8

The Cultural Nature of Collaboration

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Abstract

Social interaction strongly relies on the existence of a relationship between two or more partners, some amount of conversational exchange, and attention by all partners to that exchange. Collaboration falls largely in the framework of social interactions but harbors more leverage in that it encompasses culturally permeated sets of practices and values, leading to heterogeneity in its manifestations across groups. What one group of people regards as a way of life, another conceives as a formalized collaboration. Despite its presence in multidisciplinary reports, the role of culture in shaping collaborative interactions has been underestimated, as have the ways that collaboration influences modes of life. Research based on WEIRD societal values fail to contextualize collaboration in other cultures. This chapter explores the cultural nature of collaboration using examples from the Nso' people from the Northwest Region of Cameroon. Collaborative childcare and the network of interpersonal relationships within the Nso' community demonstrate how collaborative systems differ across cultural boundaries. The need to ensure inclusive viewpoints is highlighted when collaboration strategies are explored. From both psychological and anthropological viewpoints, culture plays a significant role and must be included when attempts are made to understand human behavior and belief systems.

Introduction

> When you cooperate, life goes, it moves. You see days are just running out like that. But when you tend to have a bad impression and don't share with people, you are just in chaos with people; in short you don't see days moving. You don't even live longer. That is one important thing. You don't live longer when you are angry with people. But when you share with people, they encourage you and you see days moving faster. (Interview with a Nso' grandmother)

At this Forum, discussions began with an initial definition: collaboration is cooperation between agents toward mutually constructed goals. This definition addresses *what* the phenomenon is, *who* is involved, and *why* this behavior

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exists. Since collaboration derives from cooperative behavior between individuals (see Chapter 2, this volume), it requires social interactions, some type of conversational exchange, and attention by all partners to that exchange. In addition, since there is no universal mold into which all people (and their behavior) can be placed, it seems obvious that cultural and environmental contexts must be factored into a definition. When one considers the culturally permeated sets of practices and values that exist in our world, we should expect heterogeneity in how collaboration is perceived and manifested across groups.

As argued by Henrich et al. (2010b), however, the context most often used to frame how people live, how they conceptualize, and how they function psychologically is based on a Western, highly educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic (WEIRD) group of people. Since WEIRD societies constitute only a tiny proportion of the world's population (5–10%), their behavior can hardly be considered to be universal. For instance, some theories of children's development and education treat babies from birth as independent agents whose will, wishes, and intentions must be considered if optimal development is to be achieved. In this setting, children's care and education may be viewed as "collaboration between agents"; more precisely, as an exclusively dyadic collaboration between an adult caregiver and a child at a particular point in time (Keller 2021). This view, however, is based on specific WEIRD contextual affordances and constraints (e.g., nuclear families with few children, high levels of formal education, economic security) and is not at all applicable on a worldwide scale; in particular, among people who live in multigenerational families and rely on each other for support and sustenance.

Drawing on our experiences in child development and psychology in multiple cultures and contexts, we wish to frame the phenomenon of collaboration as it exists in non-WIERD areas of the world. We begin by looking at how the Nso' people, from the Northwest Anglophone region of Cameroon, understand and exhibit collaboration. Thereafter, we examine how the imposition of values, practices, and concepts from one culture can disrupt or break down collaboration. If we want to understand *what* collaboration is as well as *why* and *how* humans engage in collaborative actions, we need to look through the eyes of *all* people.

The Nso' People

Cameroon is situated in West Africa. According to the World Factbook (2021), it has a population of about 29,321,637 and occupies a land surface area of 472,710 km^2. The Cameroonian population is composed of different ethnic groups with different traditions and languages:

- Bamileke-Bamu 24.3%,
- Beti/Bassa, Mbam 21.6%,

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- Biu-Mandara 14.6%,
- Arab-Choa/Hausa/Kanuri 11%,
- Adamawa-Ubangi, 9.8%,
- Kako, Meka/Pygmy 3.3%,
- Cotier/Ngoe/Oroko 2.7%,
- Southwestern Bantu 0.7%,
- Foreign/other ethnic groups 4.5%, and
- Grassfields 7.7%, of which the Nso' people are a part.

The center of the Nso' is the market town of Kumbo, with approximately 53,970 inhabitants. The primary language, both oral and written, is Lamnso'. Pidgin English is the lingua franca and most individuals easily understand it.

Traditionally, the Nso' live in both single-family and joint or extended-family hamlets in the Northwest grassland; 95% of the population subsists mainly on agriculture. They cultivate potatoes, beans, maize, cocoyams, manioc, pumpkins, and huckleberry and raise domesticated animals (e.g., chickens, ducks, pigs, goats, sheep). In gardens located behind a family's house, small-scale farming is expected. This is where products needed for immediate consumption (e.g., tomatoes, spices, oranges, guavas, avocados) are cultivated. Large-scale farming takes place several kilometers away from the homesteads. Cultivation on these larger farms requires long-distance travel between the farm and a homestead. To manage work during farming and harvesting seasons, adults stay on the farm in thatched houses, often for more than two weeks at a time, while their children remain in the homestead and care for each other. In addition to farming, miniature-scale trading, tailoring, hairdressing, teaching, and nursing contribute to everyday wage-earning activities of the Nso' people.

Collaboration is a cornerstone of Nso' life. Beyond their immediate family, the Nso' people cooperate with each other in almost every aspect of their daily lives: on construction projects, hunting, small- and large-scale farming, rites and rituals, births, child-rearing, and during ceremonies that mark the death of a community member. Although most families endeavor to produce enough food for their own needs, their farm yields barely suffice. They also cannot create necessities, such as electricity, and there is a constant demand for market items such as machetes, hoes, salt, oil, sugar, steel axes, clothes, and shoes. Thus, the Nso', like many other traditional farmers, rely on others to supplement their social or economic welfare.

Western influence, which stems from colonial rule, is visible in the evolution of present Nso' villages, from the presence of Christian missionaries, churches, hospitals and health centers to practices of market integration, government policies, and the administration of schools. The market economy system has affected the communal lifestyle but a blend of Western and local paradigms is equally evident. As the Nso' people learned to sell their farm products, they also learned to maintain their "we"-ness through "DASH"ing. Dashing is a mutually recognized norm of gifting to a buyer after they purchase an item

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from the seller. No matter how small the gift may be, the intent is to enhance social relations, beyond the market.

Nso' is one of the Cameroonian cultural groups that has been highly impacted by the Western educational system. Before entering school, young children typically spend their days with their peers and grandparents or mothers. They design role-play games with their peers, imitating and mimicking the actions of their parents or adults whom they encounter each day. In the course of such games, the children distribute roles and tasks among themselves. Caregiver–child collaboration lessons are built into daily activities, as children assist their mothers or other caregivers from an early age. For instance, when children accompany an adult to fetch water from streams to bring back to their homes, they are given a small, portable container. They also get small hoes and are allocated short ridges to till while on the farm. When the adults harvest food to take back home, children assist by gathering food in smaller baskets. They also help during meal preparation by gathering firewood, slicing spices, bringing water, and running quick errands: female children assist the women while male children accompany their father or other males to the raphia bushes to tap palm wine. This learning process continues until their "left hand can touch their right ear," roughly around the time a child is admitted into the first class of primary education. All children, even those from rural communities, attend primary schools, and a good number of Nso' obtain at least a first school-leaving certificate, equivalent to seven years of primary education.

Fomo's Social Environment

Let us consider the concrete example Fomo, a nine-month-old Nso' boy. Fomo lives in a multigenerational household comprised of his father, mother, and cousins (who are eight and twelve years old). Thus, he enjoys an extensive caregiving network. His parents teach in separate secondary schools in neighboring towns. Usually, Fomo's parents leave him in the care of his cousins when they go to work, but recently, because his older cousin started an apprenticeship as a tailor, his younger cousin, who is also in primary school, is Fomo's closest caregiver at home.

Fomo's father is responsible for providing financial and material needs for the household. He has only accompanied his wife to the market a couple of times to purchase baby items, yet he bears 90% of the financial burden. He also ensures that the barns are stocked with food and firewood for the entire family, because his wife will not farm or do hard work for some time (i.e., during pregnancy or breastfeeding of Fomo). Recently, Fomo's father bought new water storage drums and pots, as the size of the family is increasing. He plays with Fomo when his mother and the cousins are busy cooking and cleaning. He also feeds or baths Fomo every once in a while. Fomo's father enjoys engaging in hands-on care for his son, but he does not want to interfere with women's tasks. He is worried about losing respect among his friends, who might perceive

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him to be weak (i.e., because he allows his wife to control him when he does women's tasks). Moreover, he has to hustle and "*work head*[1]" to bring in more income to meet the family's needs. Fomo's mother, for her part, is financially, physically, and emotionally engaged in catering to the needs of all members of her home. Despite being well educated and formally employed, because she is the woman of the house, she must also work hard for her family planning meals, cooking, cleaning, doing the laundry as well as other tasks around the home. Most meals consumed in her home are prepared with products from her farms. Thus, she only needs to purchase a few basic needs from the market (e.g., salt, sugar, oil, soap, bed sheets, and towels). Often, she is assisted by her nieces who live with her. Every morning, a household member takes Fomo to his maternal grandparents, who live in a nearby village. The grandparents care for him throughout the day until evening, when his parents take him back home. His grandfather is especially fond of Fomo. They do almost everything together: eat, play, sing, and sleep. He is teaching Fomo the local language (Lamnso') as well as what Fomo should and should not do, thereby transmitting Nso' norms and values:

A yoh yii du fey	No one is allowed to go that way
Laa yoh kum	Do not touch
A yoh yii kum tan baa	No one is allowed to touch the father's hat
A dze ki se se	Sit still/quietly

He insists that Fomo, as his first grandchild, should become not only a good boy but also a tough boy.

His grandmother, on the other hand, excitedly takes on a maternal role as soon as Fomo arrives. She has a suitcase filled with Fomo's belongings, which she started gathering even before he was born, so that Fomo can have a total change of clothes while in her care, as often as may be needed. She cooks for and feeds him, then carries him on her back while she goes about her daily tasks. Sometimes they go to the farm or to the market. Sometimes they go to church or to visit with her friends. Generally, she attends to his physical and emotional needs—she bathes, clothes, feeds, and puts Fomo to sleep—whereas the grandfather plays with and teaches him.

Sometimes, his maternal aunt and her husband take Fomo to their home for a week or two and care for him before returning him to his parents. This gives Fomo the chance to spend time with his cousins. Their neighbor, Ma Ngoran,[2] a widow, is a small-time trader who buys and sells potatoes, beans, maize, and garri (a local food made of cassava/manioc) at the entrance to her home. She spends most weekdays at home and goes to the bush market on Saturdays. Sometimes Ma Ngoran comes to take Fomo to keep her company while she packages her market products. She likes being around Fomo because

1 *Work head* is an expression in pidgin English which means to pick others' brains for solutions.

2 Women are named Mother (Ma) of the name of the first-born child.

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his presence brings life to her home, as her children are grown up and now live in the city. Fomo enjoys spending time with Ma Ngoran, especially since she carries him on her back and often sings to him. She frequently offers him natural fruit juices made from the fruits she sells and feeds him so much that he rejects meals made by his parents when he returns home later in the day. Ma Ngoran's juices are not only tasty to Fomo but to other children and adults in the neighborhood. Knowing this, she makes large amounts and serves passersby, hungry individuals returning to the village after working hard on their farms. This habit probably began because many people assisted Ma Ngoran at her husband's funeral.

During the holidays, Fomo's parents take him to Bamenda (a big neighboring city and capital of the Northwest Region) to spend a couple of weeks with his paternal grandmother. His mother says Fomo likes sleeping in his grandmother's bed because he gets to be cuddled all night long; he enjoys the lullabies she sings to put him back to sleep each time his sleep is disrupted. He has become so close to his grandmother that he runs away from his parents when they try to separate him from her. Fomo's paternal grandmother's home has seven occupants, three of whom are non-kin relations. Nevertheless, these individuals assist equally in caring for Fomo during his stay. They take turns taking him out for a stroll to enjoy the area. They buy him biscuits, candies, puff-puff (a local snack, made of flour, sugar, yeast), and oranges—all good reasons for any child to enjoy such evening outings with his uncles!

Fomo's mother's friends are also part of the network that provides care for him. They are always on standby to care for him for a couple of hours a day. In most cases, they offer to assist his mother; in other cases, she calls them when she needs their help. They believe it is their responsibility to help their friend with the demands of childcare because she has a full-time job as well as marital home chores. They help not only when Fomo's mother is busy but also to relieve the housework. They also visit with their children.

The adult women in Fomo's environment play a significant advisory role in his upbringing and well-being. From the beginning, they offered advice on breastfeeding strategies, bathing, weaning, how to determine and treat his sicknesses—all based on their own experiences as mothers in the Nso' cultural universe. Moreover, each person in this network of caregivers reports back to Fomo's parents or the next caregiver on events while he was in their care. Mostly they talk about their observations of his developmental changes, his health status throughout their stay, his eating habits, and his choice of food and games. If any caregiver suspects something unusual about Fomo's actions during the day, they take him to the hospital, even before informing his parents.

Fomo's social world is thus composed of many people of different generations, related and unrelated, in different locations. He loves to be with them and usually transitions smoothly between people, places, and households.

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Childcare: A Communal Responsibility in Nso' Society

The diverse activities that Fomo shares with his relational network are embedded in a communal understanding of living. Children hold an exceptionally high value in Nso'. They are a sign of blessings upon a family; their birth signifies the desire of the ancestors to stay connected with the living. Family members address infants using royal connotations, such as *faay*, *sheey*, *yaah* (lord, earl, or countess), in daily interactions to communicate how honorable it is to have a child. It is a symbol of honor and respect to the parents, especially the father, who in most cases is under untold pressure to extend the family lineage as a "real man," while the mother needs to prove that she is *fit*. A male child's value is often likened to that of a *savior*: his birth frees a mother from village scorn of *unfitness*, marked by the villagers singing *Boi fo njoh* (freed of blemish).

The pricelessness of a child elucidates the necessity for multiple caregivers to be involved in ensuring children's well-being. The Nso' people believe that a child is only the mother's when it is in her womb; once it is born, the child belongs to the entire community (Yovsi 2014). The child's survival and socialization are thus a collective responsibility. Subsequently, leaving a child alone is a rarity in Nso' communities because a spectrum of caregivers—from grandparents, kin relations, neighbors, and even bystanders—take turns in caring for the child (Verhoef 2005; Verhoef and Morelli 2007; Yovsi 2014). *Fomo wan* (give me the child) and *Ko wan* (take the child) are common phrases exchanged between caregivers. A child is passed from arm-to-arm, back-to-back, shoulder-to-shoulder (especially among men), house-to-house, and family-to-family.

Baa woo teri (small father) and *mami woo teri* (small mother) are appellations for peer and sibling caregivers who provide physical and emotional care to younger children (Yovsi 2014). Sibling and peer allocare is necessary in most traditional agricultural communities, not just as a training ground or a maturity test, but also as a child-rearing cover when parents are indisposed. Even four-year-old siblings help carry their younger siblings. As such, Nso' girls become mothers before they become wives (Yovsi 2014). They co-sleep, share the same plate during meals, exchange clothes, and direct actions and speech with and for their younger siblings. Their role is so critical in the socialization process that if a younger sibling exhibits unusual behavior, the older one receives the rebuke since this is regarded as a sign that the older sibling did not show the younger one the proper way.

The father's role in the childcare network in Nso' has always seemed distant. Besides funding education and medical care, the father's principal contribution is typically to enforce laws and regulations with his authority as the head of the family (Demuth 2013; Nsamenang 1992; Yovsi 2014). More recently, however, as women have taken formal jobs and due to exposure from the Internet, father's roles have been shifting toward emotional and physical support.

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Seesi wan (born house) is one of the critical child-welcoming ceremonies practiced by most Cameroonian cultural groups to demonstrate how they value cooperative breeding (Kramer 2010). Families come together from far and near to welcome a newborn child into another family. Women sing, dance, and serve food and drinks while the child is passed around for all to carry and bless. Besides being a joyful welcoming ceremony, it also permits villagers to come and show their allegiance and commitment to assist in raising the newborn child. They come to know its name, to be able to recognize it from that day forward. *Seesi wan* is also referred to as an introduction ritual when the child and the community are officially introduced to each other. After this, all those present are expected to assume a parental role each time they interact with the child.

Alloparenting is embedded in the Nso' culture in multiple ways. It is part of the community's responsibility to care for children, as they are gifts from God. This valuation is commonly represented in children's names: *Fonyuy* (given by God), *Berinyuy* (thank God), *Fomonyuy* (God's gift), *Ndzenyuy* (God's world), *Kuuminyuy* (God's remembrance), or *Mbu'minyuy* (God's blessing). Moreover, children are named after words that imply harmony: *Tomla* (a call to support), *Kongla* (a call to love), *Javla* (a call to share), or *Kintati* (togetherness).

For several reasons, allomaternal care is not only beneficial for the child but also for the caretakers. For example, allomothering evokes a sacred spiritual communication to implore fertility. The Nso' believe that selflessly nurturing others' offspring will bring luck to an infertile couple, especially women. By caring and providing for others' children, individuals show their capacity and willingness to care for a child of their own. Typically, a woman seeking "baby luck" goes to any home with children, often bearing gifts, and spends a great deal of time in proximity to the children. She assists in washing their laundry, making baby food and feeding the baby, bathing and clothing the child, singing lullabies to and co-sleeping with the baby. The child's parents accommodate her because they believe she is making silent supplications during this time, expressing her wish for a child like this. Her actions arouse sympathy from the *Nyuy wan* (the deity that gives children).

In a similar light, the culturally induced kin-based allocare strategy practiced by most Cameroonian cultural groups (e.g., the Nso', the Bafut, and the Kom) involves placing a family's child into the family of a newly wedded couple. After a traditional marriage, the woman's family (grandparents, parents, aunts, and uncles) unanimously choose one of her nieces to accompany her to her marital home. This young individual then becomes immersed in the lives of the couple for various reasons:

- to assist the young wife in household chores,
- to assist the young wife throughout her pregnancy,
- to babysit the child after birth,

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- to acquire domestic skills, which will help her future marriage prospects, and most importantly,
- to play the role of the first child in that family, as her presence will invite other children to come (be born), because a child evokes other children.

After marriage, most women tend to lose themselves to their marital responsibilities, especially when a child is born, all but disrupting past external relationships. Friends who understand this make it their duty to visit. They help each other with cleaning, washing, cooking, farming, childcare, while chatting about recent happenings in the village. Young women who aspire to marry are encouraged by their parents to visit the homes of their married friends, to watch and learn. The married women give tips on how to attract a spouse and make their husbands happy. These meetings between young married and unmarried women, characterized by chatting and laughing, are forums to learn about a woman's role in her marital home, especially the sexual activities that parents never talk about with their children.

Collaboration as a Way of Life

When it comes to community life, the Nso' cultural framework promotes principles such as collaborative practice and sharing (Goheen 1996) along with peaceful coexistence between members of a family's extended social network (Nsamenang and Lamb 1994). In other words, inhabitants internalize a cultural model wherein cooperation and compliance are deemed to be of utmost importance. All participants in an extensive social network must want to prioritize the entire group's well-being over an individual member's concerns. Accordingly, the whole group prioritizes the safety and well-being of all its members by jointly assisting a member in need. For example, when there is a need to construct a home, this is easily achieved when all members of the community *fo kiwo* (chip in a hand to help). Everybody's efforts are needed; while some may mold the bricks, others will fetch the water, lay the building's foundation, or construct the walls. The same holds for plastering the walls and floors as well as the roofing, till the installation is complete. Individual talents are insignificant until they serve the collective to which the individual belongs.

Typical occasions for community interaction take the form of self-support group meetings, *ngwah* or *njangi* (e.g., friendship network meetings in bars, funeral grounds, after-church service meetings). Men, for example, meet to drink palm wine most evenings after work. During these get-togethers, people discuss their ideas for projects. For instance, someone will inform the collective of the state of his project, the available materials, and what he needs to complete his task. Others will pledge their assistance, financially or materially (e.g., donating sand, cement, pillars, rafters, water drums, planks, nails) while others

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will provide the workforce. Then they all agree to meet on *vishiy ve bam* (traditional holidays, *Ki loo vey* and *Ngoylum*)[3] and help in the construction process.

Word about the construction project quickly spreads after they leave the meeting, as those who were there go to the homes of men who did not attend, either on the same day or days later, to inform them of the plan. When the men return to their homes after the palm wine evening, they delegate tasks to their wives and older children. Women are assigned to cook food for the occasion assisted by their female children while the older male children are put in charge of clearing the land and fetching water. Since everyone is committed, the younger children care for the youngest ones. This collaboration goes on until the project is complete.

Collaboration as the Human Condition

The Nso' way of life is similar to the Ubuntu philosophy, as expressed in the Zulu language: *ubuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* (I am, because you are). This philosophy emphasizes reliance on others to achieve one's potential, and it has shaped the living patterns in many African communities and most subsistence cultures. Through simple adherence by community members, this ideology has saved the lives of orphans, ensured the survival of the elderly and needy, provided food for hungry children as well as to those whose crops did not yield fruit, and secured medication for the sick. It means that children from different homes move as one group into the forest to fetch firewood for cooking in their respective homes and deliver bundles of wood to the elderly in need. It also means that when children go to fetch water from the stream, several times a day, they do so as a team and fill the water drums of all households in their neighborhood. In the beginning, this behavior is prompted by parental instruction, but shortly thereafter, the children do this on their own accord. The saying *Wuu yo yii lo, ii wir mo-on sum* (rain does not only fall on one person's farm) offers a lesson: just as rain falls down from the sky and lands on everyone's field, so too should we allocate resources to benefit everyone (Nsamenang and Lamb 1995).

Children acquire communal worldviews by participating in collaborative care networks. For decades, cultural anthropologists and psychologists have documented evidence of this in caregiving networks from diverse cultural groups outside the Western world. In their extensive work with the Navajo, Leighton and Kluckhohn detailed the significance and impact of multiple caregiving in their book "Children of the People" (Leighton and Kluckhohn 1948): the Navajo child resides with and is brought up by a vast, versatile traditional family, representative of the broad social connections in the community. The

[3] *Ki loo vey* and *Ngoylum* are traditional holidays set aside for royal rituals and land cleansing. It is taboo to farm or harvest on these days so individuals spend time performing home-based chores, visiting friends, and relaxing.

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role of older children in successful child-rearing has been documented by Kramer (2005) in both Maya (Yucatan Peninsula, Mexico) and Savanna Pumé (Llanos, Venezuela) communities, just as it has been observed in the Kipsigis (African pastoralists in Kenya) (Mulder and Milton 1985). Ethnographic reports by Smørholm (2021) present a similar picture from Lusaka, Zambia, where the cooperative network is perceived as the "fertile soil" that equips a child with functioning capacities, morals, and values. Here, after the *kutulusa/kufumizga mwana* (bringing out the child) ceremony, the grandmothers, aunts, older siblings, and other relatives collectively begin to nurture the *Chivuza* (child).

In addition to traditional farming communities, multiple care arrangements have been documented in hunter–gatherer communities. In the Aka foragers from the Congo Basin (Meehan and Hawks 2013) and the Hadza in Tanzania (Marlowe 2005), up to 17 alloparents directly care for one child and paternal caregiving for young children has been demonstrated in the Aka and Bofi foragers of Congo (Fouts 2008). Aka children are reared in densely populated camps: approximately 25–35 people live in 6–8 huts (Hewlett 1993). Distributed caretaking ensures that Aka children are integrated into the social fabric of the community's life from the moment of birth; they are carried 90% of the day and looked after by ca. 20 different individuals (Crittenden 2013). Allomaternal breastfeeding and allosuckling have been observed among Aka and Efe communities (Hewlett and Winn 2014), as well as displays of extensive non-kin care. However, the Ngandu horticulturists, who also live close to the Congo Basin's rainforest, operate using a different collaborative care network. Their offspring are raised by people who are all related. Still, Ngandu children receive substantial nonmaternal care and are constantly around caregivers (Meehan 2005, 2008). For further reading see Quinn and Machego (2013).

Collaborative care networks and allobreastfeeding are also present in Samoa. Mageo (2013) observed infants at the suckling on the nipple of an adult female, the father, a young teenage girl, and grandmothers. Only one woman in the community, who had a newborn, did not practice nonmaternal breastfeeding. Still, this woman considered the possibility of her baby being nursed by another woman in the future (for further examples of alloparenting, see Keller and Chaudhary 2017). Similarly, in some villages in Nso (e.g., Mbiame, Mbam, Kingomen, and Mbuluf), allobreastfeeding is common, particularly in times of extreme need, such as when a new mother becomes ill or passes away. In Fulani families, in Nkuv, if a breastfeeding child gets hungry in the absence of its mother, any other lactating mother who is present at the time assumes responsibility for feeding the child. If an infant has cried for too long and the mother is unavailable, another (nonlactating) female caregiver will place their nipple in the child's mouth to soothe it. As early as the fourth month of life, caregivers in Nso' blow air into a baby's face each time they make eye contact with their mother during suckling. The rationale behind this action is to stop babies from "marking" their mother's faces because if they do so they will begin to avoid other caregivers.

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The routine involvement of other individuals in childcare—especially grandmothers, siblings, fathers, and unrelated kin—is the basis of collaborative childcare and can be regarded as a human universal that extends back to the appearance of *Homo erectus* (Burkart and van Schaik 2010; Hrdy 1999, 2009). Cooperative breeding (Hrdy 2009) was necessary to successfully raise children. If the task had been solely left to mothers, humankind would not have survived (Hrdy 1999, 2009). Collaborative care networks are extensive: after mothers, older siblings effect the most significant impact on infant survival, followed by maternal and paternal grandmothers, then fathers, and finally grandfathers (Sear and Mace 2008).

Extensive allomaternal care permits higher birth rates (reducing birth intervals). The intensive cooperation inherent to collaborative care networks is guided by cultural norms and community values, as well as the social and cognitive capacities for social regulations.

Discussion

The social norms and values embedded in a community guide individuals as they learn and adhere to joint routine practices, and later, as they pass these practices on to their offspring. From infancy, children are immersed in their environment's understanding of "agency," which helps them form a sense of who they are and how they relate to other community members in their social world (LeVine 1973, 1980). These processes are active and participatory by nature.

In Western middle-class societies, a serial pattern of childcare involving two individuals (the child, the caregiver) is the norm. Tasks are specified and time is allocated for the interactions. Examples include a babysitter being hired to provide childcare because both parents are working, or a mother fulfills one function while the father another (Mesman et al. 2018). These interactions are controlled, with time allocated for each encounter. Children thus naturally acquire such dyadic communication patterns as the default.

In a traditional farming and foraging context, people live in interconnected communities, and childcare here reflects this, as multiple people participate in various ways to care for a child (Leighton and Kluckhohn 1948). Numerous attachments between community members and the child form simultaneously, rather than sequentially, as in Western middle-class communities (Meehan and Hawks 2013:108). As a result, multiple polyadic communication patterns are the default for children raised in these communities.

As practiced by the Nso' and other cultural groups, collaboration as a concept deviates greatly from the starting premise of this Forum (i.e., agents who mutually agree on a common goal). For the Nso', an agent can be an individual person or a support system to which a community complies. Interestingly, in the Nso' language, there is no word for the noun "collaboration."

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Abandoning the wrong restriction of culture to country or region *enables us to regard culture as a script to organize daily life* and thus contextualize its variations within and across groups. Cultural diversity refers to socially built standards of behavior—standards which can vary from group to group due to diverse living conditions. The possibilities and limitations that impact each group contribute to the formation of distinct norms and values that apply to the group. Because of cultural diversity, no single collaboration model can be globally applied; hence, scientists should not use frameworks designed by and tested in specific groups to determine the nature or existence of collaborative interactions elsewhere. Current knowledge has been primarily derived from WEIRD contexts (Henrich et al. 2010b). Thus, our understanding of how cooperation is conceptualized or practiced is superficial, at best, and does not apply to people who live in non-WEIRD contexts: pastoralists, fishing communities, farmers, highly educated middle-class families in non-Western countries, lower-educated economically nonaffluent groups in Western nations. Ecologically sound assessments are needed that are (a) tailored to specific cultural contexts and (b) based on a more profound knowledge of interactors' folk conceptions about their collaborative interactions.

The prevalence of theories and research based on the WEIRD model of human behavior has led to implicit and explicit assumptions about the nature of human collaboration, assumed by many to be valid for all of humanity. For example, in a WEIRD context, carefully planned and managed social exchanges are required for solid, successful partnerships: the organizational structures present in these communities adhere to established rules, regulations, and policies. Exporting this concept to a non-Western community, however, could have the opposite effect: community members might view such guidelines as questioning their trustworthiness, prompting the erosion of long-standing relationships and important organizational structures in the community.

If we wish to model human cooperative and collaborative behavior globally, we need to draw on cross-cultural research that demonstrates cultural differences and the existence of socially imparted norms on appropriate behaviors in particular circumstances. For example, children are highly valued in both Western middle-class families and Nso' households. However, to care for this "precious" child, different strategies are followed:

- In the Western middle-class context, a child is believed to deserve protection from social overstimulation, requiring a restricted care network of only a few people.
- For the Nso', a child is believed to deserve a large social network to respond adequately to their importance.

Even the conceptualization of "collaboration" must be viewed through a cultural lens:

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- In a WEIRD setting, it is a contract, between independent agents, that prioritizes *independence* or *psychological autonomy*. Assertiveness and self-reliance are crucial. Individuals learn to depend on their abilities within a self-selected circle of close friends and family members. Individuals make decisions based on personal judgment (Gibson 1999). This process accounts for the economic, social, and technological emphases seen in WEIRD countries (Heslop et al. 2018).
- In traditional settings (e.g., the Nso'), it is a way of communal life that encompasses material and emotional *interdependence.* The process is characterized by multigenerational families who rely on each other for support: children rely on adults in the early years of life; the elderly, especially during frail health, rely on their children for care (Nsamenang 1992; Nsamenang and Lamb 1995).
- In previously patriarchal cultures that are currently undergoing living changes due to urban and socioeconomic expansion, it embodies both material independence and psychological interdependence. Autonomy is encouraged, but relatedness is maintained.

The benefits of multiple and polytrophic interactions that a child gains from living in a traditional setting are manifold: The rich social networks present provide children with several ways to bond and learn. This, in turn, expands their cognitive and emotional development. By contrast, a restricted social environment offers limited dyadic relationships, which also impacts cognitive and emotional development. Still, the latter setting is regarded as the norm to which everyone should aspire. Evidence of this can be found in a recent large-scale intervention program: the Nurturing Care Framework (Britto et al. 2017; Richter et al. 2017). The need for the program is based on a claim that a large number of children in low- and middle-income countries (250 million children under five years of age according to recent estimates) are at risk of not reaching their developmental potential due to inadequate care and insufficient stimulation (Black et al. 2017:77). To improve care and stimulation, the Nurturing Care Framework designed parenting intervention programs to train primarily mothers to implement WEIRD parenting practices in their family and community. Financed by international stakeholders, such as UNICEF, WHO, and many Western NGOs, this program is being applied to countries referred to as the Global South. Unfortunately, this program completely ignores cultural, anthropological, and psychological evidence. The inappropriateness of the assumptions embedded in the program vis-à-vis local norms, values, and practices has precipitated ethical problems and may well eliminate previously successful cultural practices. (For a critique of the Nurturing Care Framework, see Oppong and Strader 2022 and Scheidecker et al. 2021.)

The way forward is, surprisingly, simple: To understand what collaboration is as well as why and how humans engage in collaborative actions, we need to look through the eyes of *all* people. Importantly, we need to stop exporting

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values, practices, and concepts from one area of the world to another. No matter how noble a goal may seem, it is not valid to judge one group based on the values, practices, and concepts of another. Instead, we need to value *culture as a script to organize daily life within a specific context*. If we do this, we will be able to contextualize variations that are observed within and across groups. In the end, this approach may help us realize true collaboration between disparate groups and cultures.

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