

Sensitive responsiveness and multiple caregiving networks among Mbendjele BaYaka hunter-gatherers: Potential implications for psychological development and well-being ^[1]

Author: Chaudhary, N., Salali, G.D., & Swanepoel, A.

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Abstract

Attachment theory postulates that there is a particular style of caregiving that, because of its interaction with our evolved psychology, is most likely to result in healthy psychological development. Attachment research has been criticized because most studies have been conducted with Western populations. Critics argue this has (a) overemphasized the importance of sensitive responsive caregiving and (b) limited our understanding of multiple nonmaternal caregiving (allomothering). Here, we analyze the extent of sensitive responsiveness and structural properties of allomothering networks among Mbendjele hunter-gatherers who reside in the Republic of Congo. Humans lived as hunter-gatherers for the majority of our evolutionary history, thus studying contemporary hunter-gatherers can offer insight into the caregiving children may be psychologically adapted to. Based on 12-hr focal follows of 18 children (0–4 years old; 10 male), we constructed caregiving networks across the domains of responding to crying, physical contact, interactive care, and proximity. Crying was virtually always responded to rapidly via comforting and never via scolding. Children received physical contact and care for the majority of the day. Allomothering accounted for 40%–50% of caregiving in each domain. While allomaternal networks were large, they were highly concentrated—the majority of a child’s allocare was provided by just a few caregivers. Due to high caregiver:child ratios, “sharing” of caregivers was limited—a child typically had several allomothers who directed a majority of their allomaternal effort to him/her. These findings add to our understanding of the level and sources of sensitive responsive caregiving that children may be evolutionarily primed to expect.

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