

## Alloparenting – a historical perspective on infant ‘loving’ care relationships

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### Abstract

Contemporary loving relationships during infancy are often discussed with reference to attachment and bonding between the parent, predominantly the mother, and their infant. However, parents throughout history have often relied on alloparenting for support, offered from, among others, wet nurses, nannies, grandmothers, godparents and friends. Alloparents are defined as non-parents who provide infant care with, or at times instead of, parents, within and beyond the home. In many cultures they are considered the norm rather than the exception, and while at times the support may be temporary, it should not be perceived as necessarily chaotic or unstable. This paper explores the role of alloparenting and how it has been defined and draws upon this to propose an inclusive reconceptualisation of infant loving care relationships today. It argues that alloparents have often been central to the care of infants but inconsistently valued in their contribution of supporting both parents and infants.

**Keywords:** alloparenting, infants, care, attachment, bonding

## Introduction

Alloparenting has been defined as a form of parental care provided by an individual, other than the parents, who performs the temporary functions of the parenting role (Kluger, 2011). Alloparenting in essence is an individual's transfer of time, energy and/or resources to non-offspring. Alloparenting has been observed in a variety of species including humans (Hrdy, 2009) and is conceptualised as contributing to increased survival rates and fitness of infants (Lukas and Clutton-Brock, 2012). Focusing exclusively on human relationships, alloparenting illuminates alternative views, and widens the lens about how an infant can form several meaningful and close relationships beyond the caregiver–infant dyad conceived by Bowlby. The roles of alloparents offer an insight into the significance of extended family members as well as paid professionals who support the primary carer. Alloparents may include siblings, grandparents and extended kin, as well as non-relatives such as friends and neighbours, and extend to paid professional infant carers, ensuring the survival of the baby or young child, including (but not limited to) feeding and holding (Hrdy, 2009).

Current attachment research in early childhood is often viewed within Bowlby's theory of attachment, which focuses on the dyadic relationship with a main parental figure, often the mother, as the "key attachment figure in the life of the developing child" (Bowlby, 1969, p. 375). Bowlby (1969) argued that the survival chances of newborn mammals are enhanced by an innate capacity for care seeking and bonding with the primary carer (cited in Taggart, 2022, p. 2). However, diverse childcare arrangements exist in different cultures that, in their respective cultural contexts, are equally as normative as Western conventions. Tronick *et al.* (1992) revealed in their observations of the Efe tribe of Zaire that infants were often cared for by multiple carers and therefore formed multiple relationships. They suggested that by developing multiple relationships, the infants were able to develop a secure sense of self that included others in their life. In these contexts, alloparenting is neither chaotic nor unstable and is embedded with cultural meanings, values and practices involving parents and alloparents (Keller and Chaudhary, 2018).

Alloparenting can be encapsulated by the famous African proverb, "It takes a village to raise a child." According to David Lancy (2008), this conveys the notion that all those taking an active role as a collective, alongside the parents, can be considered an alloparent. From an evolutionary and anthropological perspective, Hrdy (2009) drew attention especially to grandparents' activities, practices and relationships as necessary for infant survival and increased positive outcomes. Hrdy (1999; 2005; 2007; 2009) surmised that without cooperation from both kin and non-kin alloparents, humans may not have been able to flourish as a species. Infant alloparenting positions relationships beyond the often-conceived binary dichotomies and more towards the infants being and becoming with others (Kehily, 2013). The role of alloparents is therefore influential and extends the maternal attachment discourse, by including family members and professional child carers in the parental/carer role as well as contextualising when alloparenting relationships occur and develop in the family home (Knott, 2019).

A historical example of rejecting patriarchal structures, which was common in Eastern Europe, was the emergence of the kibbutz community during the early 20th century (Sagi *et al.*, 1994). The relevance of the kibbutz to alloparenting was in the community members' lifestyle choices and how the infants were cared for. Infants were placed in communal 'children's houses', and alloparents were available, taking a significant role in the caring responsibilities. The parents would only return to the nursery if the infant was restless and they had been requested. The concept of the kibbutz community supports Hrdy's (1999; 2007; 2009) views about alloparenting being a necessity in successful child-rearing.

However, who supports parents and how this is interpreted and managed in relation to alloparents varies cross-culturally. Historically, alloparents have included both kin alloparents and professionals, initiating and shaping various forms of relationships, including providing financial support, physical care, play and, as argued in this paper, a loving relationship with the infant in their care.

## **Alloparenting and infant loving care – a historical perspective**

Traditionally, it was considered that if parents actively invested in the concept of alloparenting, infants would be more likely to survive beyond reproductive age (Hill and Hurtado, 2009). Alloparenting may therefore have been a means by which ancestral mothers acquired active biparental investment for their infants in the face of paternal desertion or death, or lack of resources. This reveals that parents were concerned with good outcomes for their offspring and arguably a sense of love during this process.

The first generation of family historians (Aries, 1962; Stone, 1977; Shorter, 1976) did not accept claims that maternal love existed; this was because childhood was not recognised and valued as a distinct phase of human existence, the family concept as we know it today did not exist, and love and affection were not exhibited or recorded. Nevertheless, the existence of love (or otherwise) was an aspect of their critical enquiries, which drew attention to the emotional relationships in the family and how love and affection changed over time. Alternative interpretations of maternal love have been made as records of lived experiences and expressions of love have gradually been documented (Knott, 2019; Pollock, 1983). In making sense of how loving relationships extend to alloparents, accounts of siblings, grandparents, wet nurses and nannies have provided insights into the complexities of loving relationships.

### ***Siblings and the sister effect***

Jakiela *et al.* (2020), in a report on big sisters for the Center for Global Development, stated that in almost all human societies throughout history, older children have assisted in the support and care of their younger siblings. In OECD countries, this assistance is typically confined to the older children minding their younger siblings and monitoring their safety as they play. Lancy (2008) described older siblings in families, particularly older sisters, as being significant in many low- and middle-income countries. Older sisters tended to contribute to the care of their younger siblings more than older brothers. Many anthropologists are aware of the potential for a sister effect within the family dynamic of allocare. In the Gambia during the mid-20th century, it was evaluated that the presence of an older sister increased the survival rate of the subsequent children birthed by parents (Jakiela *et al.*, 2020), which implies a form of loving relationship and a desire to support the development of, and a positive healthy outcome for, their younger sibling. In spite of this, the role that older sister siblings play in relation to childcare remains an under-studied area within research and policy (Lancy, 2008).

### ***Grandparents***

Hrdy (1999) argued that a consideration of the profound impact of grandmothers is crucial in understanding how infants survived throughout history, and it was only at the end of the 20th century that it became apparent in societies with high rates of infant and child mortality that support from alloparents not only improved health, social maturation and mental development, but was essential for child survival. Nevertheless, while family members have been researched more broadly, their roles in pregnancy, birth and the first months and years of life have historically been less studied.

Human parents require significant support to raise multiple, highly dependent offspring. Grandmothers are often highlighted as key allomothers (non-maternal caregivers), and their presence

is frequently associated with increased child survival. Grandmaternal involvement is usually higher than grandpaternal involvement, and grandmothering is best considered as an extension of the mother's role, which allows older women to effectively assist in rearing grandchildren (Lancy, 2008).

While these evolutionary considerations apply to all grandmothers irrespective of cultural background, the role and engagement of grandmothers can vary considerably across histories and cultures. For example, Chinese culture values the involvement of grandparents in caregiving such as child-feeding practices, whereas in Turkey, grandmothers raise children alongside mothers. Grandmothers in modern-day England may perceive their role as being fun partners when they are with their grandchildren, associating leisure time with them. However, many grandparents view their role as alloparent as one of responsibility and connected support with their children, in some cases leading the care with the birth parents supporting them. This may be evident with teenage pregnancies where, at times, the grandmother will step in to raise the quality of care of their grandchild, with their teenage child (Wilson *et al.*, 2017).

Bland (2019) provided autobiographical insights into the little-known history of children born to black American servicemen and white British women during the Second World War. Bland (2019) presented the narratives of more than forty children and documented that a significant proportion of the children were retained in the family home but raised by their grandparents, with the children believing their grandparents were their birth parents. They described their experiences as being loved and part of a family group, with, in certain cases, their mother being understood as their sibling. For many children with close loving family relationships, they were able to flourish and make sense of their relationships as adults. This suggests that loving relationships and ensuring the children remained within the household, cared for by the family kin, was an important factor in supporting and extending loving relationships within these families.

## **Wet nurses**

Wet nursing originated at least 3,000 years ago as a form of employment contract in Babylon and offered a source of strength that was considered essential to the survival of the infant. Although beneficial from the perspective of an infant's health, the use of wet nursing was thought to potentially affect the infant's psychological development. Rousseau (1762) had concerns that such practice led to a profound conflict within the psyche of the child when the child was returned to their biological mother. He was concerned the infant would love the wet nurse and therefore desire her more than the mother (Rousseau, 1762). The child would be unable to distinguish the wet nurse's role as servant, culminating in eventually despising their biological mother.

Rousseau believed mothers should be the primary carer for their infants, a notion not considered fashionable by many. During this time, wet nurses' and carers' support was often sought outside of the home, but for Rousseau it was a missed opportunity regarding what we now consider a valuable period in developing a bond between parents and their infant.

Does not the child need a mother's care as much as her milk? Other women, or even other animals, may give him the milk she denies him, but there is no substitute for a mother's love. (Rousseau, 1762, p. 1)

Rousseau (1762) argued that the practice of finding 'help' in the form of alloparents to carry out care roles with their infant instilled a physically and emotionally distant relationship, resulting in an increased lack of physical contact between the infant and parent.

For some infants, the act of wet nursing was also met with little love and compassion (Norman, 2022). Alloparents would often accept payment for wet nursing but primarily feed their own infant. When the non-biological infant's health was compromised and payment was ceased by the parents, the

alloparent would then prioritise the feeding of the non-biological infant to improve the infant's health and ensure they were paid. Wet nursing was motivated by the financial aspect as opposed to feelings of love. This highlighted the disparities associated with wet nursing and developing loving relationships (Coles, 2015).

Wet nursing remained common practice through to the 20th century across all social classes. Burnett (1994) highlighted the acceptance of working-class women being employed as wet nurses in the period from 1790 to 1945. Quoting a memoir from the late 19th century, Burnett (1994) provided a glimpse into the everyday practice of infant feeding.

I understand that when my sister Alice was a baby my mother's first Lady X also had her first baby. Lady X was unable to feed her baby so my mother was engaged as a wet nurse and walked to X Hall three times a day to breastfeed Lady X's baby. She received a meal each time and this she did for three months by which time the baby was sufficiently developed to be hand fed by the nurse. (Burnett, 1994, p. 289).

Albeit part of employment, wet nursing ensured the healthy development and survival of the young infant, and only when the child was sufficiently developed were they handed over to the nanny. The ambiguity around the loving nature of the relationships remains, with some wet nurses positively investing in the relationships with the infants they cared for, and other wet nurses viewing the financial benefit as the rationale for engaging in wet nursing.

## **Nannies**

During the 19th and early 20th centuries, families also employed nannies, and while initially there was an overlap with wet nurses, the role became an increasingly professional service offered to families.

A generalised portrait of a nanny from the 19th century until the mid-20th century was offered by Hardyment (2007, pp. 117–119), who described the role as follows:

- An unmarried woman was sometimes considered the same class as the wet nurse.
- There was little formalised training before the 1920s and some females entered the profession as young as 12 years of age, supported by a more experienced nursery nanny.
- A uniform was worn, and the routine was that the nanny would be responsible for the care, bathing and feeding of the infant. They would present the infant to the parents at scheduled times, in their 'best' clothes.
- After the child turned five years of age, the nanny was often replaced by an educational governor.

Emily Ward also provided a definition of the nanny or nursery nurse, as someone who was educated and trained to undertake this role. In her view, as set out in an 1899 edition of the *Norland Quarterly*, the ideal nursery nurse was:

Educated up to the age of fourteen ... having received elementary domestic training in a good home ... As [a] young girl, she has been employed to play with and amuse the children. By the time she is twenty-one she has ... been trained in the school of experience ... acquired a gentle, pleasing, respectful, and dignified manner. Well drilled to attend to the physical wants of the children ... honest, loyal, and truthful ... (Norland College, 2022)

John Bowlby, in the mid-20th century, provided accounts of the love he felt with his nanny, Minnie. It was this relationship that inspired some of his developing theory about attachment. He claimed he never recovered from the loss of her mothering approach and love. The separation anxiety he experienced when she left the family home remained with him into adulthood. Winston Churchill, the mid-20th-century English prime minister, also had wet nurses as an infant. While this has seldom been

discussed, his attendance at his nannies' funerals suggests a lifelong connection with them. Although the care of infants often varied among nannies and wet nurses, when loving maternal relationships existed between nannies and their charges, deep-rooted psychological and loving relationships continued throughout adulthood (Coles, 2015).

From the mid-20th century, however, middle-class mothers reportedly became more involved with childcare, especially as care from the nanny or wet nurse declined, although upper-class parents supposedly remained formal, controlled and distant from their infants for a longer period. Working-class parents also began to reconsider their infant care arrangements, although many continued to be burdened by financial constraints, continuing to be reliant on informal care arrangements (Violett, 2018).

Evaluating attachment between alloparents (and parents) and infants throughout history is challenging and at times contradictory, as love and affection between them were seldom recorded. This is primarily due to the fact that although parents and extended kin may have loved or cared for their infants, they did not often show affection publicly and documentation about love was infrequent. Moreover, love and affection are also often culturally assessed according to Western normative expressions of love, such as the frequency of touching, holding, verbal expressions and caresses occurring between the carer and the infant being observed. This implies that a lack of these behaviours being recorded assumed unaffectionate relationships and an absence of love (Roberts, 1995).

The realities of caring for numerous infants and children, and social conformity, contributed to seemingly unaffectionate family relationships throughout history (Hendrick, 1997). However, Burnett's (1994) collections of autobiographies and memoirs written by women in the late 19th century and early 20th century provided a glimpse of the nature of relationships between carers and infants. One entry was of a housemaid. She started by talking about herself and going out to work in 1905. In her role as a nurse housemaid, she looked after three families in total. One of her families had three children – a baby girl and two boys – and she received two shillings a week.

In the morning I did the housework, and in the afternoon, I took the children out, in the evening I looked after them and put them to bed.

...The mistress took me to have a photograph taken with the children grouped around me. Perhaps someone still has that photo of themselves ... showing the nanny with her charges. (Burnett, 1994, p. 216).

Although love was not mentioned, there were threads of affection and desire to be with the children.

Allomaternal care and investment by kin and non-kin can therefore be diverse and organised into two general categories: those that directly care for the child, and those that provide indirect care, which is towards the mother. Direct care often includes physical contact such as holding infants or supervising children (Hubbard *et al.*, 2023). Indirect care may involve supporting the parent, such as cooking for the family or supporting the mother as she breastfeeds, or, as illustrated throughout history, breastfeeding on behalf of the mother (Emmott *et al.*, 2021). In the examples given, these two aspects have merged, and illustrations of grandparent and older-sibling responsibility provide evidence of family members supporting one another. The physical care, particularly by older sister siblings, also suggests feminist notions around nurturing, as well as protecting infants from external danger as they play. Therefore, alloparents' role of protection, care and external support can be inferred as loving care. By extending this further still, there is arguably more ambiguity around loving care when considering wet nurses and nannies from the past, although it is evident from the research that from the child's perspective, the loving care, specifically in the nanny examples, had a lifelong impact on nurturing relationships.

## Alloparenting in modern industrialised societies

Modern industrialised societies are generally characterised by nuclear-family households, with grandparents and other extended family often living a considerable distance away. Alloparenting is therefore frequently sought from professional carers rather than kin or friends. However, studies carried out in societies which have not undergone the fragmentation of extended families have shown that grandmothers and other biological kin distribute the burden of infant care so that it does not fall exclusively on the mother. Some studies have also revealed that by sharing the care, there are improved health outcomes for infants (Glasper *et al.*, 2019).

Waynforth (2020) evaluated that kin-based infant care, which was predominantly offered by grandparents, was associated with a 15% reduction in the risk of hospitalisation in infants up to nine months of age. While the results suggest that there are gains in infant health improvements to encourage kin-based allocare (albeit arguably modest ones), the labour market trends in England are organised in such a way that support is often sought from professional alloparents, if parents can afford it, rather than kin. This is in part because more older family members, such as grandparents, continue to work and remain in employment than in previous years and therefore are less available as alloparents (Waynforth, 2020).

While the literature has traditionally focused on the role of kin in cooperative child-rearing, researchers are increasingly acknowledging and appreciating the flexibility around who provides care for both the parent and the infant (Hubbard *et al.*, 2023). This has included research into the role of non-kin such as professionals in providing direct care or indirect care to the child, via the parent. Salonen *et al.* (2018), who studied institutional alloparenting in Norway, highlighted that this form of alloparenting was offered to accommodate parents' working arrangements outside of daytime hours, with nurseries operating during a 24-hour period and late into the evening. Their study revealed how the role of alloparents moved towards more loving and nurturing relationships, reading stories, and creating a calm ambience in the setting, in contrast to the more educational focus and learning activities during the day care settings.

## Alloparenting today – contribution to loving relationships

Attachment and bonding, theories developed by Bowlby and in part deep-rooted in his early experiences with his nanny, are generally considered key aspects of the importance of parenting relationships. However, as discussed, from a cultural perspective attachment theory has been argued to be perpetuating a dyadic relationship, and for many parents in the West, this is often their perceived reality. In England, the mother as primary carer is often culturally (and politically) assumed to lead their infant's care in the first few months. Nevertheless, many parents are often emotionally held and supported by an array of alloparents, both kin and professionals. As is often the case, it is not until there is a disruption in the micro relationships of families that the 'invisible' care and support of alloparents for parents is appreciated and realised as being essential to infant care.

### ***It takes a village***

Formed in Bristol in 2019, the Mothership Writers creative writing group documented their experiences of being a new mother during the first Covid-19 lockdown. As a collective, 277 authors shared their experience of becoming a new mother in 2020. Their letters reflected the diversity of a mother's experiences, the complexity and their conflicts, as much as the joy and wonder. One theme of the report was their experiences of community, or rather lack of it, as quoted below:

It takes a village ... I wish I could see mine. (Hall, 2020, p. 38)

It takes a village to raise a baby, I read somewhere. Where's my village, I wondered? Feeling so removed from everything today. (Hall, 2020, p. 61)

They say it takes a village to raise a child, but where do you turn when the village is closed? The usual support is deemed 'unsafe'. (Hall, 2020, p. 69)

This strengthens the argument for the value of the support and strength of alloparents in developing loving relationships with infants (Hall, 2020).

## Conclusion and recommendations

Alloparenting, defined as care provided by individuals other than parents, is a universal behaviour among humans that has shaped evolutionary history and remains important in contemporary society. As highlighted by the Mothership Writers group, a lack of alloparenting resources can have serious consequences for infants and their parents. The experiences of parents during the pandemic revealed their despair and isolation. The loss of alloparents revealed their value and significance, alongside the challenges faced by parents when they are omitted from everyday life. Alloparenting therefore exists as part of the cooperative child-rearing system in humans. Important alloparents include both kin and professionals, within and beyond the home.

This article suggests that types of alloparenting are considered a common but under-studied area, although it is argued that the evolutionary advantages of this form of caregiving are numerous, with some evidence of infant and maternal health benefits (Schonbrun and Hershberg, 2021). Emmott (2014) noted it was clear within the literature that there are variations across populations in terms of who matters, who provides the help, how they help and how much impact they have on child-rearing. In her thesis, she used the UK Millennium Cohort Study and concluded that although fathers and stepfathers were integral to the nuclear family, the most significant allomothers impacting on child development in the UK were the children's grandmothers. However, as suggested in the article, this is increasingly challenging, with many grandparents remaining in paid work.

Kin alloparenting is an increasingly researched area, and this article suggests that further research is needed into contemporary institutional non-kin alloparents, in order to strengthen their cultural value in modern society (Glasper *et al.*, 2019). As Taggart (2022) proposed, alloparenting traditions suggest a way in which early childhood education and care settings can establish themselves as models of social sustainability rooted in 'philia' and mutuality. Taggart (2022) also concluded that empathising, and defining the role and significance of alloparenting, will be influential in taking early years ethical care and politics in new directions, both within and beyond the home.

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