

Ending epistemic exclusion: toward a truly global science and practice of early childhood development



The science and practice of Early Childhood Development (ECD) rely heavily on research from the Euro-American middle class—a minority of the world's population—and research in or from the majority world is severely under-represented. This problem has been acknowledged in ECD,¹ an applied field aiming to assess and improve child development globally, and in the related fields of global health² and developmental sciences.³ Thus, now is the time to search for effective pathways towards global representation. To date, most calls for change within ECD and related fields have focused on various aspects of knowledge production⁴ and publication.^{1,5}

Although more majority world research is certainly needed, we should work equally on the reception of existing research. A large body of research on childhood in the majority world already exists (eg, in anthropology,⁶ cultural psychology,⁷ and indigenous psychology⁸), but majority world research is almost entirely absent in ECD.⁹ The under-representation of majority world research in ECD cannot simply be blamed on the scarcity of research, however. This under-representation is also perpetuated by the exclusion of existing, accessible, and highly relevant majority world research from the dominant academic discourses—in other words, by epistemic exclusion. If epistemic exclusion in the field of ECD continues, the existence of more majority world research will not reduce the current minority world biases in ECD research. Ending epistemic exclusion is therefore an essential step towards a truly global ECD practice.

An example of epistemic exclusion is the Nurturing Care Framework (NCF),¹⁰ a roadmap for the global implementation of ECD programmes that was ratified by the World Health Assembly in 2018. The NCF claims to build “on state-of-the-art evidence about how early childhood development unfolds”¹⁰ and draws largely on three Series papers in *The Lancet*¹¹ that review the evidence for and define the principles of nurturing care. Although the NCF focuses on the majority world, the underlying evidence has been produced overwhelmingly in the minority world.^{1,9} This is especially true for basic science research from developmental psychology and neurosciences that provides “evidence about how early childhood development unfolds”.¹⁰ The three *Lancet*

Series papers, which exemplify a more general issue in ECD research, do not cite any publications from outlets such as the *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, *Ethos*, or *Childhoods*, which publish basic research from across the world.

When majority world research is cited, it is applied research assessing parenting, developmental outcomes, or interventions. Such research typically leads to a deficit view: by using measures derived from basic research in the minority world, it presents different majority world caregiving and child development as deficient by default.^{1,9,12} In fact, the *Lancet* ECD Series papers portray majority world parents as poor caregivers whose inadequate care puts children “at risk of not reaching their developmental potential”.¹¹ To merely complement basic minority world research with applied majority world research perpetuates epistemic exclusion rather than works against it: the resulting deficit view only reinforces the idea that majority world populations are unsuitable to study processes of normal development and that basic research in such populations can be dismissed.

Epistemic exclusion is not simply a matter of disregarding majority world research, it is also about ignoring research that does not readily fit into a predefined epistemic framework consisting of a set of measures, constructs, and theories derived from minority world thinking. However, the mere inclusion of derivative majority world research is not conducive to real change. Epistemic inclusion requires engaging with basic, diverse, and at times contradictory majority world research.

As much as epistemic exclusion represents a powerful maintenance mechanism of minority world biases, it also holds opportunities for change. Any researcher, reviewer, or editor can make an immediate difference with their next publication by ensuring due consideration and citation of existing majority world research. Additionally, academics can hold each other accountable for doing so on both scientific and ethical grounds, as the minority world bias and its derogatory effects are widely recognised.

We anticipate several objections regarding the feasibility of such an approach. Some might object that



Early learning among mixed-aged children without adult involvement and educational toys is common in the majority world but mostly ignored in ECD science¹³

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basic majority world childhood research is nearly non-existent. According to various estimates, only about 5–10% of childhood research has been conducted in the majority world;^{1,3} however, such estimates are based on a few high-impact journals and, thus, focus on research that has already entered hegemonic developmental discourse. Much more majority world research can be drawn upon. Context-sensitive disciplines like anthropology, cultural psychology, or childhood studies have researched child development in the majority world for many decades, but published their findings mostly in outlets that remain unconsidered. Even if majority world research is relatively rare compared with that of the minority world, the research that does exist is a valuable resource for achieving a more globally representative science.

Another objection might be that the excluded ethnographic research is not relevant to ECD. We hold that ethnographic evidence is crucial because it illuminates the sociocultural embeddedness of child development, and thus can be used to counter the deficit view in ECD and guide locally pertinent support. Relevant ethnographic research and its implications for ECD have been previously identified⁹ and discussed with regard to early learning¹³ or intelligence testing.¹⁴

ECD scientists might also justify their disregard of existing majority world research on the grounds that it is less scientifically rigorous; however, the frequent use of qualitative explorative methods in ethnographic research is not an accident. These methods have been developed exactly to counter ethnocentric biases that occur when standardised procedures are applied in contexts different from the one in which they emerged. Hence, ethnographic research methods are as valid as highly standardised methods. These methods prioritise external validity, which becomes particularly pertinent in research and practice across contexts.

The inclusion of existing childhood research from around the world is challenging but imperative, and potentially transformative. It is challenging as it requires engaging with diverse disciplines, methodological approaches, theories, and findings. It is imperative for a field that operates globally and claims to be based on the best available evidence. It is transformative because it helps to overcome the widespread deficit view in ECD and set the stage for globally representative and locally

pertinent ECD research and practice. Therefore, we urge ECD scientists and practitioners to seriously consider existing, epistemically plural majority world research and incorporate it into their work, not as an act of charity, but as a fundamental step towards a truly global ECD practice.

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