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An exploration of maternal sensitivity, culture and context in Alexandra township

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Abstract

Western-developed theories of child development predominate, despite the fact that less than 10% of the world's children are born in the Western world. In an attempt to address the paucity of African studies into parenting and child development, this study researched the applicability of the construct of maternal sensitivity to the context of Alexandra Township, in Johannesburg, South Africa. Using a combined psychoanalytic and social constructionist theoretical framework, this study used a mixed method, concurrent triangulation approach to better understand local maternal behaviour and ideas about good mothering. The study found overall congruence between local ideas about good mothering, and Ainsworth's original conceptualisation of maternal sensitivity. Some convergences with subsequent adaptations of the concept of maternal sensitivity were identified, including an unanticipated assertion that local mothers should play with their babies and should not leave their babies with family members. Divergences with more recent Western-developed operationalisations of the construct were found in the areas of warmth, verbal responsiveness, and facilitation of learning. Poverty, threats to safety and experiences of loss were identified as contextual factors that influence parenting goals, ideals, and behaviours in the setting. Maternal control, interference and non-responsiveness to infant wants and during divided attention were found to be common maternal behaviours in the setting. Such maternal behaviours are put forward as both adaptive and maladaptive, using developmental and evolutionary arguments. Maternal sensitivity is concluded to be an appropriate construct for application in the setting, and the need for infant mental health interventions which can drive social change are highlighted.