Parents’ Ethnotheories of the Nature and Causes of Positive Development and Maladjustment in Young Children: A Comparison of Spain and the United States

by

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my husband, Chris, our children, Persephone and Rafael, and our dog, Vida. Your love is my inspiration.
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ABSTRACT

Parents’ culturally specific understandings of their children, also known as ethnotheories, have been shown to hold strong implications for early child socialization and development (de Haan, et al., 2020; Super et al., 2020). However, extant research has typically only focused on middle childhood and emphasized parents’ views of positive or desirable child behaviors; moreover, the literature tends to define ethnotheories across a strict East/West dichotomy while relying on translated measures that may not have cultural validity (Su Cho et al., 2021). The main objective of this dissertation is to compare parents’ ethnotheories of the nature and causes of adaptive and maladaptive behaviors in young children across two Western countries, Spain and the United States, using tools generated through cross-cultural research. Relying on an interview protocol developed through conversations with parents around the world, we explored associations between parent-identified positive and negative traits (Chapter 2, Study 1) as well as attributions parents make for desirable and unwanted behaviors (Chapter 3, Study 2) in their children during the preschool period. Moreover, we examined the influence of factors like parent education and child gender in relation to identified child traits, including the most and least desired, and attributions for maladaptive child behaviors. Our comparison of interviews with Spanish and U.S. parents revealed meaningful differences in ethnotheories as represented by traits and attributions that both mirrored and contradicted cultural and gender expectations, as well as notable similarities that reflected a shared understanding of child behavior and development across cultures. Overall, results suggest a connection between the culturally-oriented values systems of both countries and the attributions parents made, as well as between
culture and the characteristics parents hoped to see in their children and those they disapproved of. While American and Spanish parents made similar attributions in response to children’s withdrawn, anxious, and dysphoric behaviors, they diverged in their interpretations of externalizing behaviors. Both groups of parents prioritized traits associated with social cooperation and cognitive/motivational skills, with American parents also valuing active and independent traits and behaviors and Spanish parents emphasizing those associated with spiritual/moral principles. Implications of observed differences and similarities in parents’ attributional styles and developmental goals for their children relative to ethnotheories research and clinical practice are discussed.
CHAPTER I: Introduction

While the word “culture” is often used broadly and without clear definition, in the world of psychological research the term has been used to encapsulate a unique set of shared values, beliefs, and practices that help dictate the practices of daily life (Ramirez et al., 2017). Cultures are not stagnant; rather, cultural norms evolve along with factors like historical changes and increased globalization, but elements persist that are passed from one generation to the next. Researchers have observed that parents play a crucial role in the transmission of culture by raising their children in line with cultural beliefs and values, thereby helping to ensure that these elements of culture survive (He et al, 2021; Ridao et al., 2021; Ramirez et al., 2017).

While perspectives differ throughout developmental and clinical psychology about how to best identify and evaluate core beliefs about and attitudes towards child behavior and development, culture has often been cited as one of the most significant influences on the kinds of beliefs and values parents hold relative to their children. In fact, culture has emerged as a strong, if not the strongest, predictor of parental beliefs (e.g., van Schaik et al., 2018).

Parents’ beliefs about child behavior and development

Perhaps unsurprisingly, relevant literature frequently highlights childrearing beliefs as precursors to parenting practices (e.g., Liew et al., 2018). These beliefs may encompass everything from the child and parent’s own relative abilities to the locus of control and responsibility for the child. For example, is it the parent’s or the school’s responsibility to make sure the child performs well academically? Or, how can parents optimize the ways in which their child will be received by peers, institutions, and the world at large (Ferretti et al., 2019)? Related
research explores concepts like parental beliefs about their own self-efficacy relative to their children and other causal beliefs, or why children develop the way that they do. These causal beliefs tend to be stable over time (Marsden et al., 2019) and have been associated with a broad range of child and family characteristics including parenting styles (Ren & Edwards, 2015), children’s emotion reactivity and other adaptive behaviors (Raghavan et al., 2010), as well as opportunities available to children (Lin et al., 2018), and key developmental outcomes (Kärtner, 2015). Importantly, culture appears to moderate these associations (Raghavan et al., 2010).

However, research on associations between culture and parents’ beliefs contains notable gaps in knowledge, including a lack of focus on early childhood, despite its salience as a period of intense family socialization efforts (Suizzo et al., 2019). Moreover, there is an absence of work on culturally specific beliefs related to maladjustment (Olson et al., 2019), as well as a dearth of research on intraregional comparisons of parents’ beliefs (Oudgenoeg-Paz et al., 2020). One notable exception includes a study of developmental continuity and change in cultural constructions of the “difficult child” (Super et al., 2020). Studies have typically contrasted parental beliefs in countries that are located in the Western Hemisphere with those held by parents in countries located in the Far East (e.g., Chen et al., 2012) and, more recently, analyzed variability within a single country (e.g., Liu et al., 2020).

While these comparisons reveal meaningful differences, they also leave many questions unanswered about the nuanced ways that parents within a given cultural region may perceive their children. This gap in knowledge remains true despite rare evidence of significant diversity within the West itself, as in Super and Harkness’ seminal comparisons of parents’ beliefs around the concepts of dependence and independence in their children across seven different Western
countries (e.g., Harkness & Super, 2006) that the authors expanded upon in their study of the so-called “difficult child” referenced above. In this dissertation, we rely on comparisons within the Western hemisphere to explore parent’ beliefs about positive and negative development, their attributions for maladaptive child behaviors and emotional distress, and relationships between these beliefs, attributions, and culture.

**Ethnotheories of child behavior and parenting**

Concepts of ethnotheories have played a central role in developmental scientists’ attempts to understand parents’ beliefs about child development across cultures. The term refers to shared, often implicit, culturally specific beliefs that define how parents understand relational dynamics within the family, as well as child development and socialization (Harkness et al., 2000; Harkness et al., 2015). Charles Super and Sarah Harkness pioneered bringing concepts of ethnotheories into our understanding of child development and socialization (see Figure 1).

Super and Harkness conceptualized the Developmental Niche framework as a theoretical model for analyzing the role of culture in children’s development (Super & Harkness, 2015; Super & Harkness, 2001; Super & Harkness, 1986). This framework, which has remained mostly unchanged over the past over thirty years, was largely developed as an alternative to the model of the decontextualized, acultural “universal child” model favored by developmental psychologists at the time. According to traditional models, children developed in much the same way regardless of the culture in which they grew up. Developmental Niche theory represented a radical departure by encompassing three interrelated subsystems that shape child development, all of which were defined by culture. These subsystems included: physical and social settings of daily life, customs and practices of care, and the psychology of the caretaker or parental beliefs. Each of these is made up of their own subsystems that interact with the larger environment.
Importantly, according to Super and Harkness, “homeostatic mechanisms” maintained harmony between the three subsystems and kept the niche tailored to the developmental level and individual characteristics of the child (Super & Harkness, 1986). The authors assert that parental beliefs are related to parental behavior, as well as to parental choices for daily settings and activities and the way in which they shape children’s immediate environment and experiences.

To borrow an example from a long-term study of language socialization among Kipsigis parents in Kenya, during which the authors began to define their theory (Harkness & Super, 2001): if mothers believe that children learn to talk primarily from interacting with their peers versus conversation with mother herself, these mothers will speak less to their children in comparison with U.S. mothers who believe they are responsible for linguistic teaching (Super & Harkness, 1986). We note that Super and Harkness did not invent this perspective on culture and development. Rather, their work evolved from a rich literature on child development in 50s, 60s, and 70’s that included studies of child socialization (e.g., Stendler & Young, 1950; Watson, 1959; McCandless et al., 1961; Elkind & Sameroff, 1970), as well as from the culture and personality school of social anthropology, which was active during those decades (e.g., Kroeber, 1959).

Super and Harkness proposed that through their associations with daily practices and settings of care, parental beliefs have the potential to influence children’s development in various domains. These beliefs reflect the views, ideas, thoughts, knowledge, and values that parents hold about children’s development and socialization, parenting and family life. Therefore, according to the developmental niche framework, research examining cultural influences on child development should focus on settings of childcare (e.g., formal daycare versus joining the parent in farm work), parental practices (e.g., harsh forms of parental discipline like spanking),
parental beliefs (ex: that children benefit from free, unstructured play), and the relations between these subsystems (Harkness et al., 2013). Crucially, the niche is characterized by subtle and more easily detectable cultural differences that in turn uniquely influence parents’ beliefs about child development. These beliefs are thought to mold the conditions of development themselves, completing the theoretical circle. As a result, cultural differences then manifest in terms of the varying degrees of adaptive behavior exhibited by children, and by their caregivers (Taverna et al., 2011). In sum, this linguistic play on the biologically rooted terminology of “niche” as referring to an organism’s place or function within a biosystem offers a particularly coherent organization of the cultural context of child development as shown in Figure 1.1, p. 30 (Super & Harkness, 1986).

Parents’ ethnotheories play an important part in shaping not only how parents think and talk about their children but also about themselves as caregivers (Olson et al., 2019). For example, research has highlighted associations between parents’ causal attributions for maladaptive child behaviors and parenting-related variables like child discipline and hostile reactions to children’s misbehavior (Fernandes et al., 2019). In this context, parental attributions describe parents’ cognitive inferences about the causes of children’s behavior. The more we know about the inferences parents make regarding child behavior, the better we can understand and predict the strategies they will employ in parent-child interactions (Jacobs et al., 2017). We already have seen evidence for the strong relationship between these attributions, parenting strategies, and emotional responses parents have when their children “act out,” particularly in the case of parental discipline; research shows that negative parental attributions may mediate the relationship between parenting stress and harsh punishment (Beckerman et al., 2017).
Importantly, negative attributions appear to increase the likelihood of physical or harsh punishment (Jacobs et al., 2017).

Parents’ ethnotheories of child behavior are multi-faceted, encompassing not only preferences about children’s traits and attributions for their behavior but also fundamental definitions of normality and abnormality. While uncommon, studies of diverse populations have underscored the centrality of parents’ culturally related beliefs in family life. For example, Keller and colleagues (Marey-Sarwan et al., 2016) examined Bedouin mothers’ beliefs about stranger anxiety and children’s socio-emotional development. The authors hoped to understand the relationship between this development and high levels of socio-political adversity. They studied the minority Arab-Bedouin population in the “unrecognized villages” of the Naqab district in southern Israel, so named because these villages do not appear on any official Israeli map or any governmental planning. Villagers lived under very difficult conditions in tents and shacks often subject to government demolition, were excluded from state services, legislations, budgets, and had limited access to healthcare, educational institutions, and welfare. Health problems were common in these communities, particularly among infants, and infant mortality rates were high. The aforementioned factors and more contributed to the authors’ designation of this Bedouin population as “one of the most marginalized groups in Israel” (Marey-Sarwan et al., 2016, p. 321).

Keller and colleagues asked mothers to interpret past and present child behavior and attribute its causes before identifying idealized goals for their children. Using questionnaires and semi-structured interviews, researchers asked questions like “What does it mean when the child shows signs of acceptance/avoidance toward the stranger? How did you feel when your child accepted/avoided the stranger?” (Marey-Sarwan et al., p. 323). Other questions about mothers’
goals for their children highlight meaningful tensions within parents’ beliefs, in that sometimes mothers held beliefs that appeared to conflict with one another. For example, findings indicated paradoxical maternal beliefs that Bedouin children should be social, but also wary. These results cannot be explained by simple contextual differentiation of sociability defined by security and the evolving socio-political situation (i.e, the worsening of these communities under Israeli control). Studies like this highlight goals and desirable behaviors but do not explore the other side of the proverbial coin: what they would like their children to avoid doing or the behaviors that would be most undesirable to see. As shown below, the growing literature on ethnotheories of positive child characteristics may provide a foundation for understanding parents’ culturally specific concepts of maladaptive behavior (Olson et al., 2019).

**Cross-cultural studies of parents’ beliefs about children’s desirable characteristics**

The ethnotheories framework helps to explain not only parents’ culturally-oriented understanding of their children but also, more specifically, what parents value and prioritize (Srivastava, 2019). Examples of cross-cultural research focused on characteristics parents desire to see in their children serve as representative samples of existing cross-cultural research with parents of young children. These seminal studies and their approaches to the assessment of ethnotheories of positive development offer suggestions for how we might assess parents’ theories of maladaptation.

For decades, researchers have examined cross-cultural differences in parents’ concepts of desirable characteristics, or what defines a "good child". Some studies have included research on parents’ theories of intelligence in children and others have highlighted parents' goals for their children: that is, how children should comport themselves, relate to others within the family system, other people, and society at large (e.g., Otto & Keller, 2015; Mone et al., 2014;
Rosenthal & Roer-Strier, 2001). For example, one such line of inquiry examined parents’ goals for socialization. A study of the ethnotheories held by Romanian middle-class mothers about their young children relied on qualitative and qualitative analyses in assessing maternal relational socialization goals. Authors examined whether these goals mediated the relationship between maternal level of collectivistic values that promote an interdependent cultural model and maternal level of relational parental ethnotheories. Relational parental ethnotheories focused on how children should treat and interact with others in their families or members of the community at large (Mone et al., 2014). Results revealed that mothers’ cultural models significantly predicted their socialization goals. Therefore, the higher the mother’s collectivistic values when interacting with family, the higher their relational socialization goals for their children – obedience or respect for the elderly, for example. The authors emphasized that their findings aligned with other studies in both Eastern and Western countries that previously suggested a symbiosis between mothers' cultural models and their goals for socialization (e.g., Liebal et al., 2011; Chao, 2000; Suizzo, 2020). Relatedly, other investigators have argued that cultural models are expressed in the degree of familism held by a given society, which informs the socialization goals embodied in parents’ ethnotheories of child behavior and development. Familism emphasizes a close-knit family unit, encompassing values like loyalty and reciprocity between the members of the family. The family is seen as essential to the self (Campos et al., 2014).

In work comparing cultures defined by varying levels of interdependence, researchers recruited samples of mothers of three-month-old infants to represent three distinct cultural models that were determined a priori and subsequently confirmed by data analyses: the independence, interdependence, and autonomous-relatedness models (Keller et al., 2006). The model of independence prioritizes the perception of the individual as separate and autonomous,
tending to characterize “urban, educated families in industrialized and post industrialized information societies.” Alternatively, the model of interdependence prioritizes the individual as interrelated with others and most often describes rural families. Finally, the model of autonomous relatedness “combines the interpersonal relatedness of the interdependence model with autonomous functioning.” This last model “portrays the urban, educated, middle-class families in societies with an interrelated cultural heritage” (p. 156). German, Euro-American, and Greek middle-class women were recruited to represent the independent cultural model, Cameroonian Nso and Gujarati farming women to represent the interdependent cultural model, and urban Indian, Chinese, Mexican, and Costa Rican women to represent the autonomous-related model. The authors confirmed that in each sample mothers’ socialization goals – which were measured via a Likert scale consisting of twenty-one statements about family cohesion (such as “my family’s opinion is important to me”) – mediated associations between broader sociocultural orientations and parents’ goals for their children’s socialization. Keller and colleagues assessed parents’ socialization goals not only with a qualitative interview but also by using a list of ten statements about qualities that a child should learn or develop during the first three years of life, like self-confidence or competitiveness. Both qualitative interviews and rating scales are all well-represented across the literature on parents’ ethnotheories of child development and socialization (Keller et al., 2006).

Another line of inquiry emerging from the literature on parents’ socialization goals focused on goals for emotional expressiveness (Keller & Otto, 2009). Keller and Otto contended that sociocultural context governed the ways that parents socialize emotion expression: for example, whether children should express negative emotions toward others. The authors presented prototypes of emotion regulation that described, on the one hand, rural farmer families
in non-Western societies, and, on the other, Western urban middle-class families. Authors based the two prototypes on qualitative methodology (supported by quantitative methods) that examined the broader socialization environments of their samples. The first or “Relational” cultural model, “[conceived] of the individual as part of a social system, mainly the family, seeking harmonious relationships, accepting hierarchy (mainly age and gender based), valuing cooperation and conformity, and identifying with the social roles” (p. 998). The second or “Autonomous” cultural model imagined the individual as “self-contained, competitive, separate, unique, self-reliant, assertive, and having an inner sense of owning opinions.” These prototypes captured parents’ socialization goals developmental expectations that varied by culture. Comparing the pre-defined “Relational” prototype represented by rural Nso farmers in Cameroon with the “Autonomous” prototype of German middle-class mothers, authors asked: what constitutes a “good child” in terms of how this child is expected to interact with the broader social world? Results suggested that the Autonomous prototype was that of the emotionally expressive child, even in infancy, with German mothers’ encouraging emotional expression: for example, whether a child tends to smile or laugh a lot. The Nso, on the other hand, offered their own adaptive emotion regulation strategy characterized by calmness and inexpressiveness. These goals differed to the point where the preferred calmness of the Nso might lead German mothers to fear there was something wrong with their child; the same child behavior appeared to elicit very different responses in the two samples, again illustrating the important relationship between parents’ ethnotheories, socialization goals, and parenting strategies (Keller & Otto, 2009).

A similar study of immigrant parents demonstrated the strength of the relationship between parents’ ethnotheories that included expectations for children’s development, along with perceptions of the ideal adult, and child-rearing goals (Rosenthal & Roer-Strier, 2001). Authors
Rosenthal and Roer-Strier explored parents' varying images of the adaptive adult by comparing the child-rearing goals and developmental expectations of immigrant mothers from the former Soviet Union living permanently in Israel with a comparative sample of Israeli-born mothers who remained in their birth country. The investigators explored mothers’ goals and expectations for their children as adults. Authors contended that the image of the 'adaptive adult' in immigrant mothers' minds was so deeply ingrained in their beliefs about child rearing that the women would retain these beliefs after immigration. Then, authors argued, these old beliefs would be integrated with the image of adaptive adulthood popular in the host culture. Results mostly supported these hypotheses. While both groups of mothers hoped their children would grow into intelligent, joyful, and independent adults who were well educated and held prestigious occupations, Israeli-born mothers tended to emphasize social competence, autonomy, and leadership over characteristics like achievement, emotional control, efficiency, and organization. Soviet-born mothers, on the other hand, favored the latter group of traits. This dichotomy supported the theory of the developmental goals and aspirations parents hold for their children as reflective of parents’ own culturally-defined “values, perceptions, and understanding of the reality in which they raise [them]” (Rosenthal & Roer-Strier, 2001, p. 20).

Other research studies on parental beliefs have focused on how parents describe intelligent behavior in their children. For example, research has suggested that parental beliefs around intelligence and cognitive development were “influenced by the very nature of the cultural construct of intelligence within that culture itself” (Booth, 2002, p. 378). Accordingly, cultural change resulted in shifts in terms of how parents understand desirable, “intelligent” behavior in their children. Carolyn Edwards and colleagues (Aukrust et al., 2003) explored these kinds of shifts in South Korea, where a transformation of the educational system spurred
economic growth and social change. These macro-changes resulted in parents valuing education on par with intelligence, which they have traditionally understood as innate. Seoul parents, now oriented to education as a means to economic success, encouraged their children to pursue educational opportunities and close peer relationships in preschool (Aukrust et al., 2003).

Emic analyses involve the study of cultural phenomena from the perspective of one who participates in the culture itself, or a cultural insider, and therefore represent a definitive element of research on parents’ ethnotheories of child development. For example, when Booth (2002) examined parents and teachers of school-age children in Swaziland in the context of her research on changing perceptions of intelligence in the country, emic analyses revealed desired characteristics from parental descriptions of the idealized “intelligent child”. The study revealed not only an emphasis on presentation – for example, eloquence when speaking to others – but also that parents emphasized a social element of intelligence, such as getting along well with others and copying others well. The majority of parents desired children who were respectful and obedient, terms often used interchangeably in Swazi society. This diverged notably from findings from Western samples that tended to reveal an emphasis on “cognitive competence” and academic success over social behavior (Booth, 2002). Crucially, parents’ culturally specific beliefs about child behavior vary significantly within cultures often grouped together. Comparisons between parents in countries across Western countries like the United States and Europe suggest meaningful variance in Western cultures relative to their theories of child socialization, including with respect to maladaptive development (Harkness et al., 2011).

**Parents’ ethnotheories about maladaptive child development**

Developmental scientists often conceptualize children’s maladaptive or deviant behavior as falling into two distinct categories: externalizing and internalizing problems. Externalizing
problems refer to those negative behaviors aimed towards other people, property, or living beings (e.g., aggression, destruction of property, and harming animals). Internalizing problems describe negative behaviors aimed inwardly, i.e., those that are self-directed (e.g., shyness, sadness, and fear). Crucially, while the two are conceptualized as different categories of maladaptive behaviors, externalizing and internalizing problems often co-occur in children and have been found to predict later problems in adulthood, like substance abuse, joblessness, and difficulties in social relationships (Capaldi & Stoolmiller, 1999).

Research on parents’ ethnotheories of child behavior and development has tended to focus on adaptive or desirable child behaviors, like independence or social competence; however, limited extant studies of maladaptation suggest that ethnotheories about negative, undesirable, and/or nonadaptive behaviors likewise influence parenting strategies (Harkness et al., 2015). Beyond the oft-cited, seminal study by Harkness, Super, and colleagues comparing Kipsigis parents’ beliefs in Western Kenya with those held by their Western counterparts (Harkness et al., 2009), related work does not rely on Harkness and Super’s ethnotheories framework by name but explores essentially the same concept in the study of parental beliefs about maladaptive child behavior. Instead, researchers such as Xinyin Chen (Chen, 2018) have used the term “personal storytelling” to capture the narratives parents use to pass down cultural lessons to their children, stories that reveal parents’ interpretations and responses to both positive and negative child behaviors. Chen described his work as emerging from the contextual-developmental perspective, which “emphasizes the role of social processes in mediating cultural influence on temperament development (Chen, 2018, p. 43).” In this effort to understand parenting, peer relationships, and other social-ecological conditions associated with the development of temperamental characteristics, parents in Taipei, Taiwan and Longbeach,
California were asked to provide explanations for past events involving their children: for example, to explain their child’s negative reactions to a stranger who was an elder (Chen et al., 2012).

In a seminal study, Chen and colleagues (Chen et al., 2005) explored how culture can flip the meaning of psychopathology on its head. This study of the relationship between parents’ beliefs and broad cultural change suggested that China’s shift towards more Western cultural concepts and beliefs translated into parents’ beliefs about child development. A comparison of Chinese parents from rural and urban areas revealed that the perception of shyness in China changed from a positive trait traditionally associated with better peer relationships and positive psychological well-being (Chen et al., 1992) to a negative trait among urban dwelling parents who have been exposed to Western cultural values (Chen et al., 2005). For example, some urban Chinese parents have begun to encourage self-assertion over shy, deferential behavior to help facilitate their children’s success amid the country’s transition to a more competitive economic system akin to those in Western countries like the United States; others, however, still retain the same positive beliefs about shyness that were documented decades ago (Yang et al., 2015).

U.S. parents have been found to value children’s self-expression and competitive pursuits and also to desire children to participate in and contribute to their family and the community at large; these preferences appear to vary with person-specific factors like parents’ social economic status and racial identity (Coopens, 2020). These findings may be unsurprising given the unique diversity of the United States compared with other countries across the world. In the seminal study by Olson, Kashiwagi, and Crystal (2001) of differences between Japanese and U.S. mothers of preschool-age children in which mothers were interviewed regarding their concepts of desirable and undesirable child behavior, authors found that U.S. mothers were far more likely
than Japanese mothers to designate aggressive, disruptive child behaviors as undesirable. With respect to desired behaviors, kindness, empathy, and willing cooperation with the wishes of others emerged as the most salient concepts of positive behavior in both cultures, with U.S. mothers also valuing qualities related to positive emotional adjustment significantly more than did Japanese mothers. Contrary to authors’ hypotheses, U.S. mothers demonstrated significantly more concern about social cooperation compared with Japanese mothers. In all, popular cultural stereotypes were insufficient to explain which characteristics were preferred and disfavored. Interestingly, effects of child gender on parent beliefs about children’s behavioral overall were limited (Olson et al., 2001).

**The importance of cross-cultural comparison**

Even taking work like this into account, there have been relatively few direct cross-cultural comparative studies of parents’ concepts of child maladjustment despite extant evidence that parents’ concepts of the nature of undesirable child behavior “potentially influence a broad swathe of parental and child behaviors” (Olson et al., 2019, p. 6). Parents are often unaware of or unable to articulate the ethnotheories that they hold and may also be particularly anxious or fearful to do so in the context of maladaptation. Therefore, it is crucial to examine parents’ ethnotheories of undesirable child traits via qualitative interviews including both parent- and researcher-generated narratives and examples. As we will explore, cultural differences may emerge most starkly in the context of parental beliefs about deviant child behavior (Olson et al., 2019). In other words, these beliefs may vary more than do beliefs about more positive behaviors, so that assessing the former in turn reveals more about parents’ attributions, management strategies, and emotional reactions.
Parents’ culturally specific beliefs about child behavior vary significantly within “Western” cultures as evidenced by comparisons between parents in the United States and various European nations. In their study of parents’ ethnotheories of children's learning, Harkness, Super, and colleagues (2011) found that mothers’ ideas and practices related to infant development varied substantially, even among middle-class, post-industrial Western communities within the U.S., Netherlands, Italy, Poland, and Spain. They found differences across domains, revealing, for example, that Italian and Spanish parents talked about family activities and play more than parents in other European and North American countries, Polish parents talked more about family time and less about meals than others, and American parents gave the most attention overall to developmental or school-related activities. The authors argued that these differences suggested that parents’ theories of child socialization vary meaningfully between Western cultures (Harkness et al., 2011).

This dissertation is designed to answer the call by Harkness, Super (2006), and others for more cross-cultural research within the West while also addressing the need for studies that explore parents’ culturally-oriented understandings of their children’s maladaptive behavior. To address these gaps in knowledge, I focus specifically on a comparison of parents’ beliefs about young children’s maladjustment between Spain and the United States. Spain represents a compelling opportunity for comparative cross-cultural research on child development. Limited research on Spanish parents' beliefs and caregiving practices has suggested that cultural beliefs about the nature, causes, and management of children's maladaptive behaviors are distinct from those held by U.S. parents. For example, Spanish parents tend to emphasize rule-following behavior and familism (Harkness et al., 2011) and describe their children in terms of manageability (i.e., whether the children were “easy” versus “difficult” to manage). They also
appear to rely on descriptors of a good citizen and family member (e.g., sociable or helpful to others) when describing traits they would like to see in their children (Harkness & Super, 2015). In a follow-up to the aforementioned study comparing cross-cultural differences in parental perceptions of temperament in their older children across seven Western countries (Super et al., 2008), Super et al. (2020) examined developmental continuity and change in cultural constructions of the so-called “difficult child”. Their comparison focused on parents of children between six months and 7-8 years of age across six western cultures including Spain and the United States. The authors identified low adaptability (for example, difficulty adjusting to changes in schedule) and negative mood (e.g., children labeled as “fussy” when waking up or getting their diapers changed) as the dimensions of child temperament most strongly related to Spanish parents’ ratings of their child in terms of difficulty. In fact, these were the only dimensions of child temperament correlated with parents’ reports of child difficulty at any child age in the Spanish sample. In other words, Spanish parents tended to label those children perceived as inflexible or unpleasant as difficult, as do American parents. U.S. parents, on the other hand, appeared to hold contrasting beliefs about child socialization and development. For example, the child temperament characteristics of high intensity, low persistence, and timidity were correlated with perceived difficulty in the United States at varying ages, which was not true for the Spanish sample. The Spanish concerns for children at both the younger and older ages often surround themes of courtesy and disobedience (Super et al., 2020). This finding aligns with prior research showing that Spanish parents are uniquely focused on children having “good character” and strong social skills (Harkness & Super, 2006) across domains of the child’s life, from family to school (Feng et al., 2020). “The respectful, socially graceful child is bien educado. Such children are easy to manage and parents are alert to the precursors of those traits.
Traits identified in the above studies reflect the concept of “simpatía”, an established cultural script in Hispanic cultures (Akira Miura et al., 2019; Triandis et al., 1984), which encapsulates a “general relationship-oriented pattern that includes (a) importance given to values of loyalty, respect, duty, and politeness, (b) emphasis on cooperation and interpersonal helping, and (c) willingness to sacrifice oneself for the sake of attending family functions (Akira Miura et al., 2019”).

On the other hand, American parents have emphasized equality in the parent-child relationship and encouraged children’s independence and self-expression (Weisner, 2009), in addition to underscoring the importance of children developing independence and assertiveness (Harkness et al., 2011). Scholars have argued that American parents tend to hold more progressive attitudes towards parenting relative to other countries (Bornstein et al., 2011) with some notable differences by racial/ethnic groups (Weisner, 2009). When seeking to understand how these values play out in parents' perceptions of their children's maladjustment, it is worth noting the example of American parents’ concerns around the negative consequences of shyness. For these parents, shyness has been associated with parental disappointment, concern, and rejection (Rubin, Coplan & Bowker, 2009). This may be due to the relatively greater importance placed by American parents on fostering children’s self-expression and assertiveness, although parents across Western cultures tend to encourage similar values in their children (Greenfield et al., 2006).

Another important point of cultural difference is the relative religiosity of American vs. Spanish parents. Despite the recent, very visible rise of American extremist religious sects (Griera et al., 2021), the United States was founded as a secular nation, and an increasing number of Americans no longer affiliate with a religious tradition (Cavendish, 2022). However, religious,
moral, and spiritual values continue to influence Spanish culture even though Catholicism is no longer the mandated state religion as it was under the dictatorship of Francisco Franco that ended in the mid-1970s (Burrieza Sánchez, 2019). Examinations of religiosity in Spain suggest that, while qualitative measures indicate decreased religiosity among Spaniards, the Catholic Church has regained a strong public profile in recent years, appears capable of motivating public support around religious and moral causes, and continues to be a source of Spanish identity (Griera et al., 2021). And, while Catholic values may not hold as much sway over political life as they once did, the Catholic Church maintains a role in the social sphere by upholding traditionally dominant social values like moral perfectionism, the dichotomy of good vs. evil, and the dangers of criminality. While there is a dearth of research exploring the influence of the Church specific to parenting in Spain, it seems reasonable to infer that the dominant Catholic values system influences parents’ beliefs about their children, even as secular values permeate the cultural landscape. Authors Tamarit and Balcells, M. (2022), in their recent study of child sexual abuse perpetrated by Spanish members of the clergy, elegantly summarized the French sociologist Émile Durkheim’s conceptualization of relationships between religious values and the non-religious elements of society:

[Durkheim’s] statement that systematic idealization is an essential characteristic of religion, which superimposes an ideal world existing only in the mind on a real world in which profane life unfolds. But, according to the author, the duality between the sacred and the profane, between the pure and the impure, typical of religious idealization, is always somewhat pregnant with ambiguity. (p. 827)
The ambiguity present in the confluence of religious, moral, and spiritual values and the more modern elements of Spanish society highlights an area worthy of exploration in the context of parents’ ethnotheories.

With respect to their own parenting behavior, Spanish parents have tended to value an indulgent parenting style, characterized by high levels of responsiveness and low levels of demandingness (e.g., Garcia & Garcia, 2009; Alonso-Geta, 2012), albeit with some disagreement (Osorio & Gonzalez, 2016). This emphasis on parental responsiveness appears to extend to fear-inducing situations. For example, in a laboratory experiment, Spanish children displayed more fearful reactions, like facial fear and distress vocalizations, than did their U.S. counterparts (Gartstein et al., 2016). We have yet to clearly explain these differences; however, it may be that parents’ emphasis on their own physical proximity to the child previously identified in Mediterranean cultures (e.g., Axia & Weisner, 2002) helps to exacerbate fearful reactivity. This proximity suggests that parents fail to foster in children the ability to independently self-regulate during fearful situations when the parent is not present (Chen, 2018). In other words, children may come to over-rely on their parents for emotional support. Taken together, studies of parental beliefs and caregiving practices in Spain capture a dominant, culturally-oriented parental belief that children need to be socialized into good behavior as defined by societal standards, in addition to Spanish parents’ apparent emphasis on the manageability and adaptability of their children.

Research on American parents' beliefs about the nature, causes, and management of children's deviant behavior has revealed distinct cultural patterns. In one cross-cultural study, mothers tended to highlight aggressive and disruptive behavior (i.e., externalizing problems, like aggression) as undesirable and expressed concern about emotional distress (i.e., internalizing
problems, such as withdrawn behavior) (Olson et al., 2001). Importantly, these results were consistent with a previous finding that American parents tended to have negative feelings about aggressive behavior but were confused about withdrawn behavior (Mills & Rubin, 1990). Researchers have also found that American mothers were more likely to make internal attributions about their children's misbehavior (e.g., temperament, age, or internal states) than were Mainland Chinese mothers, who tended to attribute misbehavior to external causes like socialization (Mills & Rubin, 1990; Rubin & Mills, 1990; Rubin & Mills, 1992; Cheah & Rubin, 2004). Moreover, American mothers differed from Chinese mothers in how they managed their children's internalizing and externalizing problems. Specifically, American mothers tended to react more coercively and negatively towards aggressive behavior like taking a toy from a peer, while choosing to employ less direct strategies, such as observational learning, in addressing socially withdrawn behavior (Mills & Rubin, 1992).

Parent education level may play an important role in the ethnotheories parents hold about child behavior, both within and across cultures. Recent research suggests that parents exposed to multiple and diverse educational practices, varied parenting resources including parenting professionals and nonprofessionals, and related media rely on these information sources in addition to cultural-rooted norms and practices in their construction of ethnotheories (e.g., de Haan et al., 2020). Factors like family social class that are invariably linked to parent education level are also related to parenting models and norms that at once value seemingly contradictory independent child behaviors and those behaviors rooted in more traditional ideas of family and community (Coppens et al., 2020). A study of Roma mothers living in migrant communities in Greece found that these mothers maintained the collectivistic cultural orientation typical of their culture of origin; however, the socioeconomic status of the families seemed to enhance the
mothers’ individualistic values (Penderi & Petrogiannis, 2011). Based on extant research, it seems reasonable to infer that parents who are more highly educated will hold more diverse ethnotheories of child behavior, i.e., ethnotheories that do not idealize behaviors in line distinct with distinct cultural patterns but instead conceptualize and attribute positive and negative child traits and behaviors in a more diverse, global manner. This trend applies to variations within cultures and well as between cultures.

**The relationship between child gender and parents’ ethnotheories of child behavior**

The relationship between child gender and parents’ ideas about adaptive child behaviors is a complicated one. Contrary to theories that boys are socialized to be more interpersonally assertive and girls behaviorally restrained, research does not consistently support this (Odden, 2009). For example, a study of ethnotheories held by Black mothers in the United States found that these mothers desired to nurture their daughters’ moral development and capacity to speak up and advocate for themselves (Bibbs, 2017). Another study comparing U.S. vs. Japanese parents’ ethnotheories found that child gender had relatively little impact on mothers’ concepts of desirable and undesirable behavior (Olson et al., 2001).

Yet, some research has found that child gender does significantly influence parents' beliefs about and management of their children's externalizing and internalizing problems. Parents may tend to be less accepting of deviant behavior from their daughters than their sons (Mills & Rubin, 1990) with important nuances. For example, North American parents have shown greater permissiveness of aggression but less permissiveness of social withdrawal in boys than in girls (Parke & Slaby, 1983).

Another study suggested that Latino parents tended to engage in more “gendered” parenting than parents from other backgrounds, meaning that their expectations differed more
for sons versus daughters. Specifically, for girls, parents tended to emphasize proper, virtuous, and nurturing behaviors more than they did for boys (Ramirez et al., 2017). Research exploring Guatemalan mothers’ beliefs about child learning found that mothers described “good” children are obedient and respectful. Conversely, “bad” children were defined as disobedient and disrespectful, behaviors mothers believed they learned from their friends or ‘on the street.’ Mothers’ definitions of good and bad behavior differed significantly along gender lines: good girls helped with housework, while good boys studied hard (Egan et al., 2014). However, the study of Roma communities that are also largely defined by a collectivist mindset found that when asked about attributes and behaviors indicative of their idea of the clever child, mothers similarly emphasized the child’s obedience and helping behavior in the family context in particular, including the child’s participation in the family work, but that this was especially true for boys (Penderi & Petrogiannis, 2011).

Given cultural associations between Spain and Latin America, we might expect to see some similarities in terms of Spanish parents holding gendered ethnotheories of child behavior, although, given Spain’s similarities to other Western nations, these gender differences may emerge less strongly in comparison to those evidenced in Latino samples.

**Purpose of the present study**

In summary, ethnotheories refer to shared, implicit, culturally-oriented beliefs that define how parents understand what constitutes desirable behavior, and how parents think about child development, child socialization, and family interaction (Harkness & Super, 1996; White & Levine, 1986). Related studies suggest that these beliefs vary across cultural and gender lines, influencing how parents understand their child’s development, socialization, and role in the family. Parents’ ethnotheories play an important part in shaping how parents think and talk not
only about their children but also about themselves as caregivers (Kankaanpää et al., 2020). For example, research has shown associations between parents’ causal attributions for child behaviors and parenting-related variables like child discipline and hostile reactions to children’s misbehavior (Fernandes et al., 2019). Here, parental attributions describe cognitive inferences that parents make about the causes of children’s behavior i.e., those that parents are aware of and able to report.

In the context of their larger theoretical system capturing the influence of culture on child development, Super and Harkness included parental beliefs or ethnotheories about the nature of children, parenting, and the family. Related work has tended to focus on parents’ perceptions of adaptive or desirable child behaviors, like independence, intelligence, or social competence. Limited research has suggested that parents’ ethnotheories about negative, undesirable, and/or nonadaptive behaviors likewise influence parenting strategies (Harkness et al., 2015). In the present study, we examined what parents’ ethnotheories of undesirable behaviors reveal about cultural values and practices via a mixed methods design that includes qualitative assessments of parents’ perceptions in their own words. This approach seeks to address limitations of past work, including a tendency to rely on measures developed in one culture and applied to others. For example, most previous cross-national research focused on parents’ perceptions of child deviance has been in response to rating instruments developed on North American samples. This study and others guided by the ethnotheories approach enrich our understanding of parents’ beliefs about child maladjustment by allowing parents to describe their children using their own language, including words and expressions that defy direct translation. Moreover, our methods allow for the generation of new categories of meaning when necessary rather than imposing pre-existing definitions of child behavior onto parents where these may not apply. Authors have
acknowledged the benefits of employing a similar approach (e.g., Kankaanpää et al., 2020). In their cross-cultural comparisons of ethnotheories of maternal control, Su Cho and co-authors (2020) characterize the ideal methodology as follows:

The derived etic approach is sensitive to cultural and ecological contexts (emic) and considers shared meanings across cultures (etic) simultaneously, allowing researchers to identify culturally unique parenting ethnotheories and practices through parents’ own perspectives and provide a more comprehensive understanding of shared and unique meanings and expressions. (p. 286)

We have attempted to abide by this approach wherein mothers and fathers are directly asked about their parenting values and beliefs. This has made it possible for us to develop valid research methods that elicit parents’ true perspectives while allowing for meaningful comparisons between the samples. Parents are often unaware of or unable to articulate the ethnotheories that they hold - and may also be particularly anxious or fearful to do so in the context of maladaptation. Therefore, our choice of measures represents a departure from previous studies comparing parents’ cognitions about child deviance that may have been limited by their reliance on predetermined questions validated on American samples.

While related research has explored parental expectations as important components of parents’ goals and values (e.g., Ren & Edwards, 2014; Holloway & Reichhart-Erickson, 1989), we believe our study is unique in that we prompt parents in two Western countries to identify both desired and undesired traits. Furthermore, in contrast to studies that limit their inquiry to specific types of traits – for example, social-emotional skills (Ren & Edwards, 2014) or temperament (Super et al., 2008) – we asked parents to generate child characteristics without any constraints in order to capture the full range of parent preferences. Within the larger context of
research focused on the relationship between parental ethnotheories, parenting strategies, and children’s developmental outcomes, it is essential to include parents’ beliefs around the ideal and nonideal child in order to what behavior is likely to be encouraged and discouraged.

**Potential real-world benefits of exploring parents’ ethnotheories of maladaptive behavior**

We are interested in parents’ ethnotheories of undesirable child behaviors not only for theoretical but also practical reasons related to child welfare. Particularly in the case of parental discipline, research shows that negative parental attributions may mediate the relationship between parenting stress and harsh punishment (Beckerman et al., 2017), with negative attributions increasing the likelihood of physical or harsh punishment (Jacobs et al., 2017). Viewed in this context, better understanding the conditions under which parents make these negative attributions might provide a crucial point of intervention and/or prevention for those working to support parents and children.

This type of cross-cultural inquiry has implications for intervention and prevention efforts involving parents and their young children. Research has demonstrated the potential impact of early parenting interventions on children’s cognitive and socioemotional development during the preschool period (Jeong et al., 2019), suggesting that distressed parents - i.e., those with limited access to social support and financial resources and with mental health issues of their own - and vulnerable children with developmental, emotional, or behavioral concerns may benefit most from early intervention efforts (Lau et al., 2017). Crucially, however, we lack models of the parent-child dyad that are sufficiently culturally-oriented, limiting the ability of researchers to understand and influence any relationship between parental beliefs, parenting practices, and child development in diverse populations (Grabell et al., 2015; McWayne & Melzi, 2014). Equally problematic has been the focus of ethnotheories research on middle
childhood despite evidence for the importance of the early developmental period (Olson et al., 2019), as shown below.

Early childhood has long been recognized as a critical time in children’s social, emotional, and behavioral development (e.g., Parsafar et al., 2019; Meins, 2017; Bronfenbrenner, 1963; Combe, 1846). Researchers have looked to the preschool period, in particular, to understand everything from how children develop skills like emotion regulation to which children may be most at risk for later depression (Barch et al., 2019). Studies have emphasized a child’s failure to meet developmental norms as potentially indicative of increased risk for the onset of psychopathology or the future identification of a personality disorder (Deutz et al., 2018). Characteristics internal and external to the child have been shown to increase risk for the earliest prodromes of psychopathology, with researchers arguing, for example, that poor emotion regulation moderates the association between high parenting stress and increased risk for internalizing and externalizing problems in early childhood (Tsotsi et al., 2019). Accordingly, we need to analyze parents’ concepts of positive and negative traits in young children, the causal attributions they make and emotional responses they have to different types of maladaptive child behavior in order to better understand both how parents interpret and react to potential prodromes of psychopathology already evidenced during this early developmental stage.

**Deepening cultural comparison**

Cross-cultural studies of parenting behavior have often featured comparisons across a strict East/West dichotomy. However, salient cultural differences exist between parents’ ethnotheories in Western countries that may reveal important, nuanced ways in which culture influences how parents make sense of and respond to their children. Spain is one such complex example: a European, “Western” country with aspects of both collectivist (Gouveia et al., 2002)}
and individualistic cultures (Carballeira et al., 2015). Perhaps surprisingly, related studies have revealed that Spanish parents’ ethnotheories vary in meaningful ways from other European countries (Super & Harkness, 2013), including close neighbors like Italy (Super et al., 2020). Moreover, Spanish history, culture, and geography tie the country to Latin America, the Middle East, other European nations, North Africa, and beyond. We might imagine, then, that Spanish parents’ ethnotheories, attributional patterns, and parenting strategies resemble individualistic countries like the United States as well as collectivist cultures (Gámez-Guadix & Almendros, 2015; Torregrosa, 1996) like China (Keller et al., 2007) and Japan (Olson et al., 2001). Spanish culture is uniquely situated to reveal the ways in which parents emphasize the importance of both independence and harmony, representing an intriguing departure from cross-cultural research featuring more dichotomous comparisons, and, as such, has been included in several recent cross-cultural comparisons focused on parenting beliefs and behaviors (e.g., Vazsonyi et al., 2022; Feng et al., 2020; Super et al., 2020; Gartstein et al., 2016; Mesurado et al., 2014).

In response to the dearth of qualitative cross-cultural comparisons involving parents’ perceptions of maladjustment in young children, we will explore parents’ ethnotheories in two chapters as follows:

1.) In Study 1, we will compare American and Spanish parents’ concepts of positive and negative traits in young children. Trait constructs will emerge from parents’ “free” responses to open ended questions about characteristics they value most and least in young children. We hypothesized that these responses will reveal significant differences in parents’ beliefs about child behavior consistent with the aforementioned research comparing Spanish and U.S. values surrounding parenting and the family.
2.) In Study 2, we will use hypothetical scenarios to compare parents’ causal attributions for different types of maladaptive child behavior and distress. Trait constructs will emerge from parents’ “free” responses to hypothetical scenarios involving children’s misbehavior. As with parents’ definitions of positive versus negative traits or behaviors, we hypothesized that these attributions and responses will differ significantly along cultural lines and on whether they emerge in the context of children’s externalizing or internalizing behaviors.
Figure 1.1

*The Developmental Niche (Super & Harkness, 1986)*

![Diagram of the Developmental Niche](image)
CHAPTER II: Parent-Identified Positive and Negative Child Characteristics (Study 1)

As previously discussed, American parents have been shown to share similarities while also diverging from Spanish parents in terms of characteristics that they do and do not desire to see in their children. In particular, cross-cultural comparisons involving parents of young children in Spain and the United States have revealed points of convergence and divergence in terms of parents’ developmental goals. Spanish parents have demonstrated a singular focus on their children’s interpersonal traits, like those associated with courtesy and disobedience, the development of social skills and awareness, so-called “good character,” and emotional closeness to their network of caregivers including and extending beyond their parents (Super et al., 2020). Importantly, analyses of parents’ concepts of the successful school child in seven western cultures similarly highlight Spanish parents’ emphasis on “good character” in their children (Feng et al., 2020). Feng and colleagues summarize the unique cultural pattern emerging from Spanish parents’ responses as follows:

The Spanish Good Character factor is distinctive in combining cognitive competence (Clever, Good memory) with other social qualities suggesting an active, outgoing child (Active, Adaptable, Confident, Enterprising, Open, Sweet). Similar social qualities appear again in the second factor, Cognitive Competence, suggesting a close link between cognitive and social skills. The theme of social competence is further elaborated in a unique Spanish fourth factor that includes Approaches new situations easily, Calm, Independent, and Inventive…evoking an image of a well-regulated child who can move easily into the wider social environment (Feng et al., 2020, p. 159).
Spanish parents’ demonstrated preferences mirror literature on the uniquely Spanish model of the dynamics of moral norms of good conduct, often understood in Spain to mean honest behavior. A theoretical model put forth by researchers Bethencourt and Kunze as part of their study of the cultural transmission of moral values and socialization within the family highlighted that, in Spain, there exists a socio-cultural emphasis on behaving well and being honest. This concern is reflected in the commonly held belief that “individuals’ criminal behavior and morality are complementarities that reinforce each other” (Bethencourt & Kunze, 2022, p. 579). Amoral and antisocial traits and behaviors are particularly troubling. Beyond amorality, Spanish parents appear to devalue traits and qualities indicative of poor social skills, like shyness or demandingness (Feng et al., 2020).

These same comparisons have shown North American parents to hold both similar and divergent views to those of their Spanish counterparts. For example, American parents have been found to react negatively to children’s overactivity, “low approach” (defined as fretful or very quiet in a new place or with a stranger), intense, negative mood, and lack of persistence (Super et al., 2020). These parents tended to speak about their children as “smart” and emphasize intelligence and cognitive abilities more often than did parents from Western European countries, including Spain. It is worth noting that included in U.S. parents’ singular emphasis on what authors broadly define as “cognitive competence” are qualities like calmness, cooperativeness, even-temperedness, and concern for others, as well as curiosity, enthusiasm, and independence (Feng et al., 2020). Further examination of parents’ ethnotheories of both positive and negative child characteristics could help to enhance our understanding of the nuanced differences and similarities in the traits and characteristics that U.S. and Spanish parents
and cultures at large value and devalue in young children, which in turn have important implications for clinical practice and prevention.

**Purpose/Objectives**

The purpose of this chapter is to compare parents' identified positive and negative child traits between similar samples of U.S. and Spanish parents. Our main research goals were to identify concepts of positive and negative child behavior that were most salient in each culture and to determine whether these concepts differed significantly for these two samples of parents and for boys and girls. Data were collected in a series of semi-structured and structured interviews with Spanish and American parents of preschool-aged children. Early childhood is a time of intensive socialization in the context of the development of foundational child characteristics such as self-regulation (Lunkenheimer et al., 2019; Grabell et al., 2017); as such, it serves as a logical point of inquiry into the effects of parents' beliefs about children's socialization.

We developed hypotheses and research questions according to prior research on parents' ethnotheories about preferred and undesirable childhood characteristics and behaviors. Primarily, we hypothesized the United States’ traditional cultural emphasis on independence and individualism (Harkness et al, 2000; Hofstede, 1994) would be reflected in American parents’ preferences for autonomous behaviors and associated active and independent traits and cognitive motivational skills, with these parents also valuing characteristics related to social cooperation and competence. Conversely, we predicted these parents would identify traits related to social incompetence, aggression/disruptiveness, and cognitive/motivational difficulties as particularly concerning. We predicted that Spanish parents would identify positive traits related to social
cooperation and competence, while, on the other hand, naming negative traits associated with insensitivity to others and social incompetence (Feng et al., 2020; Super et al., 2020). We also hypothesized that Spain’s longstanding affiliation with the Roman Catholic Church (Castro et al., 2009) may relate to a tendency among Spanish parents to value traits associated with children demonstrating spiritual and moral values and devalue those related to a lack of spirituality and morality.

Secondarily, we questioned whether there would be significant relationships between parents’ educational attainment, child age, child gender, and parents' cultural background in terms of the child characteristics parents identified as desirable and undesirable. Given the dearth of relevant data, particularly that specific to ethnotheories of maladaptive traits, it was difficult to make specific predictions regarding parent education, child age, and child gender. However, the limited extant literature on negative traits suggests that across cultures more educated parents may tend to identify traits associated with a lack of behavioral and emotion regulation skills as particularly problematic than less educated parents (Feng et al., 2020). These same parents may also be more likely to identify positive traits related to cognitive motivational skills facilitative of academic achievement, independence, and self-efficacy compared with their less educated peers (Seidl-de-Moura et al., 2008; Suizzo & Cheng, 2008; Suizzo & Stapleton, 2007). Parents with less education in both samples may prioritize traits related to social cooperation, like benevolence, respect for traditions, and conformity (Suizzo, 2007).

There has been limited research specific to associations between child characteristics and parents’ ethnotheories of desirable and undesirable traits and characteristics. With respect to child age, the extant literature suggests that North American parents may identify overactive and reactive behaviors as more problematic for older vs. younger children, while these relationships
have not been observed in Spanish samples. American parents may also be more likely to identify traits associated with social incompetence like shyness and a lack of distress tolerance in older vs. younger children (Super et al., 2020). Focusing on child gender, it is difficult to make specific predictions in light of the lack of consistent, relevant research. For example, while we might anticipate limited gender differences in terms of children’s traits and behaviors (e.g., Suizzo & Stapleton, 2007), whether positive or negative, we might instead observe that parents in both samples are less tolerant of aggressive/disruptive behaviors in girls vs. boys (Olson et al., 2001). Furthermore, given the aforementioned role of the Catholic Church in Spanish society, we might expect to observe relatively traditional, patriarchal gender norms in Spain as compared with the United States: for example, those favoring women and girls who are obedient and family-oriented while promoting more independent, assertive traits and behaviors in men and boys (Haskins, 2003). On the other hand, in recent years Spanish society has been characterized as increasingly progressive – indeed, more so than the United States – regarding gender equality. The World Economic Forum 2022 Global Gender Gap Report ranked Spain in the 17th position in terms of gender parity, highlighting the country’s leadership in fighting gender discrimination in the social, political, and economic domains. The United States was ranked 27th (World Economic Forum, 2022). Taken together, the conflicting evidence summarized above makes a gender-focused hypothesis unwise.

**Methods**

**Participants.** Participants were (71) mothers and (21) fathers of children aged 3-7 years (M = 4.6, SD = 0.98). Out of the total pool of (92) participants, (50) were recruited in Ann Arbor, Michigan, United States, and (42) in Elche, Spain. Both Ann Arbor and Elche are public
university towns and regional cultural centers. Spanish parents were recruited with the help of local schools and our partner research team, and American parents were recruited through electronic and hard copy fliers distributed at preschools, daycares, and libraries, as well as via postings local parent groups on Facebook and other social media and emails to parent- and family-oriented listserves. The samples were matched according to child age and parent gender. Participants were primarily of European descent and of middle-class socioeconomic status. Demographic information is presented in Table 2.1.

Materials and Procedures

Interview. A semi-structured interview (see Appendix A.1) was used to assess parents’ beliefs about child adjustment and misbehavior. The open-ended format was required for assessing cultural nuances in parents’ beliefs about positive and negative child behaviors (e.g., Liu et al., 2020; Trommsdorff & Chen, 2012). Crucially, the interview also featured hypothetical vignettes, which have been used in prior research to assess parents’ beliefs about children’s abnormal development (e.g., Lansford et al., 2014). The interview protocol was adapted from another study comparing maternal ethnotheories across the United States and Japan and developed by an interdisciplinary team (Olson et al., 2001). All measures were translated and back-translated by bilingual Spanish/English speakers. Parents were paid for their participation. Parents’ responses were tape recorded to facilitate accurate transcription. Once the audio was transcribed, a research assistant revised the transcript to ensure its accuracy. In the case of the Spanish sample, bilingual research assistants translated all transcripts, and another research assistant back-translated several of these English transcripts, as is standard in bi- and multilingual research (e.g., Su Cho et al, 2020; Keller et al., 2006). All translations and back
translations were conducted by native Spanish speakers also fluent in English and supervised by the project director, a native English speaker who is fluent in Spanish. Procedures for facilitating rapport were adapted from Miller (2012).

Interviews were conducted at local libraries, in parents’ homes or in their children’s schools by a research assistant. The interviewer began the session by providing the parent with a brief overview of the study, followed by asking the parent to sign a consent form and engaging in brief friendly conversation to build rapport. To facilitate rapport and get a better sense of the child, we began with an open-ended question (“How would you describe your child to someone who has never met (him/her/them)?”) before inquiring about desirable behaviors in Part 1: “Every parent has ideas about how they want their children to behave. What behaviors would you hope to see in your child?” The interviewer tried to elicit at least 5 different responses, described in the parents’ own words. Next, parents were asked to give examples of the behaviors, and to choose the one that is most important. Using the parent’s most highly valued behavior, parents were asked: “Why would a child turn out to be ___?” and “What could you do as a parent to help your child turn out to be ____?”. Finally, in order to assess parents’ adherence to culturally normative beliefs, parents were asked to “Think about other parents who have children the same age as (child’s name). Would they agree with you? If not, how would they disagree?” These steps were repeated with parents’ beliefs about maladaptive behaviors: “Every parent has ideas about child behaviors that might worry or trouble them. What behaviors would you not want to see in (child’s name)?” The same follow-up questions described above were used to probe parents’ beliefs about the nature, causes, and prevention of negative behaviors, and about how closely parent identifies his/her/their beliefs with those of others in the culture.
Data Analyses

Coding

**Parents’ beliefs about positive and negative characteristics.** Parents’ beliefs about positive and negative characteristics were coded in stages (see Figure 2.1: Illustration of Procedures to Create Final Coding Schemes). Two coders each independently analyzed twenty translated interviews from both the U.S. and Spanish samples (forty interviews total) to determine whether the extant twelve domains of desirable and undesirable child characteristics mostly generated from U.S. and Japanese interviews that were part of the original comparative study by Olson et al. (2001) were sufficient to categorize traits from these two new parent samples. Inter-coder reliability for the United States sample was .84 (percent agreement, based on 40% of the sample of transcripts), and inter-coder reliability for the Spanish sample was .83 (based on 47% of the sample).

In the aforementioned original cross-cultural comparison, native speakers of English and Japanese separately analyzed lists of parents’ named positive and negative child characteristics for common themes. The American and Japanese research teams identified ten domains of desirable and undesirable child characteristics. Identified positive attributes included: 1. “Emotional Adjustment” denoting characteristics describing positive emotional dispositions like happiness and self-confidence; 2. “Social Cooperation” referring to characteristics reflective of cooperative, benevolent, and receptive attitude toward others (e.g., “kind,” “thoughtful,” “empathic”) as distinguished from 3. “Social Competence”, which described overt behavioral skills (such as friendliness or a good sense of humor) that facilitate positive social interaction; the 4.”Cognitive/Motivational” category captured cognitive and motivational traits and behaviors that facilitate successful achievement, such as good impulse control and curiosity; 5. “Active and
Independent” encapsulated assertive, independent, or energetic, goal-oriented behavior; and, finally, 6. “Physical Health/Competence” referred to traits and behaviors in the physical domain like athletic or well-coordinated.

The six categories of negative attributes represent the converse to categories of positive attributes: 1. “Aggression/Disruptiveness” denoting aggression and other harmful behaviors like bullying and tantrums; 2. “Insensitivity to Others” encapsulating a negative and/or uncooperative attitude toward others including traits like rudeness and dishonesty; 3. “Emotional Distress” describing negative emotional dispositions like sadness and low self-esteem; 4. “Social Incompetence” capturing deficits in social skills/competence such as poor social skills or having few friends; 5. “Cognitive Motivational Difficulties” encompassing characteristics thought to impede achievement behavior like laziness and inattentiveness; and, finally, 6. “Physical Problems/Incompetence” indicative of poor physical health and/or performance like being prone to illness or physically weak.

In cases where parents identified fewer than the five requested characteristics, all identified characteristics were coded, and the total number of responses was recorded for each parent. Where applicable, coders assigned multiple codes to a single response. Coding was the same for parent-identified most highly desirable and most highly undesirable characteristics.

Two new categories, the positive “Spiritual/Moral Values” and negative “Lack of Spiritual/Moral Values”, were created to capture previously uncodable traits and behaviors that emerged predominately in the Spanish sample but were found in both Spanish and American responses. These categories represent characteristics and behaviors that related to a belief in a higher power, a moral compass, and good values (the positive category) and a lack of spiritual beliefs, amorality, and bad/no values (the negative category).
Analyses. American and Spanish parents’ concepts of positive and negative traits in young children were compared by computing means and standard deviations for overall frequencies of positive and negative characteristics, including most highly positive and most highly negative, (computed separately by nationality) followed by correlations of these characteristics, parent education, and child age, and child gender. Given the qualitative nature of this study and the richness of parents’ responses to the first part of the interview, we opted to focus analyses on the content of these responses, including illustrative examples of parent-identified traits that highlighted meaningful differences and similarities between the samples. Significant group differences were determined by independent t-tests.

Descriptive statistics. Point biserial correlations were calculated between all positive and negative traits and parent education, child age, and child gender for each cultural group separately.

Parent education. The hypotheses that more educated parents from both samples would prioritize cognitive motivational skills and be concerned by a lack of behavioral and emotion regulation skills were partially supported. There emerged significant but moderate positive correlations between U.S. parent education and traits associated with social competence \((r_{SCOMP} = .41, p = .01)\) and emotional adjustment \((r_{EA} = .38, p = .01)\), and a moderate negative correlation with physical health/competence \((r_{PHYS} = - .52, p = .01)\). U.S. parent education was also strongly correlated with the identification of negative traits related to aggressive and disruptive behaviors \((r_{AG} = .35, p = .05)\). Finally, U.S. parent education level was strongly negatively correlated with the identification of physical problems/incompetence as the most negative trait \((r_{AG} = - .30., p = .05)\). With respect to Spanish parents, while their education level was not significantly correlated with any positive traits or characteristics, a
significant correlation emerged between education and the identification of aggressive or disruptive behaviors as the most negative ($r$(MostNegativeAG) = .33, $p = .05$), as did a moderate negative correlation with traits associated with insensitivity to others ($r$(INSENS) = -.37, $p = .01$).

**Child age.** The hypothesis that U.S. parents would be more concerned with overactive and reactive behaviors as well as those associated with social incompetence in older vs. younger children was not supported. Within the American sample, analyses revealed significant correlations between child age and positive traits and the cognitive/motivational ($r$(COGMOT) = .30, $p = .05$) and active and independent categories ($r$(AI) = .31, $p = .05$). Child age was also modestly correlated with traits associated with physical problems/incompetence ($r$(PHYSPR) = .31, $p = .05$) and negatively correlated with the identification of physical problems/incompetence as most negative ($r$(MostNegativePHYSPR) = -.30, $p = .01$). Within the Spanish sample, child age was significantly correlated with traits related to social cooperation ($r$(SCOOP) = .40, $p = .05$) and with spiritual/moral values ($r$(SPMOR) = .42, $p = .01$; $r$(SPMOR) = .48, $p = .01$). Child age was also significantly correlated with traits associated with cognitive/motivational difficulties ($r$(COGMOTD) = .34, $p = .05$; $r$(COGMOTD) = .48, $p = .01$) and with physical problems/incompetence ($r$(PHYSPR) = .43, $p = .01$), emotional distress ($r$(ED) = .48, $p = .01$), and a lack of spiritual/moral principles ($r$(LSPMOR) = .40, $p = .01$). Finally, for Spanish parents, child age was correlated with their identification of cognitive motivational difficulties as most negative ($r$(MostNegativeCOGMOTD) = .38, $p = .05$).

**Child gender.** As previously mentioned, we did not have firm hypotheses about gender due to a lack of extant research and contradictory relevant information. For American parents, child female gender emerged as modestly correlated with the identification of positive cognitive
motivational traits \( r(\text{COGMOT}) = .27, p = .05 \) and modestly negatively correlated with traits associated with social cooperation \( r(\text{SCOOP}) = -.21, p = .05; r(\text{SCOOP}) = -.21, p = .05 \). No significant correlations were observed with negative traits in this sample. For Spanish parents, female gender was moderately positively correlated with cognitive motivational skills \( r(\text{COGMOT}) = .40, p = .01 \), negatively correlated with social cooperation \( r(\text{SCOOP}) = -.33, p = .05 \) and spiritual/moral values \( r(\text{SPMOR}) = -.33, p = .05 \). Finally, there were significant correlations with emotional distress \( r(\text{ED}) = .31, p = .05 \) and cognitive motivational difficulties \( r(\text{COGMOT}) = .31, p = .05 \) and a negative correlation with social incompetence \( r(\text{SINCOMP}) = -.33, p = .05 \).

**Culture.** Descriptive statistics were conducted for each cultural group separately (See Table 2.3 for parents’ responses to general positive trait questions, Table 2.4 for responses to the most highly positive trait question, Table 2.5 for responses to general negative trait questions, and Table 2.6 for responses to the most highly negative trait question). Our hypotheses with respect to the positive and negative traits that parents in each culture would tend to identify/prioritize were mostly supported. With respect to positive traits, overall, American parents preferred those associated with social cooperation, cognitive motivational skills, and active and independent behaviors/characteristics. Spanish parents showed a similar preference for traits related to social cooperation and cognitive motivational skills, also preferring characteristics associated with social competence. When asked to identify the most highly positive trait, American parents often chose traits related to social cooperation followed by emotional adjustment; the same was true for Spanish parents. With respect to negative traits, both groups of parents disfavored those associated with social insensitivity, aggression/disruptiveness, and cognitive/motivational difficulties.
Independent t-tests were conducted to determine significant differences between the two samples revealed the following:

With respect to general positive traits, American parents demonstrated a significantly greater preference for active and independent traits and behaviors than Spanish parents, \( t(92) = 3.01, p = .003 \). Spanish parents demonstrated a significantly greater preference for spiritual/moral values than American parents, \( t(92) = -2.83, p = .006 \). With respect to the most highly positive trait, Spanish parents demonstrated a significantly greater preference for social cooperation compared to American parents, \( t(92) = -3.60, p < .001 \), while American parents demonstrated a significantly greater preference for active and independent traits and behaviors compared to Spanish parents, \( t(92) = 2.06, p = .04 \). It is worth noting that the difference between Spanish and American parents’ identification of spiritual/moral values as most highly positive was very nearly significant, \( t(92) = -1.96, p = .05 \). With respect to general negative traits, the only significant difference emerged relative to a lack of spiritual/moral values, with Spanish parents demonstrating a significantly greater preference for these traits compared to American parents, \( t(92) = -3.56, p < .001 \). Finally, with respect to the most highly negative trait, American parents compared to Spanish parents demonstrated a significantly greater disapproval of aggressive/disruptive characteristics, \( t(92) = 3.97, p < .001 \), and Spanish parents compared to American parents demonstrated a significantly greater disapproval of social insensitivity, \( t(92) = -2.44, p = .02 \), and a lack of spiritual/moral values, \( t(92) = -2.86, p = .007 \).

As shown in Figure 2.2, the strongest finding was that both groups of parents emphasized social cooperation. They also endorsed, at more moderate levels, emotional adjustment, social competence, and cognitive/motivational skills. Group differences emerged as predicted, with American parents valuing active and independent traits and behaviors more than
did Spanish parents, and Spanish parents valuing spiritual/moral values more than did American parents.

As shown in Figure 2.3, with respect to the most highly endorsed positive traits, parents in both samples overwhelming endorsed those characteristics and behaviors associated with social cooperation. Group differences emerged as predicted, with American parents valuing active and independent traits more than did Spanish parents, and Spanish parents identifying spiritual/moral values more often than did American parents.

As shown in Figure 2.4, the strongest finding concerning negative characteristics was that both groups of parents identified social insensitivity as undesirable. Group differences emerged as predicted, with American parents much more concerned by aggressive/disruptive behavior than were Spanish parents, and Spanish parents more concerned by behaviors indicative of a lack of spiritual/moral principles than were American parents.

Finally, as shown in Figure 2.5, when it came to selecting the most highly negative trait, American parents chose aggressive/disruptive characteristics and behaviors more than did Spanish parents, while Spanish parents were more likely to choose social insensitivity and a lack of spiritual/moral values than were American parents.

These results prompted a qualitative exploration of the specific nature of child characteristics that American and Spanish parents put forth as preferred and maladaptive, including those that parents identified as the most and least desirable, in relationship to person-specific variables.

**Positive Child Characteristics**

**Emotional adjustment.** More educated American parents demonstrated a preference for traits associated with emotional adjustment in their children. Specifically, parents responded with

**Social cooperation.** Our hypotheses that both samples would tend to value traits associated with social cooperation was supported. More educated American parents demonstrated a moderate preference for traits associated with social cooperation and described characteristics and behaviors such as “kindness”, “apologizing for wrongdoing”, “not bullying”, “generosity”, “caring towards others”, “well-mannered”, “willing to help”, “respectful”, “[empathetic]”, “sharing”, and “polite”. Spanish parents valued these traits more in older vs. younger children and offered responses like “obediente” (“obedient”), “bien educado” (roughly, “polite”), “ayudarle a recoger” (“[helping to] clean up”), “atento a las solicitudes de los padres” (“attentive to parents’ requests”), “complaciente” (“compliant”), “respetuosa” (“respectful”), “empático” (“[empathetic]”), “amable” (“kind”), and “tratar bien a los demás” (“treating people well”).

**Social competence.** More educated American parents demonstrated a moderate preference for traits associated with social competence and described characteristics and behaviors such as “having friends”, “responsive to social situations and different settings”, “good manners”, and “says please and thank you.”

**Cognitive/motivational.** American parents demonstrated a strong preference for these traits/behaviors in older vs. younger children and in girls vs. boys, responding with traits like “creative”, “curious”, “observant”, “inquisitive”, “interested in the world”, “intelligent”, “smart”, “does well in school”, “good at academics”, “[productive]”, “motivated to complete thing and keep trying”, “determined”, “[persevering]”, and “hard-working”. The Spanish sample similarly showed a preference for these cognitive/motivational skills in girls vs. boys. These parents
described traits and characteristics like “curioso” (“curious”), “estudioso” (“studious”), “bien organizada” (“well-organized”), “predisposto al trabajo” (“[predisposed] to work”), “trabajadora” (“hardworking”), “culto” (“educated”), “distraído” (“not distractible”), “atente el trabajo” (“paying attention”), “inteligente” (“intelligent”), and “concentrado en los detalles” (“detail oriented”).

Active and independent. American parents demonstrated a preference for active and independent traits and behaviors in older vs. younger children and responded with characteristics like “able to express herself”, “independent”, “open to adventure”, and “able to explore”.

Physical health/competence. Less educated American parents demonstrated a moderate preference for trait associated with physical health/competence as compared with their more educated counterparts. This sample offered traits such as “healthy”, “good posture”, “hygienic”, and “[physically] strong”.

Spiritual/moral values. Spanish parents showed a moderate preference for spiritual and moral values for older vs. younger children and for boys vs. girls. Parents identified traits and characteristics like “legitima” (“lawful”), “obedecer la ley” (“obeying the laws”), “noble” (“noble”), “ser buena persona” (“being a good person”), “una persona moral” (“moral”), “se preocupa por el mundo” (“cares about the world”), “reconocer lo bueno de lo mal” (“knows right from wrong”), “trate bien a los animales” (“[treats] animals well”), and “crea en dios” (“believes in god”).

Negative Child Characteristics

Aggression/disruptiveness. American parents were more likely to identify traits and behaviors related to aggression and disruptiveness, including as the most negative possible, than were their less educated counterparts. These parents responded with characteristics and behaviors

**Insensitivity to others.** Less educated American parents were somewhat more likely to name traits and behaviors associated with insensitivity to others than were parents with a higher level of education, describing characteristics and behaviors such as “selfish”, “not listening”, “disrespectful”, “disobedient”, “talking back to adults”, “no remorse about violent behavior”, “judgmental”, “stubborn”, “conceited”, “prideful”, “unkind”, “close-minded”, “closed to differences in other people”, “not accepting others’ differences”, “lying”, and “not sharing”.

**Emotional distress.** Spanish parents were more somewhat more likely to identify characteristics related to emotional distress in older vs. younger children and much more likely to do so for girls relative to boys. These parents offered traits like “celoso” (“jealous”), “envidioso” (“envious”), “ser una víctima” (“being a sufferer”), “ser una persona triste” (“being a sad person”), “pesimista” (“pessimistic”), “ser derrotista” (“[being a] defeatist”), “enojado” (“angry”), and “no feliz” (“unhappy”).

**Social incompetence.** Spanish parents were more likely to express concern around traits associated with social incompetence in boys as compared to girls, responding with traits and characteristics like “hiciese cosas en contra de su voluntad (“doing things against her will with peers”), “no quería estar sentada en la mesa” (“bad manners at the table”), “tívido” (“shy”), “no disculparse ni darles las gracias” (“does not apologize or say thank you”), “victimizado por sus compañeros” (“victimized by peers”), “introvertido” (“introverted”), and “no sociable” (“not sociable”).
Cognitive motivational difficulties. Spanish parents were more likely to identify traits related to cognitive motivational difficulties in older vs. younger children, including identifying these traits as most negative. This sample was also more likely to demonstrate concern relative to these traits in girls as compared to boys. Spanish parents shared characteristics such as “no quiera aprender” (“not wanting to learn”), “desordenado (“messy”, “disorganized”), “propens a distraerse” (“distractible”), “poco atenta” (“not paying attention”), “inquieto” (“restless”, “fidgety”), “hiperactiva” (“hyperactive”, “jumping around”), and “perezoso” or “flojo” (“lazy”).

Physical problems/incompetence. American parents were more likely to identify traits associated with physical problems/incompetence in older vs. younger children; however, these same parents were somewhat more likely to identify these same behaviors and characteristics as most negative in younger vs. younger children, with examples including “sick”, “not strong”, “unhealthy”, “something wrong physically”, “uncoordinated”, and “unathletic”. Meanwhile, Spanish parents were also somewhat more likely to identify these negative traits in older vs. younger children, sharing characteristics and behaviors such as “usar drogas” (“doing drugs”), “ser drogadicta” (“addicted to drugs”), “la enfermedad” (“sickness”), and “enfermo” (“sick”, “unhealthy”).

Lack of spiritual/moral principles. Spanish parents were somewhat more likely to name traits indicative of a lack of spiritual/moral principles in older vs. younger children. These parents offered traits like “no ser buena persona” (“not [being] a good person”), “ser una mala persona” (“[being] a bad person”), “no valorar lo que tiene” (“not valuing what you have”), “la falta de respeto a los animales y a las plantas” (“lack of respect for animals and plants”), “no preocuparse por nuestro planeta” (“[not caring about] our planet”), “no creer en dios” (“[not believing] in god”), “no cumplir con la ley” (“[not following] laws”), “[ser] delinquente”
(“[committing] crimes”), “no hacer lo correcto” (“[not doing] what is right”), and “no saber la diferencia entre el bien y el mal” (“[not knowing] right from wrong”).

**Discussion**

In two similar samples of parents from the United States and Spain, we examined parents’ ethnotheories about their children as represented by the traits parents identified as desirable and undesirable in their children revealed in parents’ responses to our interview prompting parents to identify specific child characteristics that they would and would not like to see. Based on previous research, we expected to find differences between our samples of North American and Spanish parents that aligned with identified cultural differences, as well as notable similarities in terms of the traits parents emphasize in the context of early child development (Feng et. al, 2020; Super et. al, 2020). We hypothesized that American parents would tend to identify positive traits in the active and independent and cognitive/motivational domains while also valuing traits related to social cooperation and competence, reflective of the cultural emphases on academic/professional success and independence and individualism alongside interpersonal success and good social skills (Feng et. al, 2020; Super et al., 2020). With respect to negative traits, we expected American parents to identify those related to insensitivity to others, social incompetence, cognitive/motivational difficulties, and aggression/disruptiveness (Feng et. al, 2020; Super et al., 2020). We hypothesized that Spanish parents, in line with their own cultural values system, would idealize positive traits related to interpersonal sensitivity, social competence, (Feng et. al, 2020; Super et al., 2020), and spiritual and moral values (Castro et al., 2009; Grier et al., 2021). We expected that Spanish parents would identify negative traits associated with insensitivity to others, social incompetence (Feng et al., 2020; Super et al., 2020)
and a lack of spirituality/amorality (Castro et al., 2009; Grier et al., 2021). To the best of our knowledge, this study is one of only a handful to compare parents’ ethnotheories about positive and negative characteristics in early childhood between two Western samples, as well as the only study to prompt parents’ identification of a full spectrum of desired and maladaptive traits (i.e., beyond traits that fall under the umbrella of temperament).

Results supported the prediction that parents across cultures would value social cooperation; indeed, this emerged as the most highly preferred of all traits for both samples, which underscores a shared prioritization of children’s characteristics and behaviors that facilitate collaboration and communicate interpersonal warmth and responsiveness to peers and adults. Importantly, this includes adults outside of the family, with parents from both samples describing traits like respect for others in relation to parents, teachers, and other older adults. Moreover, findings suggest that parents in the U.S. do in fact value active and independent traits and behaviors, supporting our hypothesis and aligning with previously-identified cultural emphases on independence and individuality (Keller et al., 2017; Pearson & Rao, 2003). Also as predicted, American parents valued cognitive/motivational skills; interestingly, Spanish parents did also, which was not hypothesized. One possible explanation may be the effects of globalization on education, as well as on the relationship between educational and professional success, whereby the norms characteristic of schooling in the United States are becoming increasingly influential in terms of both the definition and prioritization of academic achievement (Holger, 2002). This is certainly a question worthy of further exploration. Our hypothesis that Spanish parents would value traits associated with spiritual/moral principles in line with literature characterizing Spanish culture’s emphasis on religious and moral values (Grier et al., 2021) was confirmed. This suggests that the growing secular influences on modern
Spanish political and social life have not been strong enough to undermine Spain’s traditional, religiously rooted moral compass, at least when it comes to parents’ goals for their children.

While, as mentioned, both groups of parents valued social cooperation, American parents identified related traits as the “most highly positive” significantly more than Spanish parents. It is difficult to know what to make of this finding; perhaps, it relates to spirituality/morality winning out in the minds of some Spanish parents. For these parents, being kind to others may pale in comparison to a broader definition of being a good person and knowing right from wrong. Moreover, there are numerous examples of Spanish parents interweaving the two – social cooperation and spiritual/moral values – in their descriptions of positive traits. An example is one father defining what he means by “buen comportamiento” or “good behavior” in relation to the traits/behaviors that he would like to see in his daughter:

*Siempre he dicho que las personas que son educadas dejan huella en los demás, y ella han comprobado que cuando una persona es educada con nosotros la sensación que nos produce…les explico la Ley del Karma, que si lanzamos el bien al mundo es como un bumerán y al final nos acabará viniendo el bien. Que hay que ser buenos con la gente. Hay que ser educados, prestar atención a los pequeños detalles que son importantes como abrir la puerta a una persona mayor, ayudar a alguien que necesita ayuda.*

I have always said that good people leave their mark on others, and [my daughter] has seen that when a person treats us this way, is good to us, they leave us with a certain feeling…[I explained to my children] the Law of Karma, that when we send out goodness into the world, it is like a boomerang, and in the end good will come to us. That we need to be good to others. We have to be good, to pay attention to the small details that are important like opening the door for an older person, helping someone who needs help.
Perhaps, for some Spanish parents, social cooperation and spiritual/moral “goodness” are inextricable.

Above all, it is important to remember that, while there may have been significant differences, parents in both cultures overwhelmingly chose social cooperation as a desirable trait, as well as the most desirable of all. Because the two groups shared more similarities than differences in this respect, we should avoid overinterpreting relatively small differences between the samples.

Focusing on negative traits, as hypothesized, both groups of parents were concerned by social insensitivity, with Spanish parents emphasizing related traits more often than any others in the context of the most maladaptive traits/characteristics. This finding lends support to the narrative that Spanish, Latino, and Hispanic cultures emphasize community and supportive social relationships and, conversely, are concerned by antisocial behavior (Akira Miura et al., 2019; Triandis et al., 1985). Interestingly, both Spanish and American parents were less concerned about characteristics and behaviors indicative of social incompetence than anticipated but, as predicted, were quite concerned by aggression/disruptiveness and also by cognitive/motivational difficulties. It may be that, as children enter a school environment and interact increasingly often with peers, and other caregivers like teachers, parents across these Western cultures worry that interpersonal aggression and disruptive behaviors in particular, rather than a broader lack of social skills, will undermine their children’s ability to build relationships and fit in socially, and, moreover, that learning-related difficulties will make it difficult for children to succeed in a school setting. As predicted, Spanish parents were more concerned than American parents about traits and behaviors indicating a lack of spiritual/moral values, including as the most highly negative trait, again underscoring the ongoing relevance of
traditional values systems in modern Spain. Finally, with respect to traits parents identified as most highly negative, results highlighted a meaningful difference between the groups of parents that were both concerned by aggression/disruptiveness and social insensitivity: namely, that American parents were most concerned by the former and Spanish parents by the latter. One interpretation supported by literature on cultural differences is that study of psychology is focused on and holds more sway in the United States as compared to the rest of the world (Webster et al., 2020), and that developmental psychologists have underscored aggression/disruptive behaviors in early childhood as uniquely predictive of problems later in life (e.g., Lewis & Rudolph, 2014). It would be worthwhile to track whether this difference in parental concern continues to hold as psychology becomes more international in its research focus and popularity, which some experts say is happening, albeit too slowly (Webster et al., 2020). Another obvious question to consider is whether American parents report higher levels of aggression/disruptive behavior in young children than Spanish parents, as this might in turn help to explain observed differences in concern about related traits.

Overall, significant differences in responses to general (“what are five traits you wish/do not wish to see in your child?”) vs. highest (“what trait would you most/least like to see in your child?”) prompts for positive and negative traits suggested that, while parents across samples prioritized and devalued similar traits, when asked to identify the characteristics that are most positive and most concerning, American and Spanish parents’ priorities tended to differ, with American parents prioritizing social cooperation and devaluing aggression/disruptiveness, and Spanish parents, on the other hand, prioritizing social cooperation but devaluing social insensitivity. These findings underscore the nuanced nature of this facet of ethnotheories in particular, implying that we cannot assume which qualities parents desire to see or are concerned
by based simply on established broader cultural differences; nor can we extrapolate identical prioritization and devaluing of child traits based on apparent agreement across cultures relative to the kinds of traits parents do and do not wish to see. Lastly, findings suggest that future work should continue to distinguish between “desirable/undesirable” and “most desirable/undesirable” traits, as this has proven a useful addition to the interview.

Our findings also suggest that in the U.S., increased parent education was related to an increased valuing of social skills and emotional adjustment, while a lower level of education was associated with a greater value placed on physical health and competence. We wonder whether this relates to the level of socioeconomic disparity in the U.S. as compared with Spain and indeed most other developed countries (Schaeffer, 2020) whereby social, academic, and professional success for more highly educated individuals is associated with social skills and emotion regulation, whereas, for less highly educated people, their success is more related to their performance on physical attributes. Findings may also relate to the increased healthcare concerns of low-SES families in the United States, a country without universal healthcare, as compared to Spain and other European nations (Schneider et al., 2021). In both cultures, more highly educated parents tended to be concerned by aggressive and disruptive behavior, which suggests that social norms in the two countries may similarly penalize individuals who behave thusly. In Spanish culture, insensitivity is a source of heightened concern for more highly educated parents in particular, which may be reflective of these parents being more attuned to and benefiting by the cultural demand for social cohesion. This sensitivity to insensitivity may relate to Spanish parents’ own experiences that have taught them that social skills such as demonstrations of interpersonal warmth (i.e., kindness, friendliness) play a singularly important role in the achievement of success in all domains of life.
Findings specific to child age suggest that, as hypothesized, American parents placed more value on positive cognitive motivational traits than on emotional adjustment. As children grow older, American parents, who were generally more concerned about physical competence than are Spanish parents, may become increasingly concerned by the presence of physical problems. This discrepancy may reflect parents’ conceptions of appropriate child development. In other words, physical incompetence may be more acceptable in younger children because parents do not expect these children to perform physically; however, as children age, parental expectations heighten in accordance with what parents believe to be developmentally appropriate and/or promoting of social success; after all, as children age, they are increasingly involved in sports teams, school yard games, gym classes, etc. However, as demonstrated by the negative correlation relative to physical competence as the most important positive trait, as children age and engage in a greater variety of activities, parents may have more ways to evaluate what is desirable vs. undesirable beyond just children’s physical qualities. Spanish parents expected older children to demonstrate skills and attributes facilitative of success in Spanish society, including social and cognitive/motivational skills, more than younger children. This may be true on a societal level: that older children are expected to comply with social norms more so than their younger peers. Conversely, American parents may expect their children to develop more independence as they pursue activities outside of the home, in alignment with the North American cultural emphasis on individuality.

Our findings relative to child gender suggest a shared emphasis on cognitive motivational skills for girls vs. boys. It may be that in both societies school success and educational attainment are more important to girls’ success as compared to boys’; extant literature on gender differences has identified this discrepancy (e.g., Määttä & Uusiautti, 2020). Surprisingly, both samples of
parents shared a strong preference for social cooperation, with Spanish parents also showing a preference for spiritual/moral values, in their sons relative to their daughters. Given the demonstrated emphases on girls’ and women’s social/relational roles (Eagly & Wood, 2016), it is difficult to know what to make of this finding: it certainly demands further exploration. Perhaps, we are observing one element of cross-cultural social change whereby boys are increasingly expected to demonstrate qualities like kindness, and empathy, and in more religiously-oriented countries like Spain, those characteristic of a so-called “good person” (Tamarit & Balcells, 2022).

**Implications.** The present findings have important implications for identifying and interpreting parents’ ethnotheories about their children. Our findings suggest that there are nuanced similarities and differences between American and Spanish parents’ ethnotheories as demonstrated by the traits and behaviors they desire to see in their children as well as those they deem maladaptive. Accordingly, it is important to continue to explore this aspect of ethnotheories with a dual focus on positive and negative traits. Findings also have meaningful implications for an enhanced understanding of parents’ reactions to their children, including parental discipline, as well as ideas for how to best connect with parents and increase buy-in in parenting interventions. After all, parents parent according to what matters to them. Results suggested that certain ethnotheories may be universally applicable – and perhaps even universally evolving – while others were not, which in turn implies that some understandings would be similarly applicable and interventions commonly effective across cultures, while others would need to be tailored specifically according to culture.

**Limitations.** There were several important limitations of this study, including notable differences between the two samples. While both samples of parents were predominantly female,
white, middle-class, educated, and living in towns with nationally recognized universities and other influential cultural institutions, the average age of children in our American sample was lower than that of Spanish children (4.4 vs. 4.7 years), and the parents in the American sample were more educated than parents in the Spanish sample. Given the long-established relationship between class and parents’ goals relative to their children (e.g., Harwood et al., 1996), these differences may skew comparisons. Moreover, the relative homogeneity of both samples limits the generalizability of our findings. We use the word culture in a homogenous way to simplify our comparison of the United States and Spain; however, the U.S. in particular is defined by its lack of a singular culture and rich diversity that itself has been the focus of fascinating recent ethnotheories research (Kuchirko et al., 2022; Markus & Kitayama, 1999) and related studies of acculturation (e.g., Ho, 2014). Although the vast majority of Spanish people identify as of European descent, Spain is home to a sizeable immigrant community that is rapidly growing, particularly in the decades following Spain’s entry into the European Union (Elgorriaga et al., 2019), with immigrant children enduring a complex process of acculturation (González-Falcón et al., 2022). Just as we hypothesized that parents’ attributions for their children’s behavior would vary with child gender, the same might be said of parent gender, and it was impossible for us to study this with an insufficient number of fathers in either sample for meaningful within or between samples comparison.

Finally, there is an important limitation related to the translatability of Spanish into English. As previously described, all interviews from the Spanish sample were translated into English before being coded. However, there are some Spanish words that defy clear translation, including those emerging from regional slang. In those cases, coders had to take context into account while trying to accurately assess meaning, which was at times made more difficult by a
lack of contextual information in parents’ descriptions of desirable and undesirable traits. One notable example is the term “bien educado”, which can be used to denote characteristics like “politeness” that would fall under the social cooperation category, “good social skills” that would fall under social competence, “organized” that would fall under cognitive/motivational skills, “cleanliness” that would fall under physical health/competence, and “honorable” that, depending on context, might fall under spiritual/moral values. Another example is the term “chula”, the meaning of which can range from the positive “pretty” or “cool” to the negative “rude” or “low-class”. Despite our best efforts to ensure accuracy of translation, it is possible our coding failed to interpret the full nuance inherent in the Spanish language.

**Conclusion.** In sum, meaningful differences and similarities emerged in associations between parents’ culture and their ethnotheories of both positive and maladaptive qualities in their children as demonstrated in parents’ responses to a qualitative interview about their young children. These differences and similarities mostly aligned with extant cultural models; others challenged them. Moreover, in both cultures, characteristics specific to both parent and child had unique relationships with the traits parents did and did not desire to see. This study lends support to models of parents’ ethnotheories as complex and nuanced and suggests they may reflect everything from traditional cultural and religious values, to evolving country-specific and global cultural norms, to socio-economic, gender, and age disparities.
Table 2.1

Participant Demographic Information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parent Education (%)</th>
<th>U.S. (N=50)</th>
<th>Spain (N= 42)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nursery school to 8th grade</td>
<td>12</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school graduate, diploma, or the equivalent</td>
<td>50</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trade/technical/vocational training</td>
<td>10</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some college credit, no degree</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Associate’s degree</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor’s degree</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Master’s degree</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional degree</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doctorate degree</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child Age (Mean)</td>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>4.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child Sex (N)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coding category</td>
<td>Definition with examples</td>
<td>Direct quote</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------</td>
<td>--------------------------</td>
<td>--------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive child characteristics</td>
<td>Positive emotional dispositions (e.g., happy, self-confident, relaxed and at ease, psychologically healthy).</td>
<td>Spanish parents: “Feeling good about herself.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Emotional adjustment</td>
<td>Characteristics that reflect a cooperative, benevolent, and receptive attitude toward other people (e.g., kind, caring, empathic, considerate, thoughtful, obedient, polite, courteous, cooperative, gentle, docile, honest, generous, sensitive).</td>
<td>United States parents: “A positive outlook and remaining optimistic.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Social cooperation</td>
<td>Observable behavioral skills that facilitate social interactions (e.g., friendly, good social skills, good sense of humor, has many friends, makes friends easily, greets others appropriately)</td>
<td>Spanish parents: “[My son] is very affectionate, is always hugging and kissing everyone.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Social competence</td>
<td>Cognitive and motivational dispositions that facilitate successful achievement (e.g., good impulse control, intelligent, bright, curious, good concentration, creative, goal-oriented).</td>
<td>United States parents: “Well-mannered when we [are] out in public.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Cognitive/Motivational</td>
<td>Assertive, independent, or energetic, goal-oriented behavior (e.g., self-assertive, active and energetic, autonomous, independent).</td>
<td>Spanish parents: “That [my daughter] be autonomous in all that she sets out do.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Active and independent</td>
<td>Positive physical characteristics (e.g., skilled at sports, physically healthy, athletic, well coordinated, physical dexterity).</td>
<td>United States parents: “[Being able to] express who she is.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### 7. Spiritual/moral values
Believing in and/or acting in accordance with spiritual, religious or moral principles (e.g., concern about the environment, belief in god, religiosity, knowing right from wrong, caring about what is right and just, acknowledging privilege).

**Spanish parents:** “That he knows his values.”

**U.S. parents:** “Caring about what is right or what is just.”

### Positive child characteristics

1. **Aggression/Disruptiveness**
Aggression or other harmful behaviors (e.g., aggressive, cruel (including verbal teasing), tantrums, defiant, destructive, bullying).

**Spanish parents:** “Harming someone, like harming anyone [like] hitting a kid in the park or taking a toy from him.”

**U.S. parents:** “Biting someone else.”

### Negative child characteristics

2. **Insensitivity to others**
Negative attitude/uncooperative toward others (e.g., noncompliant, rude, disrespectful, selfish, dishonest, egocentric, lack of empathy, intolerant of others, stubborn, inconsiderate, unkind, negativistic).

**Spanish parents:** “That [my son] be selfish and not worry about his peers.”

**U.S. parents:** “Excluding other kids.”

3. **Emotional distress**
Negative emotional dispositions (e.g., unhappy, depressed, apathetic, withdrawn, low self-esteem, anxious, fearful, angry, sad).

**Spanish parents:** “I would not like if [my daughter] were a suffer, a sad person.”

**U.S. parents:** “Crying a lot, having temper tantrums.”

4. **Social incompetence**
Deficits in social skills/competence (e.g., poor social skills, tattles, has few friends, shy or withdrawn, cannot greet others appropriately).

**Spanish parents:** “[Having] no close friends.”

**U.S. parents:** “Socially isolated.”

5. **Cognitive motivational difficulties**
Characteristics thought to impede achievement behavior (e.g., passive, lazy, academic failure, poor learning ability, indecisive, impulsive, inattentive).

**Spanish parents:** “I wouldn’t like it if [my daughter] didn’t want to learn, for example, addition, subtraction, that stuff.”

**U.S. parents:** “[Sitting] back and [waiting] for things rather than going out and getting them.”

6. **Physical problems/physical incompetence**
Negative physical characteristics (e.g., prone to illness, physically weak, unathletic, clumsy, specific physical disorders).

**Spanish parents:** “Not being healthy...[like] lacking energy for daily functioning.”
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>7. Lack of Spiritual/Moral principles</th>
<th>Not believing in and/or abiding by legal, spiritual, religious or moral principles (e.g., amorality, does not believe in god, faithlessness, obsessed with money, too materialistic, no moral compass, bad/no values).</th>
<th>U.S. parents: “Eating too many candies.”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
Table 2.3

*Parents’ Responses to General Positive Trait Questions by Culture*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Trait</th>
<th>United States</th>
<th>Spain</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N</td>
<td>M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional adjustment</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>0.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social cooperation</td>
<td></td>
<td>2.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social competence</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cognitive/motivational</td>
<td></td>
<td>1.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Active and independent</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical competence</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spiritual/moral values</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Means and standard deviations emerged from the sum of the number of times parents in each sample identified traits in each category and the number of times each parent identified traits in each category.
Table 2.4

*Parents’ Responses to Most Highly Positive Trait Question by Culture*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>N</th>
<th>United States</th>
<th>Spain</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional adjustment</td>
<td>0.18</td>
<td>0.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social cooperation</td>
<td>0.68</td>
<td>0.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social competence</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>0.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cognitive/motivational</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Active and independent</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>0.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical competence</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spiritual/moral values</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Means and standard deviations emerged from the sum of the number of times parents in each sample identified traits in each category and the number of times each parent identified traits in each category.
Table 2.5

Parents’ Responses to General Negative Trait Questions by Culture

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Trait</th>
<th>United States</th>
<th>Spain</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N=50</td>
<td>N=42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aggression/disruptiveness</td>
<td>1.48</td>
<td>0.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social insensitivity</td>
<td>1.68</td>
<td>1.98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional distress</td>
<td>0.54</td>
<td>0.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social incompetence</td>
<td>0.24</td>
<td>0.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cognitive/motivational difficulties</td>
<td>0.78</td>
<td>0.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical problems</td>
<td>0.14</td>
<td>0.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of spiritual/moral values</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.48</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Means and standard deviations emerged from the sum of the number of times parents in each sample identified traits in each category and the number of times each parent identified traits in each category.
Table 2.6  

*Parents’ Responses to Most Highly Negative Trait Question by Culture*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>N</th>
<th>United States</th>
<th>Spain</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aggression/disruptiveness</td>
<td>0.62</td>
<td>0.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social insensitivity</td>
<td>0.30</td>
<td>0.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional distress</td>
<td>0.14</td>
<td>0.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social incompetence</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cognitive/motivational difficulties</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>0.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical problems</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of spiritual/moral values</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Means and standard deviations emerged from the sum of the number of times parents in each sample identified traits in each category and the number of times each parent identified traits in each category.
Figure 2.1

_Illustration of Procedures to Create Final Coding Schemes_

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step 1: Identified, catalogued, grouped, and named conceptually distinct themes</th>
<th>Step 2: Merged and labeled conceptual groupings into codes within separate schemes/protocols for attributions and positive and negative characteristics</th>
<th>Step 3: Identified, catalogued, grouped, and named conceptually distinct, reoccurring themes that did not fit in original protocols and added to protocols</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Japanese and United States team in the original study*:
- Attributions:
  - Internal states
  - Developmental
  - Temperamental
  - Biological processes
  - Environmental influence (social, physical, social reciprocity)
  - Goal seeking (attention, material gain)
  - Power motives (negative goal, testing limits, testing independence)
- Pos/neg:
  - Positive
    - Emotional adjustment
    - Social cooperation
    - Social competence
    - Cognitive/motivational
    - Active and independent
    - Physical health/competence
  - Negative
    - Aggressiveness/Disruptiveness
    - Insensitive to others
    - Emotional distress
    - Social incompetence
    - Cognitive motivational difficulties
    - Physical problems/physical incompetence

Original coding schemes/protocols:
- Parent attributions coding protocol
- Child positive and negative characteristics coding protocol

Updated Coding Schemes/Protocols

Original coding schemes/protocols:
- Parent attributions coding protocol
- Child positive and negative characteristics coding protocol

Spanish and United States team-generated new codes in the second cross-cultural comparison:
- Attributions:
  - Negative view of the child
- Pos/neg:
  - Positive
    - Spiritual/Moral values
  - Negative
    - Lack of spiritual/Moral values

Malaysian team-generated new codes in the third cross-cultural comparison:
- Attributions:
  - Mental processes
  - Religious or spiritual influences or elements

*Olson, Kashiwagi, & Crystal, 2001
Figure 2.2

*Frequency of Parents’ Responses to General Positive Trait Questions by Culture*

* indicates $p < .050$
Figure 2.3

* Frequency of Parents’ Responses to Most Highly Positive Trait Question by Culture *

* indicates $p < .050$
Figure 2.4

Frequency of Parents’ Responses to General Negative Trait Questions by Culture

* indicates $p < .050$
Figure 2.5

*Frequency of Parents’ Responses to Most Highly Negative Trait Question by Culture*

* indicates $p < .050$
CHAPTER III: Parents’ Attributions for Child Misbehavior and Distress (Study 2)

Parents’ causal attributions for children’s behaviors are essential examples of beliefs that affect child development and vary across cultures (Enlund et al., 2015). Parents’ attributions refer to the cognitive inferences that parents make about the causes of children's behaviors. These causal inferences have been linked with parent's caregiving practices (Murphey, 1992; Park et al., 2018), as well as child conduct problems (Sawrikar & Dadds, 2017; Snyder et al., 2005; Wilson et al., 2006). Focusing on parental discipline, research suggests that negative parental attributions may mediate the relationship between parenting stress and harsh punishment (Beckerman et al., 2017), with negative attributions increasing the likelihood of physical or harsh punishment (Milner, 1993; 2003). For example, if a child refuses to comply with a parent's request, some parents may attribute the child's behavior to negative motives such as "he is just trying to show me who is the boss." Parents’ attributions can also influence children's own attributional patterns. For example, parents' power motive attributions about their children's misbehavior (e.g., believing that the child is behaving negatively in order to manipulate the parent) have been found to predict the later development of hostile attribution bias in their children through mediation via parental disciplinary practices, while controlling for possible third variable effects (Lee et al., 2018).

In sum, the explanations parents provide for their children's behavior are crucial for understanding the parent-child relationship as well as parenting behavior and hold considerable predictive capacities in various domains of development. However, there have been relatively few cross-cultural studies of parents' attributions for negative or distressing child behavior.
Despite this limited empirical research, evidence suggests parental attributions about children's maladaptive behaviors do vary significantly across cultures (e.g., Cheah & Rubin, 2004), in particular, parents' attributions regarding success or failure in caregiving situations (Bornstein et al., 1998; Bornstein et al., 2011). Typically, as we have mentioned, extant research on cross-cultural differences has focused on comparisons of North American and East-Asian parents (e.g., Chiang, Caplovitz & Nunez, 2000), ignoring the subtle differences in parental beliefs within Western and Eastern cultures (Harkness & Super, 2005). The present study was designed to help narrow this gap in the literature by focusing on parents' attributions for child maladaptive behavior in Spain, a country considered to be part of the "West" but with distinct cultural beliefs in comparison with the United States (Harkness & Super, 2006).

**Purpose/Objectives**

The main purpose of this chapter was to compare parents' causal explanations for troubling child behavior between similar samples of Spanish and American parents. To the best of our knowledge, this was the first study to examine Spanish parents' attributions for child maladaptive behavior through an ethnotheoretical lens attuned to cultural differences. Specifically, the semi-structured interview aimed to extract parents' causal attributions in response to a series of hypothetical situations about common maladaptive behaviors in young children.

We developed hypotheses and research questions according to prior research on parents' ethnotheories about maladaptive child behavior. Our first hypothesis was that the United States' cultural emphasis on independence and individualism would be reflected in American parents' attributions for their children's misbehaviors: explicitly, that overall these parents would give
more attributions to internal factors (e.g., internal states, temperament) and power dynamics (e.g., the children testing their independence) than did the Spanish parents. We predicted that American parents would make more internal attributions in response to scenarios involving the child’s internal psychological states, such as the scenarios in which the child manifests withdrawn and depressive behaviors or reports physical symptoms indicative of anxiety. Conversely, we also hypothesized that Spanish parents’ emphasis on socializing their children into culturally-defined good behaviors would be illustrated in relatively more attributions related to external factors (e.g., environmental characteristics, social modeling) compared with their U.S. counterparts. Finally, as a secondary research goal, we examined the effects of gender on parents’ ethnotheories about children's maladaptive behavior due to the insufficient power to test gender as a moderator. Given the aforementioned lack of relevant literature, we tentatively expected that parents from both samples would make more internal attributions for girls’ troubling behaviors than for boys.

Furthermore, we questioned whether there would be interactions between the type of maladaptive problem (i.e., externalizing versus internalizing) and parents' cultural backgrounds. Based on the importance of socializing independence and self-regulation in the United States, we hypothesized that American parents would make more power attributions and attributions to child internal states in externalizing scenarios than they did in response to internalizing scenarios. We also predicted that American parents would make more attributions to normal development, biological factors, and attention/material seeking in internalizing scenarios than they did in externalizing scenarios. Similarly, based on the importance of socializing children to be good citizens in Spanish culture, we hypothesized that Spanish parents would make more social modeling attributions in externalizing problem scenarios than they did in internalizing
scenarios. On the other hand, we predicted that Spanish parents would make more attributions to the children's internal states in internalizing scenarios than they did when explaining externalizing situations.

**Methods**

**Participants.** Participants were 101 parents, including 76 mothers and 20 fathers of children aged 3-7 years \((M = 4.6, SD = 0.98)\) including every parent from both samples included in Study 1 plus 9 additional Spanish parents. About 7% of parents did not complete a high school education, 25% parents completed a high school education, and 32% of parents completed a master’s degree or the equivalent; 59% of parents worked full-time (i.e., 40 hours per week). Out of the total pool of (101) total participants, (50) were recruited in Ann Arbor, Michigan, United States, and (51) in Elche, Spain. The U.S. sample included 42 mothers and 8 fathers, while the Spanish sample included 34 mothers and 12 fathers (with 5 parents not reporting gender). A Pearson Chi-Square test revealed that parent gender differences were not significant \((\chi^2 = 1.48, p = .224)\). Children in the American sample were an average of 4.39 years-old, on average \((SD = 0.83)\), as compared children in the Spanish sample, who were 4.95 years-old, on average \((SD = 1.06)\). According to a One-Way ANOVA, the difference between average child age was significant \((F = 8.12, p = .002)\). A Pearson Chi-Square test revealed a significant difference between samples on parents’ education \((\chi^2 = 64.40, df = 8, p < .001)\), with American parents were more likely to be highly educated compared to Spanish parents. A Pearson Chi-Square test revealed no significant difference between samples in terms of their employment status \((\chi^2 = 5.65, df = 5, p = .257)\).

Both Ann Arbor and Elche are university towns and have similar populations in terms of
socio-economic status and parents’ level of education. Spanish parents were recruited with the help of local schools and our partner research team, and American parents were recruited through electronic and hard copy fliers distributed at preschools, daycares, and libraries, as well as via postings local parent groups on Facebook and other social media and emails to parent- and family-oriented listservs. The samples were matched according to child age and parent gender. Participants in both samples were primarily of European descent and of middle-class socioeconomic status.

**Materials and Procedures**

**Interview.** We used the second part of the same semi-structured interview (see Appendix A.1) to assess parents’ attributions for child misbehavior and distress. The second part of our interview contains 11 vignettes that illustrate common behavioral concerns. Some vignettes concerning noncompliant and aggressive behaviors were developed and tested in earlier studies of Chinese, Japanese, and U.S. preschoolers; to these we added new vignettes that captured a wider range of potential problem behaviors. Parents were told: “Now, I’m going to describe some situations involving young children and their parents. I’d like you to imagine that each situation is happening to you. Then tell me what you might say or do in response.” The first story involves a situation where the child behaves aggressively to a peer: “Suppose (child’s name) wants a toy that a friend is playing with. The friend will not share it. Your child hits the friend and grabs the toy. What would you say or do?” After the parent describes his/her/their strategies for handling this situation, he/she/they is asked 4 follow-up questions: 1) Why would you do that? 2) Why do you think your child would hit another in this situation? 3) How upset would you feel if (child’s name) behaved this way (hit a playmate to obtain a toy; 1=not at all upset and 5=extremely upset)? And, 4) In a similar situation, how often has (child’s name)
behaved like that (1= never and 5= always)? The following hypothetical scenarios are structured identically, and contain stories about reactive aggression to a bullying peer, noncompliance with the parents’ request to clean up toys, angry aggressive behavior toward the parent, food refusal, disruptive behavior in a public place, socially withdrawn behavior with peers, generalized fears, generalized sadness, emotional distress following parental limits-setting, and chronic physical complaints without underlying medical causes (see Appendix A.1). In order to end on a positive note, the interviewer asked one final question following the parent’s response to the last hypothetical scenario: “What brings you joy about parenting [your child]?” The interview required approximately 30 minutes to complete.

Data Analyses

Reliability. We ensured the applicability of existing codes for the new U.S. and Spanish samples by continuing to revise the codes as needed in response to parents’ responses to our interview questions. For example, addressing previously uncodable parent responses in our new U.S. sample, we added the category of “Negative View of the Child” to represent parents’ attributions for child behavior rooted in the belief that their child or children more broadly are inherently malevolent (“kids are just bad”) or poorly behaved (“my son can be evil”) (see Appendix C for Parent Attributions Coding Scheme with additional examples).

Parents’ attributions. Parents’ attributions were coded by graduate students and research assistants into 16 different categories developed through content analyses of 240 protocols from U.S. parents of preschool-age children and updated through our research with samples of parents from the U.S., Japan, Spain, and Malaysia (see Figure 2.1: Illustration of Procedures to Create Final Coding Schemes) by combining individual attributions with
conceptual similarities and creating summary indices for later data analysis (see Lee et al., 2019 for more details). The categories were: “Negative Internal State” (attributing child behavior to a negative emotional state; e.g., “He was bored”), “Positive Internal State” (attributing child behavior to positive internal state; e.g., “She’s happy and excited”), “Mental Processes” (attributing child behavior to a psychologically-related process; e.g., “Maybe something psychological”), “Temperament” (attributing child behavior to stable individual attributes; e.g., “Because he has a shy personality”), “Social Modeling” (attributing child behavior to social learning or modeling; e.g., “He sees us and learns from us”), “Environment” (attributing child behavior to features of the environment; e.g., “She got distracted because of the TV”), “Reciprocal” (attributing child behavior to social reciprocity; e.g., “His brother was teasing him and he reacted”), “Religious or Spiritual Influence” (attributing child behavior to religious or spiritual elements; e.g., “The devil made her do it”), “Parent Manipulation” (attributing child behavior to negative goal to manipulate parent; e.g., “She was manipulating me to give her different food”), “Peer Manipulation” (attributing child behavior to negative goal to manipulate peer(s); e.g., “He wants to control how they all play together”), “Testing Limits” (attributing child behavior to limit testing; e.g., “He tries to test his limits”), “Testing Independence” (attributing child behavior to child’s independence; e.g., “He did not want to stop playing”), “Attention Seeking” (attributing child behavior to attention seeking; e.g., “She wants my attention”), “Material Gain” (attributing child behavior to wanting something physical/material; e.g., “He wanted something from the store”), “Biological” (attributing child behavior to biological processes of which the child has no control; e.g., “It just must be his clinical brain chemistry”), “Gender” (attributing child behavior to gender; e.g., “This is just what boys do”), and “Developmental” (attributing child behavior to immature development and lack of cognitive
skills; e.g., “That is how kids her age act”), and, finally, “Negative View of Children” (Parent makes negative statement about nature of children in general; e.g., “Children are just bad”).

For each code, a “1” was coded if the attribution was present, and a “0” if it was not. More than one code could be given to an individual response, since parents often used more than one attribution in their responses to the interview scenarios. For instance, “Kid is mean at school or excluding her. She feels like I don’t have time to play,” would be assigned “1”s for both Social and Attention Seeking, and a “0” for all other attributions. Proportional scores were calculated by dividing the parent’s total responses by the number of responses provided for each situation/vignette. Inter-coder reliability for the United States sample was .86 (based on the first 40% of the sample of interviews collected), and inter-coder reliability for the Spanish sample was .84 (based on the first 40% of the sample of interviews collected).

Once data were collected and coded, the codes were composited into eleven theoretically-derived constructs of parental attributions: a) child internal (i.e., attributing child behavior to internal state; sum of Negative Internal, Positive Internal, and Mental Processes), b) social learning (i.e., attributing child behavior to social learning; sum of Social, Environment, and Reciprocal), c) power motives (i.e., attributing child behavior to intentionality; sum of Parent Manipulation, Testing Limits, Peer Manipulation, and Testing Independence), d) developmental (i.e., attributing child behavior to immature development; Developmental), e) temperament (i.e., attributing child behavior to stable individual characteristics; Temperament), f) attention seeking (i.e., attributing child behavior to attention seeking; Attention Seeking), g) material gain (i.e., attribution child behavior to wanting something physical/material; Material Gain), h) biological (i.e. attributing child behavior to biological processes of which the child has no control), i) supernatural (i.e., attributing child behavior to spiritual causes or elements), j) gender (i.e.,
attributing child behavior to gender), and k) negative view of children (i.e., attributing child behavior to parents’ negative beliefs about children in general).

Each participant was given a total score for each of the eight composited categories. This score included the sum of the proportional number of attributions that each parent produced for each of the eight categories across the five situation vignettes, which reflected the parents’ tendency to explain their child’s behavior in a certain way. We compared parents’ causal attributions in response to different types of child misbehavior and distress by first computing descriptive statistics for parental attributions by summing parents’ responses across vignettes according to the relative frequency with which they endorsed each of the attributions described above as part of our coding system for each cultural group separately. We then computed separate descriptive statistics for internalizing and externalizing scenarios for each cultural group separately. Next, we conducted a two-way (Culture) X (Child Gender) MANCOVA with attributions in response to internalizing scenarios to examine whether attributions varied significantly according to parent culture and/or child gender before doing the same with attributions in response to externalizing scenarios.

Descriptive analyses. Descriptive statistics also were calculated for internalizing and externalizing scenarios separately (See Table 3.2 for U.S. parents’ externalizing and Table 3.4 for their internalizing, and Table 3.3 for Spanish parents’ externalizing and Table 3.5 for their internalizing; please note that all tables and figures include overall means vs. the means after controlling for the effects of the covariates of parent education and child age that are reported in the text). Overall, parents from the U.S. mostly made attributions to children’s internal states, such as fleeting negative emotions, and to social learning factors, such as social modeling. Attributions to power motives and developmental processes also were high. Similarly, Spanish
parents made frequent attributions to social learning motives and to children’s emotional states. Attributions to developmental processes were also common.

**Externalizing Scenarios**

A 2 (Parent Culture) by 2 (Child Gender) MANCOVA revealed a significant main effect of culture, Pillai’s trace = .40, \(F(8, 78) = 6.10, p < .001, \eta^2_p = .397\). Post-hoc analyses revealed significant differences in attributions between U.S. and Spanish parents (See Figure 3.1). Our hypotheses that American parents would make more attributions to children’s internal states and power motives than Spanish parents also were supported. Specifically, American parents made more attributions to children’s internal states than Spanish parents (\(F = 7.63, p = .007, \eta^2_p = .086, M_{\text{U.S.}} = 1.51, M_{\text{Spain}} = 0.82\)). American parents also made more attributions to children’s power motives than Spanish parents (\(F = 6.60, p = .012, \eta^2_p = .075, M_{\text{U.S.}} = 1.31, M_{\text{Spain}} = 0.72\)). Our hypothesis that Spanish parents would make more attributions to social learning factors than U.S. parents was not supported. Contrary to our hypothesis, American parents also made more attributions to social learning factors than Spanish parents (\(F = 6.76, p = .011, \eta^2_p = .077, M_{\text{U.S.}} = 1.64, M_{\text{Spain}} = 0.87\)).

Spanish parents made more attributions to attention-seeking than U.S. parents (\(F = 6.91, p = .010, \eta^2_p = .079, M_{\text{U.S.}} = 0.02, M_{\text{Spain}} = 0.22\)). Spanish parents also made more attributions to children wanting material gains than U.S. parents (\(F = 5.50, p = .021, \eta^2_p = .064, M_{\text{U.S.}} = 0.24, M_{\text{Spain}} = 0.61\)).

There was no significant effect of child gender, Pillai’s trace = .05, \(F(8, 78) = 0.46, p = .881, \eta^2_p = .047\). Finally, there was no significant Parent Culture x Child Gender interaction effect, Pillai’s trace = .07, \(F(8, 78) = 0.74, p = .653, \eta^2_p = .074\).
Parents’ education and children’s age were covariates in the model. There was a significant effect of parents’ education, Pillai’s trace = .20, $F(8, 78) = 2.38, p = .025, \eta^2_p = .204$; but there was not a significant effect of children’s age, Pillai’s trace = .12, $F(8, 78) = 1.29, p = .262, \eta^2_p = .122$.

Post-hoc analyses were conducted on differences in attributions between parent culture and child gender. Post-hoc analyses revealed that parents from the U.S. made significantly more attributions to social learning factors than Spanish parents for boys ($F = 8.87, M_{U.S.} = 1.86, M_{Spain} = 0.68, p = .004$), but there were no significant differences for girls ($F = 1.21, M_{U.S.} = 1.42, M_{Spain} = 1.06, p = .274$). U.S. parents made more attributions around child internal states for girls than Spanish parents ($F = 9.51, M_{U.S.} = 1.71, M_{Spain} = 0.85, p = .003$), but there were no significant differences for boys ($F = 2.53, M_{U.S.} = 1.32, M_{Spain} = 0.78, p = .115$). Spanish parents made more attributions to material gains for boys than parents from the U.S. ($F = 4.46, M_{U.S.} = 0.19, M_{Spain} = 0.63, p = .038$), but there were no differences for girls ($F = 2.86, M_{U.S.} = 0.30, M_{Spain} = 0.59, p = .095$). Similarly, Spanish parents made more attributions to attention-seeking for girls than parents from the U.S. ($F = 7.94, M_{U.S.} = 0.02, M_{Spain} = 0.26, p = .006$), but there were no differences for boys ($F = 2.59, M_{U.S.} = 0.02, M_{Spain} = 0.18, p = .111$).

**Internalizing Scenarios**

A 2 (Parent Culture) by 2 (Child Gender) MANCOVA revealed no significant main effect of culture, Pillai’s trace = .132, $F(8, 74) = 1.41, p = .207, \eta^2_p = .132$; and no significant main effect of child gender, Pillai’s trace = .13, $F(8, 74) = 1.38, p = .218, \eta^2_p = .130$. Post-hoc analyses revealed that parents made more attributions about material gains for boys compared to girls ($F = 5.27, p = .024, \eta^2_p = .061, M_{Boys} = 0.06, M_{Girls} = 0.00$). There was no significant effect of parent education, Pillai’s trace = .10, $F(8, 74) = 1.07, p = .381, \eta^2_p = .105$, and no significant
effect of children’s age, Pillai’s trace = .11, $F(8, 74) = 1.10, p = .391, \eta^2_p = .105$; the two covariates. Finally, there was no significant Parent Culture x Child Gender interaction effect, Pillai’s trace = .09, $F(8, 74) = 0.88, p = .536, \eta^2_p = .087$. Thus, our hypotheses about differences in attributions by parents’ culture were not supported (See Figure 3.2).

Post-hoc analyses revealed one significant difference in Spanish parents’ attributions between boys and girls. Specifically, Spanish parents made more attributions to material gain for boys versus girls ($F = 6.25, M_{Girls} = 0.00, M_{Boys} = 0.11, p = .014$).

**Discussion**

The present study investigated potential differences and similarities in parents’ ethnotheories, or distinct cultural beliefs about children’s appropriate development, by interviewing U.S. and Spanish parents about their attributions in response to hypothetical situations describing common forms of misbehavior and emotional distress in young children. Previous research on parents’ ethnotheories has revealed cultural differences in parents’ beliefs about the nature and causes of children’s misbehaviors. Specifically, previous studies of parental beliefs in Spain have highlighted the importance of socialization (Harkness et al., 2011) and adaptability (Super et al., 2008), while parents in the U.S. has been found to emphasize the development of independence and assertiveness in their children (Harkness et al., 2011). Despite evidence of meaningful differences in parents’ ethnotheories of maladaptive behavior, related research has been sparse and research specific to attributions for these behaviors has been non-existent. We addressed this gap in the literature by using hypothetical vignettes to examine the ways in which parents in Spain and the U.S. explained common forms of behavioral challenges and emotional distress in young children. Importantly, unlike other cross-national studies of
parents’ attributions, we gave parents the opportunity to compose their own explanations of children’s behaviors as opposed to asking them to choose between predetermined categories of meaning. We relied on this unique methodology to examine how parents in different cultures make sense of children’s maladaptive behaviors and distress, and whether these explanations differed according to nature of the behavior (aggression or disruptive vs. anxious or dysphoric behaviors).

**Cultural Differences**

**Externalizing scenarios.** Our initial hypothesis that American parents would make more attributions to internal states and power attributions in response to hypothetical child externalizing behaviors compared to Spanish parents was supported. Specifically, in the scenarios depicting aggressive and disruptive behaviors, American parents made more attributions to children’s immediate positive and negative internal emotions and children’s goals around power than did Spanish parents. For example, in response to the vignette about the child refusing to stop playing and clean up his or her toys, many American parents tended to offer internally focused explanations like “she is mad” or “she feels overwhelmed by the task being too big,” as well as those related to the child’s quest for autonomy, such as “she does not want to stop [playing].” These findings align with previous research showing that American parents value assertiveness and independence in their children (e.g., Harkness et al., 2011). In other words, these parents may tend to emphasize internal causes of their children’s misbehavior and thereby distinguish the child as an individual with their own emotional motives separate from other people and the environment at large. It is interesting that American parents tended to explain their children’s externalizing behaviors with a focus on fleeting negative emotional states vs. enduring developmental issues or temperamental traits: perhaps, this relates to the age of the
child, i.e., that it more difficult to make assumptions about more enduring characteristics with children this young. Moreover, American parents attributed children’s externalizing behaviors to power goals. This finding aligns with previous research that shows American parents interpret children’s misbehaviors as their children attempting to assert their independence, highlighting the cultural salience of independence in U.S. culture (Harkness et al., 2011). In sum, American parents highlighted transient emotional states, power motives, and social modeling as the causes of their children’s externalizing behaviors.

Our hypothesis that Spanish parents would make more attributions to children’s social environment compared to American parents was supported, although both samples of parents demonstrated a preference for this attribution. In particular, many Spanish and American parents attributed children’s aggressive behavior to social modeling from peers or siblings. For example, one American parent explained that her son might hit a peer because “he sees other kids behaving that way,” while a Spanish parent hypothesized that her son might do the same because “that behavior is modeled in [the] house.” Although unanticipated, Spanish parents made more attributions to attention seeking and material gain for externalizing scenarios than did American parents. Results suggest that some Spanish parents may interpret their children’s aggressive and disruptive behaviors as signs that the child is seeking attention from them or that the child has unmet material needs. This finding aligns with the emphasis on manageability in Spanish culture (Super et al., 2008). Specifically, Spanish parents may interpret children’s misbehaviors as signs that parents need to respond by meeting children’s needs for parental attention or other material comfort: in other words, the result of manageable needs rather than products of children’s inner states or external environment. Moreover, Spanish parents may be subject to a similar socio-cultural influence on their beliefs about their children, including the dominant narrative about
disruptive attention-seeking behavior. Helpfully summarized by Dr. Kayla R. Waters, “the phrase hungry-for-attention is in widespread use in popular Western culture as a metaphor for negative attention-seeking behaviour, but it can be reconstructed as a transcendent narrative instead” (Waters, 2011, p. 213). In other words, while every parent has a unique story about their children, “all narratives are inextricably woven through with threads of the larger socio-cultural environment (Waters, 2001, p. 209).”

Overall, these similarities and differences between cultural groups illustrate parents’ ethnotheories about the causes of children’s externalizing behaviors. Specifically, American parents interpreted aggressive and disruptive behaviors as reflections of children reacting to negative emotional states, to troubling social dynamics, or to their desire for individual self-expression, highlighting children’s independence and assertiveness but also the power of negative social modeling. Conversely, Spanish parents tended to explain children’s aggressive and disruptive behaviors as stemming from unmet needs for attention or material comfort, highlighting children’s management.

**Internalizing scenarios.** Contrary to our hypotheses, we observed no significant differences between Spanish and American parents in terms of their attributions about children’s withdrawn, anxious, and dysphoric behaviors. In other words, both groups of parents understood these behaviors in similar ways, attributing withdrawn and fearful behaviors to children’s negative internal states and troublesome aspects of the social environment, thus highlighting cultural commonalities in their theories of common internalizing behaviors. It may be that attributing these behaviors to temporary emotional states and social environments allowed parents to understand these behaviors as impermanent or changeable. In these scenarios depicting anxious, withdrawn, and dysphoric behaviors from children, parents’ tendencies to
attribute their children’s distress to internal states might be a way to emphasize internal causes of their children’s behavior, and thus, highlight the child as an individual with his/her own emotional motives. For example, in the hypothetical scenario in which the child does not wish to play with other children, some American and Spanish parents identified their children’s own desires as the motivation for this behavior (“he just didn’t feel like playing”; “she wanted to rest”). Importantly, these internal causes were limited to transitory emotions and not temperament. This may indicate that parents of young children were more comfortable making assumptions about mutable factors like emotion states and changing environments of daily life than they were with assigning temperamental characteristics to children so early in their development. This interpretation is supported by Super and colleagues’ recent study of the so-called “difficult child” that contents that “[parent’s perceptions of children’s] “fit” with the environment of daily life is a more accurate and useful focus of analysis than is an absolutist notion of “difficulty” as a trait (Super et al., 2020, p. 63).” Results also aligned with extant research like a study of socialization beliefs about toddler’s friendships among Dominican, Mexican, and African American mothers that found that these mothers held beliefs related to friendships that targeted emotion-related function: specifically, that mothers viewed their children’s attitudes and behaviors as subject to both positive and negative influence from friends (Kuchirko et al., 2022). Findings like these suggest that parents may view children’s internal states and social relationships as closely related and perhaps even inextricable. Overall, the similarity between cultural groups illustrates parents’ commonly-held ethnotheories about the causes of children’s internalizing behaviors.

**Child gender.** While there were no main effects of child gender for parents’ attributions in response to internalizing or externalizing behaviors, post-hoc analyses revealed significant
interactions between cultural background and child gender for externalizing scenarios that aligned with previous findings on cultural differences. Specifically, American parents made more attributions to social environmental factors for boys and more attributions to internal states for girls than did Spanish parents. When boys demonstrated aggressive and disruptive behaviors, American parents tended to attribute these behaviors to troublesome aspects of the social environment, like negative influence from peers; however, American parents tended to attribute these same behaviors in girls to negative internal states, like sadness or anger. These varied interpretations may relate to a previously observed greater comfort in discussing negative emotionality, and emotions more generally, with respect to girls vs. boys. For example, research exploring a developmental bio-psycho-social model of gender differences in children’s emotion expression suggests gender-related display rules: for example, that girls are expected to display greater levels of most emotions than are boys (Chaplin, 2015). An important caveat is that, because the majority of related research has been focused exclusively on White middle-class children, there is limited data on the effects of culture and related factors like ethnicity and SES on gender differences in observed emotion expression (Chaplin, 2015).

Spanish parents made more attributions related to attention seeking for girls and more material gain attributions for boys than did American parents. In other words, Spanish parents tended to believe that internalizing responses in boys resulted from boys’ desire for something material like a toy and the same behavior in girls as indicative of girls’ desire for attention from caregivers. These findings align with identified traditional Spanish beliefs about gender according to which girls are viewed as closely attached the family unit as compared to boys, who are allowed a greater sense of independence. An important caveat is that this finding was based on a study of Spanish adults in caregiving roles (Brea et al., 2016) as opposed to children, as is
the case in the present study. Furthermore, these traditionally-ascribed gender-based roles may be shifting as Spanish women continue to establish their independence in society in the years following the end of the Spanish dictatorship under Francisco Franco that lasted for almost four decades and meant that women as a whole were denied autonomy and confined to the domestic sphere (Camps, 1994; Toledano-Sierra et al., 2020).

Finally, emergent significant cultural differences for externalizing but not internalizing behaviors suggest that parents’ causal attributions for children’s maladaptive behaviors vary according to the type of problem. In other words, parents appeared to differently conceptualize various forms of misbehaviors and distress. This finding validates the use of a broad range of vignettes that describe different types of misbehaviors and supports the inclusion of this methodological feature in future studies.

**Implications.** Parents’ ethnotheories have emerged as relevant to everything from how parents interpret their children’s behaviors (Keller et al., 2006) to their socialization and developmental goals for their children (Harkness et al., 2008) to how they parent (Beckerman et al., 2017). Here we rely on extant research to argue that parental attributions for child misbehavior would align with culturally-defined values: for example, that Spanish parents might endorse attributions related to the social sphere in line with their culture’s focus on the role of the child in the larger context of family and community, while American parents’ emphases on their children’s internal states, power motives, and problematic social environments might prompt these parents to teach their children to put their needs ahead of the needs of the group, particularly when parents perceive that a social dynamic is negatively impacting their children. Thus, the way in which parents explain the causes of their children’s misbehaviors might be important in maintaining culturally-specific values and beliefs.
Turning to clinical practices related to parenting and families, these findings might carry meaningful implications for culturally-informed interventions – specifically those geared towards parents of young children. In particular, given the observed lack of significant differences across Spanish and American parents with respect to attributions around internalizing behaviors, interventions like family therapy and parent training that target these behaviors and have been shown to be efficacious in the United States might be easily applied in Spain. However, accounting for observed difference in these samples of parents’ attributional styles in response to externalizing behaviors, interventions targeting those behaviors might necessitate a focal shift from an emphasis on improving emotion regulation and developing child independence/autonomy, which may be uniquely effective for American parents, to highlighting children’s unmet needs and improving relationships, which may resonant more with Spanish parents. In sum, this research highlights the need for an emic understanding of parenting across cultures including enhancing knowledge about the process and mechanisms that characterize parents’ strategies, including, crucially, the forms of discipline they employ (Bibbs et al., 2018) in response to children’s misbehavior and distress.

**Limitations and future directions.** Many of the limitations of this study are identical to those related to Study One, including the reliance on small, homogenous samples of parents. Another limitation is the exclusive focus on parents of young children. It is easy to imagine that parents’ attributions for child behavior might change as children grow older, with their theories of children’s maladaptive behaviors evolving as their children progress in school, near puberty, and continue to develop more independence and relationships outside of the family. A natural extension of this research would be to examine parents’ attributions for their children’s maladaptive behaviors in other child age groups.
One limitation unique to this study is that parents responded to hypothetical scenarios vs. situations they had experienced relative to their children. During interviews, parents often commented that their children either had or would never behave in the manner described. Attributions may differ for problematic situations that parents identify themselves: this is an area worthy of exploration. Another limitation is this study’s exclusive focus on parents’ attributions for children’s misbehaviors and distress or failure to examine attributions for desirable behaviors and successful development. This emerges in contrast to Study One, in which we explore parents’ beliefs about both desirable and maladaptive traits. Here, we only prompted parents to respond to hypothetical child misbehavior and distress despite prior ethnotheories research demonstrating the relevance of parents’ attributions for a broad range of child behaviors, including desirable behaviors, like successfully meeting a developmental expectation or norm, to child socialization and development (e.g., Park, Johnston, Colalillo & Williamson, 2018). Therefore, future studies should explore cross-cultural differences in parent’s attributions in response to a fuller spectrum of child behaviors, including simultaneously those identified as maladaptive and desirable or indicative of positive development. We might reasonably expect that adaptive behaviors and positive emotional states would prompt different attributions than do negative child behaviors and distress, and might similarly differ cross-culturally.

Future studies should also explore possible cross-cultural differences in the relationships between parents’ attributions, parent’s emotional responses to child behaviors, parental disciplinary strategies, and children’s outcomes given the aforementioned relationship between these variables given extant research revealing that types of attributions parents make can predict the disciplinary strategies that parents use in response to undesired child behavior – for example, that parental attributions that place blame on the child have been found to be
predictive of harsh discipline (Jacobs et al., 2017), while harsher disciplinary strategies have been shown to predict increased children’s aggression and withdrawal and decreased in compliance (Gershoff, 2013).

**Conclusions.** In conclusion, American parents made more attributions to children’s internal states, social environmental influences, and power motives than did Spanish parents, while Spanish parents make more attributions to attention seeking and material gains than did American parents, in response to hypothetical child externalizing behaviors. There were no cross-cultural differences in parents’ attributions for child internalizing behaviors. Taken together, noted differences as well as the lack thereof highlight the importance of evaluating the specific kind maladaptive behavior – for example, where a child is behaving aggressively or withdrawing from others – in the study of cross-cultural similarities and differences in parents’ attributions. Observed differences in parents’ explanatory styles may reflect and maintain broader cultural differences between Spain and the United States, although it is difficult to be certain given the dearth of related research and underscores the need for further cross-cultural research focused on parents’ attributions. Certainly, this study contributes to the growing literature on the relevance of parents’ ethnotheories of child development in its novel focus on the previously underexplored topic of parental attributions regarding maladaptive and distressing child behaviors.
### Table 3.1

**Parent Attributions for Child Behavior Coding Scheme**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Coding category</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Direct quote</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Child internal (NINT, PINT, MENT)</td>
<td>Misbehavior linked to negative or positive internal emotional states, or mental processes. E.g., anger, excitement, frustration. Negative/positive sub-code for internal states.</td>
<td>Spanish parents: “[My son] is jealous of his little brother.” United States parents: “[My daughter] feels angry.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social learning</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Misbehavior linked to modeling and social learning (SOC)</td>
<td>1. SOC has to do with SOCIAL environment. 2. ENV has to do with PHYSICAL environment. 3. RECIP has to do with responses to negative behavior on an individual level.</td>
<td>1. Spanish parents: “[My son] sees that (his siblings) don’t it, so he doesn’t either.” U.S. parents: “[My son is] with a new group of kids.” 2. Spanish parents: “[My daughter] is enclosed in her school for too long and has to let go of that energy latter.” U.S. parents: “[My son does not like] how the socks feel.” 3. Spanish parents: “The other kid’s inability to hear reason leaves [my daughter] with no other choice but to resort to violence.” U.S. parents: “[Kicking] is a natural reaction to being kicked.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Misbehavior linked to characteristics of the environment (ENV)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Misbehavior linked to social reciprocity (RECIP)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Power motives</td>
<td>1. POWD has a negative/antisocial valence. 2. POWLIM has to do with the child’s more normative desire for control.</td>
<td>1. Spanish parents: “[My child] wanted to dominate me a bit.” U.S. parents: “[My daughter tries] to get a rise out of her sister because she likes the power.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Category</td>
<td>Description</td>
<td>Example (Spanish parent)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developmental (DEV)</td>
<td>Misbehavior linked to immature development, lack of cognitive skills</td>
<td>Spanish parents: “[That is] a typical fear of kids.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(language, conflict resolution skills)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Temperament (TEMP)</td>
<td>Misbehavior linked to individual stable characteristic of child, such as stubbornness, etc.</td>
<td>Spanish parents: “[My son] has a shy personality.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attention seeking (ATT)</td>
<td>ATT has to do with focus on and/or time spent with the child.</td>
<td>Spanish parents: “[My son wants [his mother] to always be paying attention to him.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Material gain (MAT)</td>
<td>MAT has to do with the child wanting something physical and/or material.</td>
<td>Spanish parents: “[My daughter] wants ice cream, among other things.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biological processes (BIOP)</td>
<td>Misbehavior linked to biological process going on internal to child of which the child has no control, sometimes double coded with developmental.</td>
<td>Spanish parents: “[There is] some problem with somitization.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Category</td>
<td>Misbehavior Description</td>
<td>Spanish parents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supernatural (SUP)</td>
<td>Misbehavior linked to spiritual influences or elements.</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender (GEN)</td>
<td>Misbehavior linked to gender of the child.</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative view of children (NVC)</td>
<td>Parent makes negative statement about nature of children in general.</td>
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Table 3.2

* indicates $p < .050$

Descriptive Statistics for U.S. Parents Across All Externalizing Scenarios

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* indicates $p < .050$
Table 3.3

Descriptive Statistics for Spanish Parents Across All Externalizing Scenarios

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* indicates $p < .050$
Table 3.4

Descriptive Statistics for U.S. Parents Across All Internalizing Scenarios

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* indicates p < .050
Table 3.5

Descriptive Statistics for Spanish Parents Across All Internalizing Scenarios

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* indicates p < .050
Figure 3.1

Attributions for Externalizing Scenarios

* indicates $p < .050$
Figure 3.2

Attributions for Internalizing Scenarios

[Bar chart showing attribution levels for different scenarios and groups, labeled US Parents and Spanish Parents.]
CHAPTER IV: Summary and Conclusions

Culture influences the ways in which parents understand and speak about their children (Coppens et. al, 2020; Harkness & Super, 2006; Harkness & Super, 1996), with nuanced discrepancies evident even between parents in countries within the same hemisphere or traditionally defined by similar value systems (Kuchirko, 2022; Super et al., 2020). Super and Harkness (1986) conceptualized ethnotheories as parents’ culturally oriented understandings of their children. The ethnotheories literature represents an evidenced-based, culturally valid conceptualization of parental beliefs; however, historical cultural differences are not sufficient to explain the different ideas parents hold about their children nor the explanations they offer for child behavior (Liu et al., 2021; Olson et al., 2019). This goal of this dissertation was to examine the relationship between culture and the traits that parents hoped to see in their children, the characteristics these parents deemed undesirable, and the attributions they made for child maladaptive behavior and emotional distress. Identified qualities and explanations offer a window into the broader differences among parental ethnotheories worldwide – in this case, between parents in the United States and Spain. Furthermore, we explored the relationship between parental education level, child age, and child gender and parents’ beliefs. Overall, we found meaningful differences and similarities between the two samples suggestive of a larger cultural divide bridged by some agreement in the ethnotheories parents hold about their children. We also observed the relationship between culture and beliefs varied significantly depending on factors unique to the parent and the child. These findings suggest that comparisons across vastly distinct regions of the world do not capture the breadth of meaningful ethnotheoretical
differences, nor is it sufficient to take person-specific characteristics into account, as it is the interaction between culture and these other factors that more fully explains parental beliefs. These observations have important implications for our understanding of how parents conceptualize both adaptive and maladaptive traits and behaviors and offer possible explanations for similarities and differences across cultures.

**Study 1** examined the relationship between culture and American and Spanish parents’ concepts of positive and negative traits in young children. Ethnotheories have been evaluated with a singular focus on desirable or positive child characteristics – for example, prosocial behaviors of children in Kenya (de Guzman et al., 2005; Edwards & Whiting, 2004) or successful performance in a school setting (Feng et al., 2020). This study was developed in response to a dearth of cross-cultural research specific to parents’ ethnotheories of both desirable and undesirable traits and characteristics despite extant related literature suggesting meaningful points of similarity and difference relative to both extremes of parents’ ethnotheories of child development. For example, American parents have been found to value children’s active and independent qualities (Coopens, 2020), cognitive skills (Feng et al., 2020), and engagement with family and community life (Coopens, 2020). Spanish parents similarly have been shown to emphasize children’s positive interpersonal traits like politeness while also highlighting a broader prioritization of “good character”, which seemingly orients their children as moral beings. Both groups of parents have been shown to devalue a lack of social skills (Feng et al., 2020). Notably, none of the previous research exploring parents’ concepts of positive and maladaptive traits in their children has prompted parents to identify those traits that are most/least desirable, thereby failing to highlight the ways in which cultures that name similar traits may potentially differentially prioritize those qualities they idealize or devalue. We sought
to fill this gap in asking parents to select a single favored (and disfavored) trait after generating five negative and five positive characteristics.

Data emerged from the first part of our emically-derived interview developed over the course of almost two decades that elicited parents’ “free” responses to open ended questions about characteristics they valued most and least. These responses were coded according to an existing protocol that was modified to accommodate the full spectrum of parents-identified child characteristics. The results of our analyses confirmed some of our initial hypotheses about cultural variability, revealing significant differences in parental beliefs about child behavior consistent with and divergent from the aforementioned research comparing Spanish and American values surrounding parenting and the family. In particular, findings highlighted a shared prioritization of social cooperation and concern regarding social insensitivity while underscoring American parents’ emphasis on positive active and independent traits and problematic traits and behaviors associated with aggression and disruptiveness, and Spanish parents’ focus on spiritual/moral values (and a lack thereof), as well as a shared idealization of children’s development of cognitive/motivational skills facilitative of school success in the short term and professional success in the long term.

This qualitative study provided evidence for distinct ethnotheories of desired and maladaptive traits and characteristics in young children that varied along cultural lines while simultaneously highlighting key areas of shared beliefs and common developmental goals. It also suggested that a complete understanding of parents’ goals for their children demands that research include both positive and negative traits rather than assuming the traits parents want to see will be the opposite of those they do not. Moreover, examining the ways in which parents idealize and worry about child development has the potential to deepen knowledge relative to
meaningful connections between parents’ developmental goals for their children and their emotional reactions to child behavior, parenting styles, and disciplinary strategies. Extant research has already observed relationships between parents’ socialization goals and child-rearing practices (Rao et. al, 2003), child self-regulation and arousal (Harkness et al., 2007), children’s development of competencies (Pearson & Rao, 2003; Rubin et al., 1989), prosocial (Mesurado et al., 2014) and preventive health behaviors (Lees & Tinsley, 1998), and substance abuse (Martínez et al., 2013). Research has also suggested that ethnotheories may matter most for vulnerable populations: for example, in the context of the relationship between culture, what parents value, how they structure their children’s time, and how this in turn impacts the development of children with disabilities (Harkness et al., 2007). Given how much we know about the relationship between parenting and child development more broadly, it seems crucial to focus on the “why” behind parents’ reactions to and interactions with their children, and how these vary according to cultural context and individual factors.

**Study 2** explored the explanatory inferences that parents make about the causes of children's behavior. Parents’ causal attributions are categories of parental beliefs that affect child development and vary across cultures (Enlund et al., 2015). Crucially, they have been linked with parents’ caregiving practices, i.e., not just how parents think about but also how they parent their children (Murphey, 1992). For example, research suggests that negative parental attributions may mediate the relationship between parenting stress and harsh punishment (Beckerman et al., 2017), with negative attributions increasing the likelihood of physical or harsh punishment (Milner, 1993; 2003). Furthermore, parental attributions can also influence children's own attributional patterns, meaning these attributions help to shape how children make sense of the world around them (Lee et al., 2018). The explanations parents provide for their children's
behavior are necessary not only for a complete understanding of the parent-child relationship and parenting behavior but also hold considerable predictive capacities across domains of development. However, there have been relatively few cross-cultural studies of parents' attributions for negative or distressing child behavior. Despite this limited empirical research, evidence suggests parental attributions about children's maladaptive behaviors do vary significantly across cultures (e.g., Cheah & Rubin, 2004), with nuanced differences emerging even between countries that researchers have historically lumped together in categories like East vs. West (e.g., Keller et al., 2007; Harkness & Super, 2005; Olson et al., 2001). Our study addressed this gap in the literature through a comparison of parents' causal explanations for troubling child behavior between similar samples of American and Spanish parents, i.e., parents from two Western countries. One hundred and one parents of children ages 3 to 7 were asked to offer explanations for hypothetical child behaviors via the second part of our culturally-informed semi-structured interview. Our analyses included both externalizing and internalizing behaviors. Beyond this, we sought to investigate the role of parental education level, child age, and child gender in the attributions made within and between cultures.

We found significant differences and similarities in the attributions American and Spanish parents made for their children’s misbehavior and distress, including differences related to disruptive and aggressive behavior, child gender, child age, and parents’ educational background, and similarities related to anxious and dysphoric behaviors. With respect to attributions for externalizing behaviors, American parents made more attributions to internal states and power goals than did Spanish parents. This finding aligned with previous research showing that parents in the U.S. value assertiveness and independence in their children (e.g., Harkness et al., 2011) while also suggesting that American parents may define their children as
emotion-driven beings. As hypothesized, Spanish parents made more attributions to social and environmental factors than did American parents, with Spanish parents also making more attributions to attention seeking and material gain for externalizing scenarios than did American parents. The latter two findings supported the established emphasis on manageability in Spanish culture (Super et al., 2008) by, in this case, highlighting parent-manageable solutions like giving children attention and meeting their material demands in response to misbehaviors. Surprisingly, there were no significant differences between Spanish and American parents in their attributions for children’s internalizing behaviors; both groups of parents tended to attribute withdrawn and fearful behaviors to children’s negative internal states and to troublesome aspects of the social environment. Perhaps, attributing different types of distress to temporary emotional states and social environments may allow parents to believe these behaviors as impermanent or changeable, thereby reducing the amount of concern they generate. Thus, these data showed that parents’ causal explanations varied dramatically according to the general category of problem behavior, underscoring the importance of including a broad range of vignettes in future studies.

Taken together, differences in parents’ explanatory styles may reflect and maintain broader cultural differences and similarities between Spain and the United States. This study lends evidence to the growing literature on the relevance of the nuanced nature of parents’ ethnotheories in the context of child development with a focus on parents’ attributions regarding child misbehavior, highlighting the importance of and need for further cross-cultural research on parents’ beliefs about their children’s behaviors and development in order to understand why parents may differently interpret various forms of children’s forms of misbehavior and emotional distress. Moreover, the need for this kind of research may be particularly useful in the context of examining parenting beliefs across generations (Goodnow, 1994).
Limitations

As mentioned, our samples were mostly comprised of white, middle-class, educated parents, limiting generalizability to families from different SES and/or cultural minority backgrounds. Even parents from similar backgrounds may hold different theories about their children’s behavior and employ distinct parenting strategies related to factors like the regions from which they originate, where they live, and race/ethnicity (Ball Cooper et al., 2018). Given the singular diversity of the United States in particular (Harkness et al., 1992), it is easy to imagine a rich comparison between our Ann Arbor sample and samples of parents from other regions of the United States (i.e., an American cross-regional comparison). To our knowledge, one has not been done, although there are several notable examples of intracultural research within the U.S. (Kuchirko et al., 2022; Bornstein et al., 2010; Suizzo, 2007). Similarly, as Spanish culture becomes increasingly diverse (Olmos Alcaraz & Martínez Chicón, 2019), one could imagine meaningful ethnotheoretical variance within the country itself. We also would have liked to be able to examine parent gender differences, as well as differences between the ethnotheories held by teachers and other important caregiving figures in the children’s lives. Extant literature suggests that it is important to take these varied perspectives into consideration (Cabrera et al., 2013; Harkness et al., 2008; Harkness et al., 2006; Amorim & Rossetti-Ferreira, 2004; Kurachi, 1987). In particular, we would have liked to examine differences in ethnotheories held by mothers vs. fathers across cultures but did not have a sufficient number of fathers in either sample to do so. Future studies should collect similar data from multiple caregivers while also prioritizing the inclusion of fathers’ perspectives. Finally, an important limitation characteristic of cross-cultural research is inherent in the translation of foreign languages into English (Sutrisno et al., 2014). Translations cannot possibly capture the full nuance of the native
language, and so there is almost certainly meaning lost in this process despite the heavy involvement of native Spanish speakers at every stage of our research.

**Contributions to the Literature and Future Directions**

Overall, this dissertation lends support and adds nuance to previous literature suggesting that parents across cultures hold ethnotheories that vary and align in meaningful ways according to and in contrast with established cultural differences, as well as related to both parent and child characteristics. Findings support and defy cultural expectations and may be reflective of a rapidly evolving and interconnected global ethos influencing parents’ ideas about their children. Modifying slightly the words of Super and colleagues, “most enlightening in the present analyses….and most relevant to the understanding of parenting and culture, are the unique thematic continuities” – and discontinuities – “that tap into larger networks of cultural meaning” (Super et al., 2020, p. 60).

Subsequent analyses should examine the relationship between identified desirable and undesirable characteristics and the attributions parents make for child behaviors, while also making the connection between parent and child characteristics, parents’ beliefs, attributions, and emotional reactions to child behavior, and parenting strategies. Relevant literature suggests a meaningful connection between ethnotheories and parenting styles/strategies (ex: Camilo, 2020), with extant research already pointing to the richness of this kind of work: for example, one study of Spanish parents’ characteristics and parenting strategies found that education level was associated with a higher rate of verbal explanation, a higher frequency of penalty tasks and with a lower use of physical punishment by the mothers (Gámez-Guadix & Almendros, 2015). Research also suggests that the ethnotheories parents hold relative to their children are associated with the kinds of children’s activities they promote (Desmarais et al., 2019) and have the
potential to shape child development (Harkness & Super, 2020; Bowie et al., 2013).

Ethnotheories and related parenting strategies carry implications for everything from positive and negative development (Bethencourt & Kunze, 2022; Baumrind, 1991) to the quality of the relationship between parent and child (Espino, 2013). Relatedly, research should continue to explore the influence of parent psychopathology on the ethnotheories parents hold. This is particularly true in light of new work that reveals meaningful associations between parents’ psychiatric symptoms and their beliefs relative to their efficacy as parents (ex: Goodman et al., 2022). Recent inquiry has also highlighted the relationship between parental psychopathology, parents’ interpretations of ethnotheories, and the characteristics parents desire to see in their children. For example, some authors suggest that ethnotheories may be so thoroughly formed that depressive symptoms do not shift them, as demonstrated in that study by the lack of effect these symptoms appear to have on parenting practices (Defelipe et al., 2016).

It is our hope that this dissertation furthers the necessary evolution of our field toward a “global and inclusive science of human development”, as proposed in the recent “Manifesto for New Directions in Developmental Science”, which rearticulates the argument made twenty years ago by researcher Carolyn Pope Edwards (Bardot et al., 2020, p. 140). Edwards proposed that, “in studying human development in cultural-historical context, we must integrate multiple levels of analysis and strive to identify culture’s imprint inside the contexts of socialization (Edwards, 2002, p. 307).” Authors of the “Manifesto” call for a shift from the myopic focus on so-called “cultural-general” aspects of development like universal biological processes to the consideration of these factors alongside “culture-specific” aspects of human development – i.e., “the influence of local environments” toward a “dual perspective that combines attention to both dimensions…to achieve more accurate portrayals of a “universal” science of development”
(Bardot et al., 2020, p. 140). The studies included in this dissertation support Edwards’ decades-old contention that sensitivity to the context in which development occurs demands a consideration of “the particular as well as the universal.” While, as she suggests, “this kind of research…[requires] an enormous investment of energy, resources, and effort”, the ends justify the means, teaching us not only “about human behavior but also about methodology in cultural studies” (Edwards, 2002, p. 311). With those goals in mind, it is difficult to imagine a richer realm of inquiry than the world of ethnotheories.
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APPENDICES

Appendix A.1: Parents’ Ethnotheories Interview (English Version)

Date________

Age of child (DoB)________

Sex of child_____________

Introductory Script

[First 5 minutes: greeting and small talk; try to put Mom at ease, e.g., convey warmth and interest in her as a person; make sure parent is seated in preferred location for interview with child(ren) out of the room] I want to thank you so much again for agreeing to sit down with me today. First, if it’s ok with you, I would like to tell you a little bit about our project. Our research team at the University of Michigan is interested in how parents in different cultures define, manage and explain desirable and undesirable behaviors in their children. Despite the importance of parents’ perspectives, they are often overlooked in studies like these; we hope to change that by sitting down and getting honest opinions and examples from moms and dads about how they perceive their children. Everything we discuss today will be kept confidential, with your responses stored by participant ID only and nothing that identifies you or your child. It’s important to us that you feel comfortable being as open as possible. The only time we would ever have to share anything said here would be if we were concerned for your safety or the safety of someone else. Does that make sense? [Pause for participant response] Would it be all right if I audiotaped this interview? [Pause
for participant response – if consents, turn on laptop recorder] Do you have any questions or concerns before we begin? [Pause for participant response] Please know that you can ask questions during the interview, decide not to answer a question, or stop the interview at any point. The interview is organized in several parts. First, I will ask a series of opened ended questions, and then wrap up by describing potential situations that could come up with your child and asking follow-up questions about how both of you might respond. The interview should last about 30 minutes and will be followed by two brief survey questionnaires. Do you have questions before we begin?

**Introductory question:** How would you describe your child to someone who has never met (him/her/them)?

**I. In the first part of the interview we ask you to describe child characteristics that you both value and disapprove of.**

A1. Every parent has ideas about how they want their children to behave.

What behaviors would you hope to see in your child? (elicit 5 characteristics):

1. 

2. 

3. 

4. 

5. 

A2. Can you give some examples of these behaviors?

A3. Which behavior is most important?

A4. Why would (child’s name) turn out to be (name highest ranked positive
A5. What could you do as a parent to help your child turn out to be ____?

A6. Think about other parents who have children the same age as (child’s name).
   Would they agree with you? If not, how would they disagree?

B1. Every parent has ideas about child behaviors that might worry or trouble them.
   What behaviors would you not want to see in (child’s name)?

   1.

   2.

   3.

   4.

   5.

B2. Can you give some examples of these behaviors?

B3. Which of these behaviors is the most negative?

B4. Why would (child’s name) turn out to be (highest ranked negative behavior)?

B5. What would you do as a parent to discourage your child from _____?
B6. Think about other parents who have children the same age as (child’s name).

Would they agree with you? If not, how would they disagree?

II. Now I would like you to think of the last 2-3 weeks. In what situations was (child’s name) most likely to misbehave? What did s/he do? (Probe for at least 2 situations)
Chapter 1  **Situation # 1**

C1A. Description of situation and child’s behavior:

C1B. What did you say or do when _____ behaved this way?

C1C. Why do you think that _____ behaved this way?

C1D. How did it make you feel?
Chapter 2  **Situation # 2**

C2A. Description of situation and child’s behavior:
C2B. What did you say or do when _____ behaved this way?
C2C. Why do you think that _____ behaved this way?
C2D. How did it make you feel?

**Situation # 3**

C3A. Description of situation and child’s behavior:
C3B. What did you say or do when _____ behaved this way?
C3C. Why do you think that _____ behaved this way?
C3D. How did it make you feel?

III. Please think about all of the time you have spent raising (child’s name). Has s/he ever done anything that upset you a lot?

D1. What was it?
D2. What did you say or do?
D3. Why would (child’s name) behave that way?
D4. How did it make you feel?

IV. Now, I’m going to describe some situations involving young children and their parents. I’d like you to imagine that each situation is happening to you. Then tell me what you might say or do in response.
Chapter 3  **Story 1**
E1. Suppose (child’s name) wants a toy that a friend is playing with. The friend will not share it. Your child hits the friend and grabs the toy. What would you say or do?

E2. Why would you do that?

E3. Why do you think your child would hit another in this situation?

E4. How upset would you feel if (child’s name) behaved this way (hit a playmate to obtain a toy)?

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E5. In a similar situation, how often has (child’s name) behaved like that?

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Chapter 4  **Story 2**

F1. Suppose that your child is playing with a friend. Suddenly the friend calls your child a bad name and kicks your child. Your child kicks the friend back. What would you say or do?

F2. Why would you do this?

F3. Why do you think the friend behaved this way?

F4. How upset would you be with your child for kicking back?

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Chapter 5 **Story 3**

G1. Imagine that your child is asked to stop playing and clean up his/her toys, but s/he refuses. What would you say or do?

G2. Why would you do this?

G3. Why do you think your child would behave this way?

G4. How upset would you feel if your child behaved this way?

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G5. In a similar situation, how often has (child’s name) behaved like that?

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Chapter 6 **Story 4**

H1. Suppose that (child’s name) has been watching T.V. for a long time and is very interested in the program. When you turn off the T.V., _____ shouts “NO!” and slaps you. What would you say or do?

H2. Why would you do this?

H3. Why do you think __________ would behave in this way?

H4. How upset would you feel if __________ behaved this way?

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6.1 **Story 5**

I1. Suppose (child’s name) says that s/he doesn’t like the food that has been served for dinner and refuses to eat it. What would you say or do?

I2. Why would you do this?

I3. Why do you think that ______ would behave in this way?

I4. How upset would you feel if (child’s name) behaved this way?

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I5. In a similar situation, how often has (child’s name) behaved like that?

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J1. Imagine that you and (child’s name) are shopping. (Child’s name) keeps running around and grabbing things and getting in the way of other shoppers. You ask (child’s name) to quiet down, but s/he refuses. What would you say or do?

J2. Why would you do this?

J3. Why would (child’s name) behave in this way?
J4. How upset would you feel if (child’s name) behaved this way?

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J5. In a similar situation, how often has (child’s name) behaved like that?

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**Story 7**

K1. Imagine that you and (child’s name) are getting together with some other mothers and their children so the children can play. (Child’s name) wants only to stay by you and not to play with the other children. What would you say or do?

K2. Why would you do this?

K3. Why would (child’s name) behave in this way?

K4. How upset would you feel if (child’s name) behaved this way?

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K5. In a similar situation, how often has (child’s name) behaved like that?

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**Story 8**

L1. Imagine that (child’s name) is very afraid of many things. No matter how much you reassure him/her that everything will be okay, (child’s name) is still scared. What would you say or do?

L2. Why would you do this?

L3. Why would (child’s name) behave in this way?

L4. How upset would you feel if (child’s name) behaved this way?
L5. In a similar situation, how often has (child’s name) behaved like that?

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Story 9

M1. Imagine that you are doing some work and (your child) wants you to play with him/her. You tell (child’s name) to wait until you finish your work. (Child’s name) becomes frustrated and starts to cry. What would you say or do?

M2. Why would you do this?
M3. Why would (child’s name) behave in this way?
M4. How upset would you feel if (child’s name) behaved this way?

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M5. In a similar situation, how often has (child’s name) behaved like that?

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<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Story 10

N1. Imagine that your child seems sad all the time. He/she cries a lot and doesn’t have fun doing anything. If you were this child’s parent, what would you say or do?

N2. Why would you do this?
N3. Why would (child’s name) behave in this way?
N4. How upset would you feel if (child’s name) behaved this way?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
N5. In a similar situation, how often has (child’s name) behaved like that?

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<thead>
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<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Never</td>
<td>Sometimes</td>
<td>Always</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Story 11**

O1. Imagine that (your child) feels ill all the time no matter what you say or do. S/he often complains of headaches and/or abdominal pain and medical doctors haven’t found any reason for these complaints. What would you say or do?

O2. Why would you do this?

O3. Why would (child’s name) behave in this way?

O4. How upset would you feel if (child’s name) behaved this way?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1</th>
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<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Not at all upset</td>
<td>Somewhat upset</td>
<td>Extremely upset</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

O5. In a similar situation, how often has (child’s name) behaved like that?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1</th>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Never</td>
<td>Sometimes</td>
<td>Always</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Concluding question:** What brings you joy about parenting your child?

**Concluding Script**

[Quickly review questionnaires to make sure fully completed] Thank you so much again for your willingness to talk with me today. How did that feel? Do you have any questions? [Wait for participant’s response] If you are interested, we would be happy to let you know if and when work related to this study is published. Would you like...
to receive updates about the project going forward? [If participant says yes, verify contact email and obtain information for a close friend/relative. Collect surveys, compensate participant and explain how to redeem gift card, and leave]
## Appendix B.1: Parent-Identified Positive and Negative Child Characteristics Final Codes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Positive characteristics</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional adjustment</td>
<td>Positive emotional characteristics.</td>
<td>Happy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Self-confident</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Relaxed and at ease</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Psychologically healthy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Kind</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Considerate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Obedient</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Polite</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social cooperation</td>
<td>Characteristics that reflect a cooperative, benevolent, and receptive attitude toward other people.</td>
<td>Good social skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>A sense of humor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Makes friends easily</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Greets others appropriately</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social competence</td>
<td>Observable behavioral skills that facilitate social interactions.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cognitive/motivational</td>
<td>Cognitive and motivational dispositions that facilitate successful achievement.</td>
<td>Intelligent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Active and independent</td>
<td>Assertive, independent, or energetic, goal-oriented behavior.</td>
<td>Curious</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Creative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Goal-oriented</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Self-assertive</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Energetic</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Autonomous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Self-sufficient</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical health/competence</td>
<td>Characteristics that reflect physical well-being, fitness, and skill.</td>
<td>Skilled at sports</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Physically healthy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Athletic</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Well coordinated</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Concern about the environment</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Belief in god</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Religiosity</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Knowing right from wrong</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spiritual/moral values</td>
<td>Believing in and/or acting in accordance with spiritual, religious or moral principles.</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Negative characteristics</strong></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aggression/disruptiveness</td>
<td>Aggression or other harmful behaviors.</td>
<td>Cruel</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Hitting</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Defiant</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Destructive</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Rude</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Selfish</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Dishonest</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Lacking empathy</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Unhappy</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Apathetic</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Depressed</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Anxious</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Poor communicator</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Tattles</td>
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<tr>
<td>Insensitivity to others</td>
<td>Negative attitude/uncooperative toward others.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional distress</td>
<td>Negative emotional dispositions.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Social incompetence</td>
<td>Deficits in social skills/competence.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cognitive motivational difficulties</td>
<td>Characteristics thought to impede achievement behavior.</td>
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<td>-----------------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical problems/incompetence</td>
<td>Characteristics that reflect physical illness, weakness, and lack of ability.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of spiritual/moral values</td>
<td>A lack of belief in and/or behavior not in accordance with spiritual, religious or moral principles.</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Has few friends</td>
<td>Socially inappropriate</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Passive</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lazy</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Academic failure</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Impulsive</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Prone to illness</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Physically fragile</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Unathletic</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Clumsy</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Faithless</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Unprincipled</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Materialistic</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No moral compass</td>
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</table>
### Appendix C.1: Parental Attributions for Child Behaviors Final Codes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attribution</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Internal states (NINT, PINT)** | Misbehavior linked to positive or negative internal emotional states. Sub-code negative/positive. | PINT: “I think she was happy.”  
NINT: “He was probably over-excited.”  
“He is only four and doesn’t know how to express himself,”  
“Hitting is very normal at that age.”  
“She is just a very cranky child,”  
“He has always been a loner.” |
| **Developmental (DEV)**    | Misbehavior linked to immature development, lack of cognitive skills (language, conflict resolution skills). | “He has seen that among his peers,”  
“I didn’t give him 5 minute warning.”  
“There were too many toys around,”  
“The TV show was interesting.” |
| **Temperament (TEMP)**     | Misbehavior linked to individual stable characteristic of the child, such as stubbornness, etc. | “They both wanted the toy and argued about it,”  
“The other child hurt his feelings and he got angry.” |
| **Environmental influence:** |                                                                                       |                                                                                                     |
| 1. Social environment (SOC) | Misbehavior linked to modeling and social learning.                                     | “He is trying to get the best of the teachers,”  
“He just wants to manipulate his parents.”  
“He wants how much he can get away with,”  
“She is hoping her dad will stop asking her to do her homework.” |
| 2. Physical environment (ENV) | Misbehavior linked to characteristics of environment.                                         |                                                                                                     |
| 3. Social reciprocity (RECIP) | Misbehavior linked to social reciprocity.                                                   |                                                                                                     |
| **Goal-seeking:**          |                                                                                       |                                                                                                     |
| 1. Attention-seeking (ATT) | Misbehavior linked to desire for attention from/time with others.                          | “She wants to be the star of the show,”  
“He needs his mom’s undivided attention.”  
“He is obsessed with that toy,”  
“She wanted something from the grocery store.” |
| 2. Material gain (MAT)     | Misbehavior linked to the child wanting something physical/material.                       |                                                                                                     |
| **Power motives:**         |                                                                                       |                                                                                                     |
| 1. Negative goal (POWD)    | Misbehavior linked to desire for manipulation of/control over others.                       | “He is trying to get the best of the teachers,”  
“He just wants to manipulate his parents.”  
“He wants how much he can get away with,”  
“She is hoping her dad will stop asking her to do her homework.” |
<p>| 2. Testing limits (POWLIM) | Misbehavior linked to child’s attempts to figure out or push rules and expectations.        |                                                                                                     |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>3. Testing independence (POWIND)</th>
<th>Misbehavior linked to child exerting his or her own will.</th>
<th>“He wanted to continue watching TV,” “She didn’t want to go to sleep yet.” “Children are just bad”, “Kids always cry to annoy their parents.”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Negative view of children (NVC)</td>
<td>Parent makes negative statement about nature of children in general.</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>