
Abstract: The influence of culture on cognitive development is well established for school age and older children. But almost nothing is known about how different parenting and socialization practices in different cultures affect infants’ and young children’s earliest emerging cognitive and social-cognitive skills. In the current monograph, we report a series of eight studies in which we systematically assessed the social-cognitive skills of 1- to 3-year-old children in three diverse cultural settings. One group of children was from a Western, middle-class cultural setting in rural Canada and the other two groups were from traditional, small-scale cultural settings in rural Peru and India.

In a first group of studies, we assessed 1-year-old children’s most basic social-cognitive skills for understanding the intentions and attention of others: imitation, helping, gaze following, and communicative pointing. Children’s performance in these tasks was mostly similar across cultural settings. In a second group of studies, we assessed 1-year-old children’s skills in participating in interactive episodes of collaboration and joint attention. Again in these studies the general finding was one of cross-cultural similarity. In a final pair of studies, we assessed 2- to 3-year-old children’s skills within two symbolic systems (pretense and pictorial). Here we found that the Canadian children who had much more experience with such symbols showed skills at an earlier age.

Our overall conclusion is that young children in all cultural settings get sufficient amounts of the right kinds of social experience to develop their most basic social-cognitive skills for interacting with others and participating in culture at around the same age. In contrast, children’s acquisition of more culturally specific skills for use in practices involving artifacts and symbols is more dependent on specific learning experiences.