

Must We Abandon Context and Meaning to Avoid Bias in Cultural Parenting Research? Commentary on “Parenting Culture(s): Ideal-Parent Beliefs Across 37 Countries”

Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology
2023, Vol. 54(1) 36–42
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DOI: 10.1177/00220221221138907
journals.sagepub.com/home/jcc



Gisela Trommsdorff¹

The authors of the current article advocate a culture-sensitive approach in research and interventions, including a culture-informed methodology. They examine how “ideal-parent” beliefs in different countries comprise “parenting cultures,” conceptualized as shared “ideal-parent” beliefs. The authors define “ideal-parent” beliefs as “a higher level construct—the meaning system and lens through which parents perceive, understand, and engage in their parenting practices.”

This definition suggests a complex model of interrelations between *individual* and *shared* parents’ beliefs and practices, and *contextual* conditions of parenting and development. From a parenting science view, this definition implies that “ideal-parent” beliefs are closely related to cultural values and norms, parents’ self- and world views, the role of parents, parent’s child-rearing goals and practices, and to parent–child relationships, while all these aspects are impacting the socialization and development of children in given developmental contexts. From a cultural psychological view, shared “ideal-parent” beliefs, defined as constituting a specific “parenting culture” are characterized by shared values and norms. Reciprocal relations among parenting culture, parents’ beliefs, every-day parenting practices, and the general cultural context may be assumed. However, this model is not articulated in the current study, but it is guiding my own research on socialization, parenting, and development in cultural contexts (Mayer & Trommsdorff, 2010; Rothbaum & Trommsdorff, 2007; Trommsdorff, 2006, 2012, 2017; Trommsdorff & Rothbaum, 2008; Trommsdorff et al., 2012; Trommsdorff & Kornadt, 2003).

The Current Study

Aiming to avoid a biased approach, the authors rejected the use of established theoretical frameworks and universal dimensions for comparing ideal-parent beliefs across nations. Attempting to uncover culture-specific shared “ideal-parent” beliefs and to prevent the risk of overlooking indigenous concepts, the authors applied an exploratory and bottom-up approach. Their goal was to disclose “parent cultures” by mapping shared ideal-parent beliefs recorded from parents beyond WEIRD countries (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic; Henrich, 2020). The data were collected from a large convenience sample of participating parents (mostly mothers and some fathers). The participants indicated “five features (each in one word) that an ideal mother or

¹University of Konstanz, Germany

Corresponding Author:

Gisela Trommsdorff, University of Konstanz, Konstanz, Baden-Württemberg 78464, Germany.
Email: gisela.trommsdorff@uni-konstanz.de

father should have in your opinion (e.g., caring).” The single word answers were translated by native language researchers. Automated content analysis of these data using an unsupervised machine learning technique was applied to reduce interpretation bias. Semantic Network Analyses performed quantitative content analysis. The analyses resulted in a visualized “Global Semantic Network Map of Five Parenting Culture Zones and Their Country Composition” and in “The Semantic Network Maps of the Ideal-Parent Beliefs and the Educational Groups in the Five Parenting Culture Zones.” Multiple cultural clusters of beliefs were labeled according to their geographical location. Each cluster contained specific one-word responses of parents for “ideal parent” beliefs. A discussion on the culture-specific contents of the “cultural zones” is very limited. Precluding a meaningful interpretation of the data induces various questions and suggestions.

Theoretical and Methodological Issues

My major questions regarding the scientific contribution of the current exploratory study arise from the existing theoretical and empirical achievements of parenting science and cultural psychology (Bornstein, 2012; Bornstein et al., 2018; Harkness & Super, 1996; Lansford, 2021; Lansford et al., 2023; Miller & Goodnow, 1995; Rothbaum & Trommsdorff, 2007; Super & Harkness, 1986; Trommsdorff & Rothbaum, 2008; Whiting & Whiting, 1975). Do the authors refer to culture as a value system which defines and evaluates “ideal-parent” beliefs? Are “ideal-parent” beliefs seen as cultural constructs, as individual or as cultural stereotypes? Are cultural values, beliefs, norms, practices, products regarded as aspects of “ideal-parent” beliefs? Are “ideal-parent” beliefs conceived of as a function of cultural mandates and orientation? Do the authors conceptualize “ideal-parent” beliefs as shaped by diverse external variables such as the distal and proximate developmental contexts (e.g., socioeconomic and political conditions, family climate, parent–child relationship)? Are internal parental variables, such as the parents’ personality, parents’ needs and goals, their self-constructs, or parental self-efficacy, regarded as shaping “ideal-parent” beliefs? Furthermore, are “ideal-parent” beliefs conceived of as impacting child development? To summarize these questions: What is the authors’ theoretical approach to the conceptualization of “ideal-parent” beliefs and parenting culture?

The authors are not explicitly following an established theoretical approach. However, they frequently refer to Western studies on parenting and culture. Although they adopt the “cultural niche” approach, they neglect the theoretical implications of Super and Harkness (1986, 2020). The question arises how research enacted in the current study can contribute to parenting science and cultural developmental psychology. To be more concrete: The authors’ definition of “ideal-parent” beliefs (as a “meaning system and lens through which parents perceive, understand, and engage in their parenting practices”) does not justify their assessment of “ideal-parent” beliefs with only *one abstract word*, devoid of context. A meaning system is a complex, multifaceted, cognitive, and emotional representation of interrelated aspects of self- and world views (Harkness & Super, 1996; 2020; Trommsdorff, 2006). Some questions to be raised are: How is the cultural and psychological meaning of a single word interpreted in various (and even in the same or similar) cultural contexts? How valid is the translation into other languages? Can functional equivalence of its meaning be achieved when contextual information is missing? What can a study based on the assessment of similarities (and frequencies) of single-word responses (devoid of context, and irrespective of its meaning) contribute to parenting science and cultural psychology?.

A major question is whether the method chosen in the target article may capture the cultural and subjective individual meaning of “ideal-parent” beliefs in diverse cultures, and whether the notion of “parenting culture zones” is justified by the results. My major concern is how culture, “ideal-parent” beliefs, and the relation between those are theoretically conceptualized, and whether the article’s contribution goes beyond “a tutorial on the use of Semantic Network Analyses for automated content analyses of a large data set.”

Bias and Meaning

The target article's authors aimed to control bias. They decided to avoid a sample bias related to the WEIRD sample problem (Cheon et al., 2020; Kanazawa, 2020; Roberts & Mortenson, 2022) to avoid Western theoretical frameworks, and to use artificial intelligence for data analyses. The questions to be raised are: Are these decisions the best recipe to arrive at unbiased, representative, and valid results? Do the data and their analyses allow the discovery of their culture-psychological meaning? Can the detection of bias be related to culture-informed interpretation of meaning?

Given discussions on the problem of generalizability and representativeness (Richiardi et al., 2013), the question is whether bias due to low generalizability of data from only two or a limited number of countries justifies the use of large data sets, big data, and artificial intelligence for data mining and analyses (Brayne & Moffitt, 2022; Kaplan et al., 2014). Even in the current study some bias remains (e.g., the role of native speakers in the translation process). Nevertheless, the psychological and cultural meaning of the results remain to be clarified, especially since a very limited discussion circumvents a culture-informed interpretation of the data.

These questions open the floodgates to questions regarding the authors' future research. Will the authors continue to avoid theoretical frameworks and respective methodological repertoires established in the west? Would they object even when such approaches have undergone modifications due to non-Western research, or have discovered culture-specific concepts, contributed to a refinement of a theoretical framework, and reduced an ethnocentric bias?

Options for Future Research

Future research on culture and parenting may gain from descriptive, exploratory, and bottom-up studies whose research goals and methods are matching. Such studies may be a valuable basis for arriving at theoretical questions which could be expanded for testing hypotheses, for explanation and prediction. For example, the current study that aims to map "parenting cultural zones" according to "ideal-parent" beliefs may serve as a relevant scientific contribution if further research avoids its shortcomings and clarifies the meaning of cultural zones and of patterns of "ideal-parent" beliefs. This mapping may start at a descriptive level. According to Poortinga and Fontaine (2022) and their notion of the "empirical cycle," the next step may be to apply mixed methods to acquire valid quantification for testing relationships between individual- and cultural-level shared beliefs about the "ideal-parent."

In our own research, we are partly following Bruner's (1990) approach using qualitative data to clarify the subjective meaning of parents' beliefs. Furthermore, we are also partly following Bronfenbrenner's multilevel approach of development (Bronfenbrenner, 1977; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) and Super and Harkness' (1986) approach of the developmental niche, collecting data from the proximate and distal developmental contexts in the respective cultures. We have assessed parents' responses (beyond one-word statements) regarding their parenting goals, their subjective evaluation of their parenting role and practices (e.g., self-efficacy), their parent-child relations in different situations, and the desired developmental outcome for their child. We have used qualitative data from narratives, behavior observation, open-ended questions, semi-structured interviews, projective tests, and focus-group discussions. Translation, theoretical derived coding manuals, hand-coding, and testing for interrater reliability are always done in cooperation with native researchers. The quantitative data are used for different kinds of analyses (e.g., cluster, multivariate, multilevel) depending on the research questions (e.g., Park et al., 2012; Rothbaum & Trommsdorff, 2007; Trommsdorff et al., 2012; Trommsdorff & Kornadt, 2003; Trommsdorff & Nauck, 2005; Ziehm et al., 2013).

Such qualitative culture-psychological approaches require much effort and time. However, because a large number of co-authors from diverse countries have co-authored the current study,

a well-organized division of labor would give participating scholars a chance to further pursue a promising project which may provide a convincing contribution to parenting science and to cultural psychology.

So far, the target article does not perfectly match expectations regarding a substantial contribution to parenting science and to cultural developmental psychology. Various information is missing and several questions arise, mainly regarding the theoretical and methodological basis for assessing parents' beliefs in diverse cultural contexts.

A main task for future research is to specify the relevant contextual aspects which are rather neglected in the current study. In their commentary to a research report on parental burnout (by the PI of the International Investigation of Parental Burnout [IIPB] consortium), Super and Harkness (2020) have encouraged authors to start with a solid description of cultural aspects of the parents' and their children's developmental niche. However, this advice has been overlooked in the target article, leading to ambiguous findings with respect to "cultural zones." It remains to be seen what future cultural developmental studies will gain scientifically when avoiding Western theoretical frameworks and universal dimensional approaches. What will they gain when just proposing a broad organizing concept basing on ambiguous features such as the concept of "cultural zones"? Here, the issue arises whether research on cultural dimensions should be discussed in relation to the notion of "cultural zones." A theoretical based description of the cultural and developmental contexts of parents is necessary to examine *seemingly* similar parents' responses, focusing on their semantic and conceptual similarity. These steps are needed to assess the cultural and subjective meaning of parents' responses, and to achieve a valid mapping of "cultural zones" of "ideal-parent" beliefs.

The authors' future research will gain from clarifying the relevant cultural aspects of the developmental context. Exploring the contextual variables will bring the individual's development into focus, revealing that they are interrelated.

Summary and Conclusion

Our question concerning how far the current study may contribute to parenting science and to cultural psychology can be answered positively, referring to the notion of the "empirical cycle" by Poortinga and Fontaine (2022). Descriptive exploratory studies like the current one may be a valuable basis for arriving at theoretical questions that could be expanded for testing hypotheses, for explanation, and prediction. After clarification of culture-informed conceptualizations of research questions and appropriate methods as part of an "empirical cycle," the current study may be extended to answer questions beyond the current goal of exploration.

Primarily, the patterns of words for "ideal-parent" ask for clarifications of the subjective and cultural meaning, and their relations to the respective cultural contexts of the parents. Furthermore, more information on the relation between the concepts of "parenting culture" and "culture" is necessary. Particularly, more theoretical input is needed about the themes and contents of words for "ideal-parent" and the cultural meaning of these words in the different cultural contexts and in the academic parenting literature. If the authors conceive of the meaning of "ideal-parent" as social and cultural representations, it is not clear how this view can be empirically supported. A similar reservation applies if the authors rather view parents' responses to questions of "ideal-parent" as representing the subjective individual beliefs and ideal self-concept of parents. Furthermore, internal inconsistencies of patterns of beliefs and the meaning of such inconsistencies should be detected and discussed and clarified. Hopefully, data from the larger data set of the consortium will be applicable to deal with these limitations.

A more theoretically based extension of the target article may aim at a theoretical model on culture and parenting, including cultural conceptualizations and culture-specific functions of parenting variables (e.g., role of parents, child-rearing and child developmental goals, value

of parent and value of children, parenting practices, parent–child relations, parents’ beliefs) for better understanding child development in different contexts, taking into account developmental processes over the time.

As regards the authors’ theoretical position which seems to search for a promising road between an emic and an etic approach: Will their future work profit from Geertz’ (1973) approach of “thick descriptions” and from Bruner’s (1990) preference for narratives which may disclose the situation-specific and culture-specific meaning of phenomena (e.g., words for “ideal-parent”), and will Bruner’s appeal for “no data without interpretation” be taken seriously?

The authors’ future research will profit from approaches on the nature and impact of developmental contexts, especially regarding research on relations among developmental contexts (on different ecological levels) and developmental processes in diverse and changing cultural contexts. For example, Lewin’s (1936) field theoretical approach has informed Berry’s (2022) multilevel Arc model and is indicated in the multilevel “Bio-ecological model of human development” by Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006). These models require multidimensional designs and profit from multigroup and multilevel data analyses. Respective research has been enriching cultural psychological science by extending traditional perspectives on cultural dimensions (e.g., individualism-collectivism; independence-interdependence) to ecological and sociological factors conveying cultural psychological implications (e.g., Akaliyski et al., 2021; Smith & Bond, 2022; Talhelm, 2020; Uchida et al., 2019; Uskul et al., 2008; Van de Vliert et al., 2018; Vignoles et al., 2016). Yet, context-informed developmental research will have to expand its focus on the future of changing pathways of human development. This is called for due to dramatically changing environments impacting sociocultural changes and socialization conditions (Greenfield, 2009; Park et al., 2014; Varnum & Grossmann, 2017). It remains to be seen whether and which “ideal-parent” beliefs will be part of future cultural changes and will impact changes in individual development and cultural contexts.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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