Parents' Ethnotheories of Maladaptive Behavior in Young Children

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ABSTRACT—*Parents' culturally influenced belief systems, or ethnotheories, are critical components of children's socialization. Beliefs about children's desirable characteristics motivate specific parenting activities and moderate the effectiveness of childrearing practices. However, relatively little attention has been given to parents' ethnotheories of children's undesirable behavior. From a few studies, we know that parents have culturally specific theories about the nature and management of children's maladaptive behavior that motivate their socialization practices. In this review, we identify gaps in the research and suggest that qualitative studies of parents' ethnotheories about the nature and management of children's deviant behavior have strong theoretical, empirical, and practical benefits for developmental science.*

KEYWORDS—*ethnotheories; child deviance; parenting beliefs*

Ethnotheories are shared cultural beliefs that provide a framework for how parents think about child development, child socialization, and family interaction (Harkness & Super, 1996; White & LeVine, 1986). Often implicit, ethnotheories are rooted in folk knowledge about what it means to be a successful member of society (Bruner, 1990; Harkness & Super, 1996). For example, Super and Harkness (1986) proposed the concept of the *developmental niche*, a theoretical perspective for understanding child development in a cultural context. The developmental niche is composed of three mutually interacting systems: (a) the physical and social settings and routines in which children live, play, and learn; (b) typical, culturally shared practices used to provide physical child care, support, education, and discipline; and (c) cultural belief systems, including ideas about the nature and socialization of children.

The subsystem containing parental beliefs can be further differentiated and placed into a hierarchical model. At the top of the model are generalized beliefs about the nature of children, parenting, and the family. Next come parents' ideas about specific domains of child development and care, such as sleep, education, and social development. The final level consists of caregiving practices, which are thought to be closely tied to domain-specific beliefs about child development. Despite the importance of culturally specific parenting beliefs in understanding child development and socialization, Harkness, Super, and Mavridis (2011) noted that these beliefs have been researched less frequently than other aspects of children's socialization, deeming parents' theories the "black box" of child development (p. 76). In recent years, research has grown on parents' ethnotheories of adaptive child characteristics, such as social competence. However, research remains sparse on beliefs about children's maladaptive behavior.

In this article, we highlight the importance of assessing parents' ethnotheories of children's undesirable behavior in ways that reveal parents' beliefs about the nature, causes, and management of deviant development. Our focus is on early childhood because it is a time of intensive socialization and rapid cognitive, emotional, and social development with strong implications for prevention. We begin with a brief description of parents' ethnotheories of children's desirable characteristics, then discuss how we might similarly examine parents' culturally influenced concepts of maladaptive behaviors. Finally, we address the challenges and implications of this work.

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PARENTS' ETHNOTHEORIES OF CHILDREN'S DESIRABLE CHARACTERISTICS: A FOUNDATION FOR UNDERSTANDING CONCEPTS OF DEVIANCE

Most studies of parents' ethnotheories of child development have focused on parents' constructs of children's desirable characteristics. Since these beliefs tend to be implicit, they may be difficult for parents to articulate, or parents may be unaware of them. For this reason, researchers have tried to bring them to light using methods that include direct observations of parent–child interaction; open-ended interviews; and asking parents to keep diaries of daily routines around waking, sleeping, eating, schooling, work, and play activities. In one study (Miller, Fung, Lin, Chen, & Boldt, 2012; Miller, Wang, Sandel, & Cho, 2002), researchers used open-ended interviews to assess European American and Taiwanese mothers' beliefs about fostering positive adjustment in their preschool-age children. Nearly all European American mothers spontaneously stressed the importance of building high levels of self-esteem in their young children. In contrast, relatively few Taiwanese mothers even mentioned children's self-esteem and when they did, tended to describe it as a *vulnerability* that could fuel maladaptive behaviors such as stubbornness, rudeness, or poor self-control.

Studies spanning diverse global contexts have also revealed cultural specificity in parents' beliefs about the nature of children's social competence (Harkness et al., 2011), emotional expressiveness (Trommsdorf, Cole, & Heikamp, 2012), and self-control (Chen, 2018). In one study (Harkness, Super, Barry, Zeitlin, & Long, 2009), researchers looked at members of the Kipsigis community in Western Kenya. Parents described an intelligent child as one with a willingness to take responsibility for housekeeping, cooking, growing food, caring for animals, and taking care of children daily. They also defined an intelligent child as one who willingly assumed responsibility for helping with daily household chores and behaved respectfully toward other members of the community. Kipsigis parents' beliefs about children's intelligence contrast strongly with traditional Western theories of intelligence, which focus on the development of reasoning and problem-solving skills in educational settings, not aspects of social intelligence in everyday settings.

Moreover, parents' beliefs about children's desirable characteristics not only vary across cultures, they also motivate specific parenting activities and moderate the effectiveness of childrearing practices (e.g., Bornstein, Putnick, & Suwalsky, 2018). Hence, the growing literature on parents' ethnotheories of children's positive characteristics provides a foundation for understanding parents' culturally specific concepts of maladaptive behavior. Theoretically, parents' concepts of maladaptive and adaptive behavior come from the same conceptual ecosystem of culturally specific values and expectations. However, a nearly exclusive focus on adaptive behaviors ignores its critical counterpart, maladaptive behaviors.

PARENTS' ETHNOTHEORIES OF CHILDREN'S MALADAPTIVE BEHAVIOR

In this section, we address the importance of examining parents' beliefs about the essential nature, causes, and management of deviant or undesirable behavior in young children. We focus most of our attention on parents' beliefs about the nature of maladaptive behavior because these systems of meaning have been critically underrepresented in research.

Parents' Beliefs About the Nature of Children's Deviance

Relatively little cross-national research has been done on parents' concepts of maladaptive behavior in children. When parents' reports of children's behavioral and emotional symptoms have been compared across different cultural contexts, most investigators, including ourselves, have relied on translated versions of instruments that have been developed for use with Western samples. However, simply translating an instrument into another language does not mean that the instrument has *cultural* validity. In addition to lexical meaning, parents' beliefs about children's deviance have layers of meaning based on philosophical or folk premises that vary widely across cultures (Bruner, 1990; White & LeVine, 1986), revealing important points of similarity and difference.

For example, when Japanese and American mothers were asked to generate their own constructs of desirable and undesirable characteristics in preschool-age children, the types of characteristics they found desirable, such as social cooperativeness and good manners, were similar (Olson, Kashiwagi, & Crystal, 2001). However, cultural differences were most evident in relation to concepts of children's negative characteristics. In sharp contrast with the American mothers, Japanese mothers had few concerns about children's aggressive and disruptive behavior, and no concerns about emotional problems such as dysphoria, anxiety, or low self-esteem. Thus, the two most salient categories of children's maladjustment in Western populations, internalizing and externalizing problems, were not captured by Japanese mothers' intuitive concepts of maladaptive behavior. Instead, Japanese mothers' concerns centered on socially insensitive, uncooperative behaviors like rudeness and disrespect. As has long been recognized by social anthropologists (e.g., Douglas, 1966), beliefs about *un*acceptable behavior may reveal distinctive cultural values and practices more clearly than beliefs about customary behavior. Indeed, one way to quickly discover implicit rules for behavior in a given culture is to break them.

Moreover, what is adaptive in one culture may be considered maladaptive in another. In cultures that value assertive, expressive traits, such as the United States and Canada, parents, teachers, and peers tend to view shy, inhibited behavior as a sign of social incompetence, and shy children are accepted less by peers than children who are not shy (Rubin, Coplan, & Bowker, 2009). In contrast, inhibited behaviors that foster social harmony have been perceived more positively in China, Indonesia,

Korea, and Sweden, where they are associated with favorable adjustment outcomes (Chen, 2018). Other studies have revealed cultural differences in parents' tolerance for expression of angry and sad emotions. For example, Tamang Nepalese parents' values of group harmony and respect for authority may shape their beliefs that angry feelings should be suppressed, which in turn were associated with their children's beliefs about emotion (Cole, Bruschi, & Tamang, 2002). School-age children in India perceived their parents' disapproval of sadness and anger, and reported inhibiting expressions of negative emotions in social settings (Raval, Martini, & Raval, 2007). Similarly, Chinese and Korean parents place more emphasis on promoting emotional restraint and impulse control in their children than North American parents (Chen, 2018; Lee, Zhou, Eisenberg, & Wang, 2013). Reflecting traditional cultural emphases on maintaining social harmony, socially disruptive behaviors are viewed negatively and prohibited in family and school settings. Theoretically, children who display culturally valued traits are likely to receive more positive attention, as well as access to social and instrumental support and opportunities, than others, leading to higher levels of positive self-regard (Rubin, Bukowski, & Bowker, 2015). Indeed, in studies, Chinese children with high levels of self-regulation reported lower levels of later internalizing problems such as anxiety and depression than others (Chen, Zhang, Chen, & Li, 2012; Eisenberg et al., 2007). Conversely, North American youth who showed high levels of one aspect of self-regulation, anger suppression, tended to report higher levels of symptoms of depression than others (Cheung & Park, 2010). Thus, beliefs about the nature of undesirable behavior in children can influence a broad swathe of parental and children's behaviors (e.g., Bornstein et al., 2018), yet relatively few cross-cultural studies have compared parents' concepts of children's maladjustment.

Parents' Beliefs About the Causes and Management of Children's Deviance

Parents also have culturally influenced beliefs about the causes of children's undesirable behaviors that have strong implications for how they manage them. Although most cross-cultural work has focused on parents' explanations of children's cognitive abilities, studies have shown that North American and Chinese parents hold different theories about the causes of children's adjustment problems (Cheah & Rubin, 2004; Rothbaum & Wang, 2010). For example, Chinese parents attributed children's competence to environmental influences (such as encouragement of hard work), whereas North American parents tended to endorse explanations favoring children's innate characteristics, a contrast that has implications for understanding approaches to the malleability of behavior (Rothbaum & Wang, 2010). Moreover, parents may hold different causal theories about different categories of undesirable behavior in children. For example, in one study (Bayram Ozdemir & Cheah, 2015), Turkish mothers of preschool-age children perceived the causes

of aggressive behaviors as more transitory, social-contextual, and intentional, whereas socially withdrawn behaviors were attributed to internal causes such as children's temperament.

Parents' causal theories of children's behavior have been directly related to the manner in which they attempt to manage these behaviors (Bayram Ozdemir & Cheah, 2015; Cheah & Park, 2006). For example, reflecting their view that disruptive behavior is a sign of age-normative developmental immaturity, Japanese mothers, and preschool teachers responded to preschoolers' aggressive behavior with tolerance, sensitivity, and subtle redirection (Tobin, Hsueh, & Karasawa, 2009). Conversely, in a survey of disciplinary practices among parents in 24 developing countries, endorsement of severe beatings of 2- to 4-year-olds ranged from 1 to 40% among countries (Lansford & Deater-Deckard, 2012). The reasons *why* the prevalence of severe violence varies so widely are likely rooted, at least in part, in parents' ethnotheories about the nature and management of children's deviance.

In a conceptual analysis of rates of severe youth violence in Jamaican, Japanese, and Latin American cultures (Guerra, Hammons, & Clutter, 2011), researchers reached similar conclusions. Parents in all three cultures shared broad-based values that highlighted collectivism and deference to authority, yet these groups had strikingly different rates of severe youth violence (e.g., Jamaica's reported rates of violence are among the highest in the world, and Japan's, the lowest). The study's authors argued that to fully understand these different rates of severe violence, and to help prevent continuing violence, we must examine parents' ethnotheories of the nature, causes, and management of children's undesirable behaviors.

METHODOLOGICAL CHALLENGES

Because of the implicit nature of ethnotheories, they must be assessed in ways that allow parents to generate their own culturally grounded beliefs. This requires including qualitative methods, such as open-ended interviews, daily diaries, and observations, along with more typical "-etic" approaches to cross-national research. In addition, parents' ethnotheories about children's behavior and development are inherently multidimensional, encompassing beliefs about the essential nature, explanation, and management of a diverse range of behaviors that may vary according to different domains of negative behavior (Cheah & Park, 2006). Thus, it is essential to assess parents' perceptions of a wide range of common behavior problems in ways that allow for comparative analyses of their attributions, management strategies, and emotional reactions, all of which may vary according to specific domains of children's undesirable behavior.

Beyond the practical challenges of implementing these labor-intensive methods, we also need to recognize that parents' ethnotheories about children's behavior vary within countries according to differences in education, income, and region,

among other factors (e.g., Cole, Tamang, & Shrestha, 2006; Keller, 2018). For instance, in one study, Tamang and Brahmin elders in Nepal held different beliefs about the appropriateness of children's communications of anger and shame that reflected their different statuses in Nepali society (Cole et al., 2006). In addition, we should be aware of individual variability within broad cultural groupings such as Eastern and Western cultures. In a study of children's temperament in seven Western countries (Super et al., 2008), both common and culturally specific temperament traits were related to parents' definitions of a "difficult" child.

Finally, another challenge is that parents' beliefs about children's behavior and development are not static; rather, they change across time in relation to transitions of populations from rural, agrarian areas to urban centers and to increasing globalization (e.g., Chen, 2018; Edwards & Whiting, 2004; Morris, Chiu, & Liu, 2015). In a study of Ngecha mothers in a Kenyan community (Whiting & Edwards, 1988), mothers believed that children should be trained to become competent food growers, herdsmen, and child care providers, and began assigning toddlers chores that became increasingly challenging as they grew older. Subsequently, this community underwent rapid social and economic change from an agrarian to a wage-earning economy. In followup visits, researchers saw that parents' values regarding desirable traits in children had changed in ways that reflected these broad-scale changes in the ecological conditions of their lives (Edwards & Whiting, 2004).

Similarly, researchers have chronicled changes in Chinese parents' attitudes toward children's traits, such as shyness, that appear to reflect macrodemographic shifts toward a competitive, market-based economy (see Chen, 2018). Although urban Chinese parents' and peers' attitudes toward children's shyness have become increasingly negative across time, in rural areas of China where traditional cultural values have remained stable, shy children continue to be accepted and valued by others (Chen, Wang, & Cao, 2011). Finally, parents' beliefs about children's deviance are likely to change across different developmental periods, providing both methodological challenges and a rich source of information about developmental moderators within and between cultures.

IMPLICATIONS FOR DEVELOPMENTAL SCIENCE

Addressing these issues can benefit developmental science theoretically, empirically, and practically. First, studies of parents' beliefs about the nature of deviant behavior provide a foundation for understanding cross-cultural differences and similarities in how parents perceive, explain, and manage undesirable behaviors across different periods of development. These local systems of meaning have been understudied in developmental science. In our view, they provide essential building blocks for culturally sensitive formulations of the development and prevention of maladaptive patterns of adjustment in children. Second,

developmental science remains focused on groups that are Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic (Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010). For example, U.S. participants in psychology research have been drawn from samples that represent approximately 5% of the world's population (Arnett, 2008). With increasing globalization, child development researchers need to fully understand diverse psychologies, particularly given large demographic changes driven by immigration in places like the United States, Canada, and Europe.

Finally, understanding parents' beliefs about children's behavioral and emotional maladjustment has strong translational value for health professionals who work with families of young children. The most effective parenting interventions draw on a sensitive and deep understanding of parents' beliefs about the nature and management of children's desirable and undesirable behaviors (Keller, 2018). Previous cross-cultural work illustrates how a lack of such understanding can lead to cultural miscommunication or bias, such as unawareness of cultural differences in assumed goals of children's socialization (e.g., Buchtel et al., 2015). For example, in Kenya, although interventions often have involved enhancing African children's cognitive stimulation, parents' ethnotheories of less optimal child development focus on practical causes of poor physical health, such as a lack of adequate food, health care, and hygiene (Abubakar & Van Boar, 2013). Similarly, well-intentioned efforts by Western psychologists to provide trauma-focused psychological interventions to families affected by the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami backfired because the interventions conflicted with local knowledge about the nature and management of emotional distress (Christopher, Wendt, Maracek, & Goodman, 2014).

CONCLUSION

Beliefs about children's maladaptive behavior represent fundamental categories of cultural meaning, yet few researchers who have done cross-cultural studies have directly compared parents' concepts of undesirable behavior in children. In most studies, parents' reports of children's behavioral and emotional symptoms have been investigated cross-culturally using translated versions of instruments developed with Western samples. However, simply translating one instrument into another language does not guarantee its cultural validity. Some studies have shown that parents' definitions of children's undesirable behaviors vary significantly across cultures, to the extent that what is adaptive in one culture may be considered maladaptive in another. Moreover, parents' culturally influenced causal explanations for undesirable behavior have been linked to risky management strategies, particularly a preference for harsh discipline. To understand the nature of these concepts, they must be assessed directly in ways that allow parents to generate their own culturally grounded beliefs. Addressing these gaps in research has strong theoretical, empirical, and practical benefits for developmental science. Increasing globalization further

accentuates the need for child development researchers to document parents' ethnotheories about a broad range of children's characteristics. As we have argued, comparative studies of parents' beliefs about children's undesirable behaviors can help answer this need by providing a foundation for further research on cultural differences and similarities in the development, expression, and management of children's maladjustment.

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