

How early is infants' attention affected by surrounding culture?

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Do the cultures in which we live shape how we view the objects and events in the world that surrounds us? Research with adults has suggested that it does. But how early might any such culturally inflected differences emerge in development?

In a new Northwestern University study, researchers address the issue directly, asking how 24-month-old [infants](#) from the United States and China deploy their attention to objects and actions in active scenes.

Researchers found that 24-month-old infants from the U.S. and China—who are on the threshold of learning words for objects and actions—have a great deal in common when observing active scenes.

However, infants' looking patterns in the two cultures diverged significantly for a brief period.

In the experiment, all infants watched a series of repeated scenes (e.g., a girl petting a dog). Then, infants watched new scenes in which either [object](#) was switched (the girl petting a pillow) or the action was switched (e.g., the girl kissing a dog). This was when their attention diverged.

Infants from China preferred looking at the scenes featuring a new action. In contrast, infants from the U.S. showed the opposite pattern, preferring scenes featuring a new object.

This new result provides the earliest evidence for strong overlap in

infants' attention to objects and events. But the research also raises the possibility that by 24 months, infants' attention may already be shaped subtly by the attentional patterns characteristic of adults in their cultural communities.

"There is already reason to suspect that infants' attention to objects and events in dynamic scenes might already be influenced by cultural-specific patterns of attention," said the study's lead author Sandra Waxman, the Louis W. Menk Chair in Psychology in the Weinberg College of Arts and Sciences at Northwestern and faculty fellow in the University's Institute for Policy Research. "We know, for example, that infants pay attention carefully to the actions of their parents and to others close to them."

Furthermore, decades of previous research suggest that when observing scenes, adults from the U.S. focus predominantly on objects, while those from China and Japan direct more of their [attention](#) to the contexts and events in which those objects are engaged.

According to the researchers, the current results underscore the value of conducting cross-cultural research with infants.

"Clearly, 24-month-old infants from the U.S. and China have a great deal in common when attending to dynamic scenes, but they may have also begun to pick up the attentional strategies characteristic of adults in their respective communities," Waxman said. "The results reported here suggest that by the time they reach their second birthdays, infants may be on their way to becoming 'native lookers.'"

More information: "How early is infants' attention to objects and actions shaped by culture? New evidence from 24-month-olds raised in the U.S. and China" was published in *Frontiers in Psychology*.

Provided by Northwestern University

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