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LUULE MIZERA
TIIA TULVISTE
University of Tartu
Södertörn University College, Stockholm

MOTHERS' CHILD-REARING ATTITUDES AND VERBAL BEHAVIOR: A COMPARATIVE STUDY¹

This paper focuses on a salient aspect within the context of a broader comparative study on family socialization, namely, on the relationship between the actual verbal behavior of mothers of early adolescent children and their reported child-rearing attitudes. We compared mothers of early adolescent (10-13 yrs.) children from three different groups – Estonians living in Estonia, and two samples of bicultural Estonians residing in Sweden. The mothers' responses to statements on child rearing were compared with the frequency of verbal regulation of the child's behavior and speech that was obtained from real-life interactions. A significant correlation between a reported belief and the respective behavior appeared only in respect to attitudes towards controlling the child's behavior. The cultural context had a significant effect on the frequency of verbal regulation of target children's behavior, which was much higher in mothers residing in Estonia.

Introduction

The notion that family socialization plays an important role in the development of social behavior has been suggested by many cross-cultural researchers (e.g., Berry, Poortinga, Seagall, & Dasen, 1992; Bornstein, 1991; Kađitçibaşı, 1996; Triandis, 1995). Also, it has long been argued that mothers from different cultures have different beliefs about child rearing (e.g., Super & Harkness, 1986, 1997). By means of the many tools of socialization parents mold their children into competent members of society, attempting to pass on both their intrinsic belief systems and culturally determined behavioral patterns. However, to what extent can researchers rely on correlations between measured attitudes and actual behavior is yet not clear. The authors of this study do not propose to give an exhaustive answer to this widely studied issue,

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but rather to gain some information on the usefulness of attitudinal measures in the studies on family socialization (for a comprehensive overview on child-rearing attitude instruments see Holden & Edwards, 1989).

Though acknowledging the interactional and multidirectional nature of the process, the central role of the mother still seems to prevail in family socialization. Thus, we concentrated on a small number of child-rearing beliefs reported by mothers of early adolescent children, and the actual regulatory speech of these mothers emerging in interactions with their offspring. We also differentiated between regulatory speech aimed at controlling the child's behavior and that designed to elicit talk from the child. Accordingly, we had attitudinal statements reflecting the importance of controlling the child's behavior and conversational participation. We expected positive correlations between the frequency of controlling behavior and favorable attitudes towards behavioral control, and the frequency of eliciting talk and valuing the child's verbal contribution.

It is self-evident that the cultural context has a profound effect on the process of socialization in the family. Not only the concept and family structure vary across cultures, so do the family members' beliefs and ways of imposing these beliefs on their relatives. To examine the extent to which the slightest change in cultural context influences the above-mentioned attitudes and behavior, we compared the results of three sociocultural groups – Estonian mothers living in Estonia, and two different samples of Estonian mothers residing in Sweden. Earlier research in mother-child interaction has demonstrated that Estonian mothers of 2-year-olds were less interested in eliciting children's conversational participation, and more concerned with directing and controlling their physical behavior, than mothers from Sweden and the U.S. (Junefelt & Tulviste, 1997), and that Estonian mothers and teenagers were significantly more active in making verbal comments on behavior than their American counterparts (Tulviste, 2000). Therefore, presuming that exposure to different patterns of socialization leads to different styles of interaction, we expected the mothers living in Estonia to be more concerned with behavioral regulation of their early adolescent children than mothers living in Sweden.

Method

The *participants* in this study were 21 mothers of early adolescent (10-13 yrs) children (10 boys and 11 girls) from two groups with different socio-cultural backgrounds – Estonians living in Estonia ($n=7$) and Estonians residing in Sweden. The latter group was divided into families where the target child had been born in Sweden ($n=7$), and families who had left Estonia at the beginning of the 1990s ($n=7$). All mothers were middle-class and had more than secondary school education, ranging from applied college education (e.g., nurses) to university degrees. The adolescent target children had siblings in most families. The bicultural (i.e., Swedish-Estonian) mothers were bilingual; the target children had at least some knowledge of spoken Estonian.

Table 1. Significant ($p < 0.05$) correlations between the mothers' responses to the control items and the frequency of their verbal regulatory behavior towards the target child

| Item | <i>r</i> | | |
|---|----------------|----------------------|-------------------|
| | Eliciting talk | Controlling behavior | Total reg. speech |
| A child should learn to think independently instead of obeying adults | -0.43 | -0.53 | -0.49 |
| A child should learn at an early age that many things are forbidden | 0.47 | | 0.49 |

Note. $N=21$

Measures

From each sample we had 7 videorecordings of family mealtimes (altogether 21), and the respective mothers' responses to four statements on child-rearing attitudes on a 5-point Likert-type scale. Two statements were designed to measure the importance of *controlling the child's behavior* ("A child should learn at an early age that many things are forbidden", and a reverse item "A child should learn to think independently instead of obeying the adults"), and two items stressed *the conversational participation of the child* ("Children should be brought up so that they are able to have polite conversations with other people", and a reverse item "A child should speak only when (s)he has something important to say").

In the transcriptions of the video recorded data we identified all verbal regulations and calculated their frequency *per time unit*. All regulations were then divided into the categories of *verbal control of the child's behavior* (e.g., "Take some more salad!") and *eliciting conversation from the child* (e.g., "But what can you tell me about Saturday?") according to McDonald & Pien's (1982) category system, and compared to the scores of the above-mentioned items of control and communication.

Results

Relationship between attitudes and verbal regulative behavior

There were significant (at $p < .05$) correlations between the mothers' ($N=21$) responses to the two attitudinal items reflecting the importance of control over children's behavior, and the frequency of their actual verbal regulatory behavior (controlling behavior, eliciting conversation, and the total amount of regulatory speech) towards the target child. The correlations are shown in Table 1.

No significant correlations were found between the mothers' responses to the items of conversational participation, and the frequency of actual occurrences of talk elicitation from children.

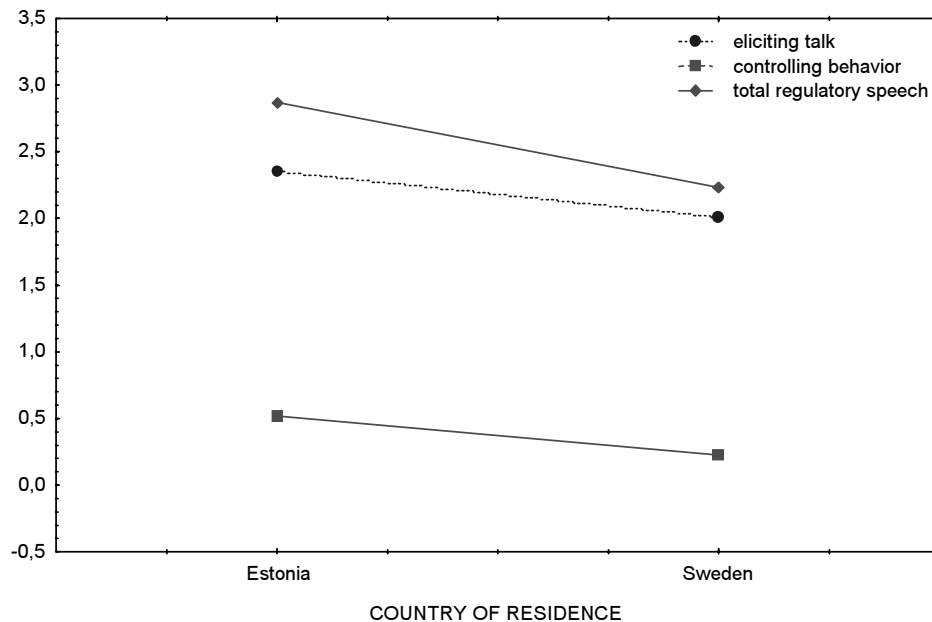


Figure 1. The mean frequencies of types and total amount of regulatory speech of mothers *per* sample

Cultural differences

Cross-cultural comparison showed no significant differences between the two groups of Estonians residing in Sweden neither in attitudes nor in the variables of actual regulatory behavior, thus the groups were considered as one in later analyses.

The only cultural difference $F(1,19)=3.45$ in responses to the attitudinal items between Estonian mothers living in Sweden ($M=3.57$, $SD=0.51$) and in Estonia ($M=2.71$, $SD=1.60$) emerged on the statement “A child should learn to think independently instead of obeying the adults”, however, not reaching the level of significance ($p=.079$).

Also, the country of residence had a significant influence on verbal regulation of target children’s behavior *per* time unit, $F(1,19)=5.67$, $p=.028$. As hypothesized, the mothers living in Estonia were much more concerned with their children’s behavior ($M=0.52$, $SD=0.39$) than the mothers living in Sweden ($M=0.22$, $SD=0.17$). No significant cultural differences appeared in talk elicitation and in the total amount of verbal regulation. Figure 1 demonstrates the mean frequencies of types and total amount of regulatory speech by mothers towards the early adolescent *per* sample.

Discussion

It has turned out that, while there is a correlation between the attitudes towards controlling children's behavior and putting these attitudes into practice in verbal interaction, no such accordance was found between the variables of eliciting talk and conversational participation.

The results were thus somewhat controversial, giving ground to discussions about the validity of the attitudinal items and the measurability of ways of prompting conversational participation.

As there are obviously several other ways of conveying one's attitudes towards various behavioral patterns along with verbal means (e.g., demonstration, imitation, etc.), we cannot conclude that this apparent lack of correspondence implies that the mother does not influence her children according to her beliefs.

Also, there is the question of the relative importance attached to different traits. Super and Harkness (1986) described interviews with Kokwet mothers who thought that children learned to talk mainly from each other, and that the mother was not as important a language socializer as are other children. According to data from natural observations, the mothers talked little with their children. The authors noted that it reflected the Kipsigis' parental goals of valuing obedience and responsibility more highly than verbal expressiveness.

Not only do parents from different cultural contexts emphasize the relative importance of some aspects of socialization over others. The parents' satisfaction with children's responses to their socialization practices has been noted to vary considerably, from full acceptance (internalization) to partial agreement, or even – if the child's public behavior is satisfactory – rejection of the parents' standards and values (see Grusec, Goodnow, & Kuczynski, 2000). So there is obviously no uniform knowledge to convey, no uniform way of conveying it, and no uniformly desirable end result.

As the number of participating families and attitudinal statements were quite limited in our study, we cannot claim that any broader issues were conclusively (or even sufficiently) explored. Clearly, the results point towards a need for more substantial and thorough measurements.

The fact that the Estonian mothers were more concerned with controlling their preadolescent children's behavior than the Swedish-Estonian mothers has already been noted in earlier studies by Tulviste and Kants (2001). This result is not surprising, bearing also in mind that Swedish mothers put relatively little emphasis on controlling their children's behavior according to a study carried out by Junefelt and Tulviste (1997). Thus, according to our results it seems that verbal regulation of behavior is particularly sensitive to cultural context, even if the language used for this purpose is the same.

Another bicultural socialization study carried out with parents of Chinese origin living in countries as culturally diverse as China and the USA found only meager differences in most responses given to a child-rearing practice questionnaire (Lin & Fu, 1990). Thus, if cultural differences in behavioral regulation are more likely to emerge in naturally occurring situations, and not in attitudinal responses – as in our study, one

is tempted to say that, while attitudinal scales can differentiate between larger samples from very different contexts, real-life data is required when dealing with smaller groups with more similar cultural backgrounds (like Estonia and Sweden).

In conclusion, although it seems common sense to assume a correlation between reported beliefs and real-life practices, and it is known that social attitudes sometimes display a weak association with actual behavior (see e.g., Eagly & Chaiken, 1993), hopefully at least in some domains it is possible to predict behavior on the basis of attitudes.

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