as an indication of emotional detachment, but should be seen in terms of resolving the problems of conflicting roles (a problem which rests primarily on women). Mothers are also heard to voice resentment against the physical burden of pregnancy, breast feeding, and child care as in the case of the impoverished Brazilians (Scheper-Hughes 1983). One Zoroastrian woman I interviewed in Iran remembered her first experience of motherhood as a coming of age experience. secluded in a small room with her new infant, she moaned about the cold and the pain of her breasts. "I was so young," she said, "only a child myself, what was I doing with a baby?" Her sister-in-law told her husband of her complaints and he angrily sent her the message that he would bring up the baby without her. She smiled at the memory: "Well," I asked her, "did you give him the baby?" "I was tempted," she told me. "but then my milk came in and no, I did not give up the baby. I was the one who had the milk it wanted." She had thought of abandonment, but her milk had come in a miraculous intervention-like in the myths. When she recalled the death of her infant later, she appeared to do so without any emotion. "Weren't you upset?" I asked her. "I was too young to understand death," she answered, applying to herself a common Iranian view that children are not scarred by early trauma. In such cases it may be difficult to distinguish between feigned and real indifference, just as it is at times hard to differentiate neglect from permissiveness. A Yanomomo mother threatened her small child who was climbing about on her in their hammock, "Be quiet or the leopard will eat you." As the author says, "She nevertheless spreads the hammock so that the child can make herself comfortable." (Lizot 1976:74). Her message to the child is an ambivalent though common one. As is frequently the case the verbal message and the kinesthetic one are in conflict. To perceive the whole message, we must be aware of both levels of communication. I began this paper with an attempt to evaluate the disagreement between the Kilbrides and the LeVines on the nature of early mother-infant relationships. It is easier to reach conclusions concerning methodological problems than to resolve the substantive issues of their dispute. The frequency of reported maternal indifference to infants, particularly in South America and in subsaharan Africa makes it likely that some form of maternal detachment does occur at least in some periods of early mother-infant relationship-though we must keep our methodological reservations in mind. However, case studies, such as that of Scheper-Hughes, Johnson, and my own, offer evidence of recurring ambivalence, or positive attachment counterbalanced by negative withdrawal. It seems that the ambivalent portrait of motherhood conveyed to us in mythology corresponds to the experiences of motherhood in most cultures. It is displayed not only in cases of a mother who may kill one infant and nurture another, or a mother who may neglect an infant who fails to thrive and then devote herself to another, but ambivalence is also expressed in the daily treatment of each infant who experiences the mother's approach and withdrawal in various stages of their relationship. However, a better understanding of variations in expression of affect or detachment awaits collection of data which does not exclude kinesthetic and other perhaps as yet unknown methods of mother-infant communication. References REFERENCE NOTES 1. An unpublished interview by

one of my students, with an Ibo woman however, offers considerable insight. The Ibo woman relates that when twins were born, it was (is?) customary for the mother to leave them alone in the home where they would be found and disposed of by disguised members of the community so that the mother would not know who killed her children. The mother of the interviewee, a strong Christian convert, offered to adopt these children with the mother's permission. She relates that most mothers helped her to run off with the babies before the disguised Ibo arrived. Unfortunately, like most other data the information is anecdotal and in this case third hand. 2. Many authors are aware of the problems with using predefined behavior lists. As Goldberg (1977) says there may be other ways that feelings can be expressed. Lewis and Ban (1977) point out that there can be different kinds of holding. I would like to propose the use of the Kestenberg Movement Profile, a method of movement notation and analysis which breaks up movements into fifty components and also measures the flow of tension changes in muscles. Not relying on culturally defined movements, it is relatively culture free. Since most of the movements studied are not consciously produced, it is also less troubled by observer effect. Movement profiles can be made from films of mothers and infants which provide good sampling of the movement day. Although the profile is primarily known among dance therapists, it would be a valuable addition to the anthropological tool kit.

REFERENCES Achebe, Chinua (1957). *Things Fall Apart* New York: Fawcett Crest. Ainsworth, M. (1967). *Infancy in Uganda: Infant Care and the Growth of Love*. Baltimore: John Hopkins Press. Benedict, Ruth (1932). "Configurations of Culture in North America," *American Anthropologist* 34:1-27. Brazelton, T. (1977). "Implications of infant development among the Mayan Indians of Mexico," in *Culture and Infancy Variations in the Human Experience*. P. Leiderman, S. Tulkin and A. Rosenfeld eds. New York: Academic Press, 151-188. Bowlby, John (1973). *Attachment and Loss*. 2 vols. New York: Basic Books. Campbell, J. (1988). *The Power of Myth*, New York: Doubleday. Colum, P. (1930). *Orpheus: Myths of the World* New York: McMillan. Condon, R. (1987). *Inuit Youth: Growth and Change in the Canadian New Brunswick*: Rutgers Univ. Press. Devereux, George (1961). *Mohave Ethnopsychiatry and Suicide*. Bulletin no. 175, Bureau of American Ethnology, Wash. D.C. Devereux, George (1967). *From Anxiety to Method in the Behavioral Sciences* The Hague: Mouton. Dixon, S. Tronick, E., Keefer, C. and Brazelton, T. (1981). "Mother-Infant Interaction among the Gusii of Kenya," in *Culture and Early Interactions*, eds. T. Field, A. Sostek, P. Vietze and P. Leiderman, Hillsdale, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Assoc. Draper, P. (1972). *!Kung Bushman Childhood* Unpubl. Doc. Diss. Fajardo, B. and Freeman, D. (1981). "Maternal Rhythmicity in Three American Cultures," in *Culture and Early Interactions*, op. cit. Fernandez, E. and Guthrie, G. (1984). "Belief Systems of and Breast Feeding Among the Filipino Urban Poor," *Social Science and Medicine* 19(9): 991-5. Gilmore, D. (1986). "Mother-Son Intimacy and the Dual View of Women in Andalusia," *Ethos* 14(2):227. Goldberg, S. (1977). "Infant Development and Mother-Infant Interaction in Urban Zambia," in *Culture and Infancy*: op. cit. pp. 211. Harkness, S. and Super, C. (1980). "Child Development Theory in Anthropological Perspective," in *New Directions for Child Development* C. Super, S. Harkness eds. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Inc. Hausfater, G. and Hrdy, S. (1984). *Infanticide: Evolutionary Perspectives*, New York: Aldine Press. Hinnells, J. (1985). *Persian Mythology*. New York: Peter Bedrick Books. Johnson, O. (1981). "The Socioeconomic Context of Child Abuse and Neglect in Native South America," in *Child Abuse and Neglect in Cross Cultural Perspectives*. J. Korbin ed. Los Angeles: Calif. Univ. Press, pp. 56-70. Kestenberg, J., Kestenberg M., and Kestenberg, Amighi (1988). "The Nazis' Quest for Death and the Jewish Quest for Life," *Psychological Perspectives of the Holocaust and its Aftermath*, R. Brahm ed. New York: Social Science Monographs, pp. 13-44. Kilbride, P., and Kilbride, J. (1983). "Socialization for High Positive Affect between Mother and Infant Among the Baganda of Uganda," *Ethos* 11(4): 232. Konner, Melvin (1977). "Infancy Among the Kalahari Desert San," in *Culture and Infancy* op. cit. pp. 287-328. Korbin, Jill (1981) *Child Abuse and Neglect: Cross Cultural Perspectives*. Los Angeles: Univ. Calif. Press. Landy, D. (1959) *Tropical Childhood: Cultural Transmission and Learning in a Rural Puerto Rican Village*. New York: Univ. N. Carolina Press. LeVine, Robert (1977) "Child Rearing as Cultural Adaptation," in *Culture and Infancy* op. cit. pp. 15-28. LeVine, S., and LeVine, R. (1981). "Child Abuse and Neglect in Subsaharan Africa," in *Child Abuse and Neglect*, op. cit.

pp. 35-55. Lewis, M. and Ban, P. (1977). "Variance and Invariances in the Mother-Infant Interaction" A Cross Cultural Study," in Culture and Infancy op. cit. pp. 329. Lizot, Jacques (1985). Tales of the Yanomami New York: Cambridge Univ. Press. Lutz, C. (1988). Unnatural Emotions, Chicago: University Chicago Press. Martin, E. (1987). The Woman in the Body: A Cultural Analysis of Reproduction, Boston: Beacon Press. Minturn, L. and Lambert, W. (1964). Mothers of Six Cultures. New York: Wiley and Sons. Murphy, Y. and Murphy, R. (1985). Women of the Forest New York: Columbia University Press. Osborne, H. (1968). South American Mythology. Middlesex: Hamlyn Publ. Parrinder, G. (1967). African Mythology, London: Paul Hamlyn. Rohner, R. and Chakirsicar, M. (1983). "Caste Differences in Perceived Maternal Acceptance in West Bengal, India," Ethos 15(2): 406. Scheper-Hughes, Nancy (1985). Culture, Scarcity and Maternal Thinking," Ethos 13 (1): 291. Seymour, S. (1983). "Household Structure and Status and Expression of Affect In India," Ethos 11(4): 263. Shostak, M. (1983). Nisa: The Life and Words of a !Kung Woman. New York: Vintage Books. Walker, B. (1968). The Woman's Encyclopedia of Myths and Secrets, New York: Harper and Row publ. Whiting, B. and Whiting, J. (1975). Children of Six Cultures. Harvard: Harvard Univ. Press. Zipes, Jack (1986). Don't Bet on the Prince, New York: Methuen. AuthorAffiliation Janet Kestenberg Amighi, Ph.D. AuthorAffiliation Dr. Janet Kestenberg Amighi received her Ph.D. from the University of Missouri in 1984. Her dissertation, Zoroastrians of Iran: Conversion, Assimilation, and Persistence is published by AMS Press, Spring 1990. She has taught anthropology at Tehran University, Cabrini College, and University of West Chester, Penn. She has also taught the Kestenberg Movement Profile at the Laban Institute for Movement Study in New York. Address correspondence to her at 763 Denton Hollow Road, West Chester, PA 19382.

Publication title: Pre- and Peri-natal Psychology Journal

Volume: 5

Issue: 2

Pages: 131-146

Number of pages: 16

Publication year: 1990

Publication date: Winter 1990

Year: 1990

Publisher: Association for Pre&Perinatal Psychology and Health

Place of publication: New York

Country of publication: United States

Journal subject: Medical Sciences--Obstetrics And Gynecology, Psychology, Birth Control

ISSN: 08833095

Source type: Scholarly Journals

Language of publication: English

Document type: General Information

ProQuest document ID: 198676457

Document URL: <http://search.proquest.com/docview/198676457?accountid=36557>

Copyright: Copyright Association for Pre&Perinatal Psychology and Health Winter 1990

Last updated: 2010-06-06

Contact ProQuest

Copyright © 2012 ProQuest LLC. All rights reserved. - [Terms and Conditions](#)