

# Cultural Variability in Baby-Schema Perception: Insights on Face Perception from Two Small-Scale Malaysian and An Urban German Community

**Marie Michael**

Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology, Leipzig, Germany

**Daniel Haun**

Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology, Leipzig, Saxony, Germany

## Abstract

Baby-schema is a social perception phenomenon describing how infantile facial features and their abstract representation in animals and objects automatically engage human caregiving responses. While often considered universal, its cross-cultural variability remains untested outside large-scale industrialized communities. Does cultural background and visual experience influence perceptual and behavioral biases of baby-schema?

We examined responses to manipulated infant faces in two Indigenous Malaysian (Batek, Temiar) and an urban German community. In a pre-registered eye-tracking task, participants viewed human and cat face pairs differing only in baby-schema-level (high vs. low) and completed a pre-registered binary forced-choice task. Germans selected high baby-schema faces as more likable, cuter, younger, and healthier, while small-scale communities showed attenuated or absent effects and were less sensitive to baby-schema manipulations in a control discrimination-task. Eye-tracking showed cultural differences in gaze patterns that were not meaningfully influenced by species or baby-schema-level. A follow-up study will investigate effects of group membership.