Parental ideas and their role in childrearing: the idea-behavior connection [1]

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Abstract: The relation between parental ideas and actions is an old and troublesome issue in socialization research. Parental ideas are assumed to play an important role as determinants of parental actions and the issue has received increasing attention. In this article, the idea-behavior dilemma is dealt with. In order to help glimpse underlying assumptions and build an accurate understanding of the role that childrearing ideas play in parents' functioning, a review of several empirical approaches and studies is presented and limitations of current idea-behavior research are highlighted. Throughout the discussion, the complexity of the idea-behavior links is exposed and attention is called to the theoretical and practical importance of research connecting parents' ideas and their behaviors for understanding, predicting and changing parental behavior. Finally, a perspective for the study of parents' ideas is presented.

Key-words: socialization, parental idea, parental behavior, childrearing,

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Introduction

Over the past few decades, one of the most striking trends in developmental and social psychology theory and research has been the increasingly cognitive emphasis in studies of social interaction. In this field, ideas parents bring to the work of parenting constitute a particularly interesting issue, making attention devoted to the cognitive aspects of parenting worth noting. In everyday life, people often make comments and judgments about ability and its development, bear different perspectives about the nature of thinking and the way it is acquired and hold ideas about children, their development and the nature of parental roles. These folk perspectives characterize approaches to children and everyday ideas convey meanings that allow people to understand their surrounding world. The study of parents' social cognitions is, therefore, important in and of itself. Concerns in the course of seeking to advance our understanding of the way parents think, act and feel and to provide one way of specifying the social context in which development occurs have, hence, become common ground to wide range of social scientists.

Current theory and research are linked to a long tradition of concern with parenting and ideas about the nature of the child (e.g., Ariès, 1962; Richards, 1926; Sears, Maccoby, & Levin, 1957). Nonetheless, the field of psychology has its own recent history, which has influenced approaches that are characteristic of current research and evolving body of literature. In order to understand present trends in the study of parents' cognitions, it might be useful to conceptualize it as an outgrowth of several underlying assumptions. According to Goodnow and Collins (1990), the starting point of research on parental ideas focused on parents' expectations and attitudes as an expression of naïve psychology (Baldwin, 1965; Heider, 1944, 1946, 1958). Later, with the advent of behaviorism, a shift in point of view came about as psychologists tended to develop exclusive attention on actions and on the details of relations between the actions of parents and children, emphasizing prescriptive recommendations of how to rear children (McGillicuddy-De Lisi & Sigel, 1995). After this behavioral emphasis, and as part of a global change in psychological research, interest in cognitive psychology and parents' ideas sensed a reawakening, "sparked by the view that parents' ideas are an

interesting form of adult social cognition" (Goodnow, 1988, p. 286). The recognition that accounts of socialization are incomplete without attention to what parents think and the assumption that it is surely not possible to address parents' cognitions unless we grant parents with cognitive activity and consider them in the "context of particular responsibilities, particular social conditions, particular relationships and cultural history of ideas about childhood, parenting and the course of development" (Goodnow & Collins, 1990, p. 7) directed the stirring interest in parents' ideas to grow very much in line with moves towards "everyday" psychology (Moscovici, 1981).

Since children and adults have come to be viewed as naïve theorists or active information processors (Heider, 1958), focus is set on attitudes (Holden, 1995), beliefs (McGillicuddy-De Lisi & Sigel, 1995), ideas (Goodnow & Collins, 1990), knowledge and expectations (Goodnow, 1995), attributions (Dix & Grusec, 1985), social representations (Mugny & Carugati, 1985) or implicit theories (Sternberg, 1985) people use to understand the world around them or acquire in the course of everyday practices and interactions. Thus, actual research *status* is of a topic – parents' ideas about their children's development and education – that, on the one hand, is approached from the scope of different conceptual labels and, on the other hand, is characterized by specific issues or sub-topics which investigators survey according to their theoretical preferences.

In broad terms, research on parents' ideas has been guided by several sets of questions (Miller, 1988), which, although neatly separated or singled out for emphasis, are very much interrelated, as none can completely be set aside (Goodnow, 1995).

A first and basic set concerns the nature of parents' ideas, both in terms of their content and quality. Studies related to this issue try to shed some light on what parents think about their children, how they explain children's behavior and how they justify their own.

A second set takes as its focus the sources or conditions that influence parents' ideas. Where do parents' ideas about children come from? By and large, literature on the origin of parents' ideas is marked by two features: one that focuses on the impact of direct experience with children and another that considers individuals' cultural context and the social construction of

knowledge. From this last perspective, information is seen as "social", with "social" referring to the ways a set of ideas can come to identify a person or a group, to the way shared ideas allow easy communication and to the importance of social life as the basis of ideas. This is the case of social representations theory, which will be more fully discussed ahead.

The third set concerns the consequences of parents' ideas for parents' (their actions and feelings) and for children. Exploring if parents' ideas about children affect the way they behave toward them and if children's development is influenced by parents' ideas are, therefore, specific issues addressed by this particular feature.

Consequences for parents are the focus of this article. Much work has been dedicated to the argument that ideas permeate parents' actions, not only with their children, but also with the larger environment. In fact, much of recent interest in parents' ideas has stemmed from the conviction that there must be *some* relation between ideas and behaviors (Miller, 1988). Ideas are believed to organize the world for individuals, enabling them to cope with everyday life. In addition, ideas provide a means for generating behaviors that, in turn, may then affect the child's development, in response to parenting demands. Far the most part, this has been, indeed, the direction of interest in much developmental research: the one that considers that ideas lead to actions. There is, however, an alternate direction of effect, yet to be strongly considered in parental research (Goodnow, 1988; Goodnow & Collins, 1990). The contrasting view about sequence appears in the proposal that ideas follow – and not precede – actions. This direction from action to ideas suggests that action can come about without much grounding in thought, as ideas are prompted by people's actions to develop justifications, either to others or to themselves. Some scientific evidence that this is the case comes from Festinger and Carlsmith (1959), who showed that, once a stand is taken, there is a natural tendency to think and behave in ways that are consistent with the stand. In these cases, people encounter personal and interpersonal pressures to behave consistently with that previous commitment, which will cause individuals to respond in ways that justify their early behavior (Cialdini, 2001). When confronted with this situation, individuals need only to believe, think or do whatever is consistent with their earlier decision. Behavioral commitment is, therefore, not without

cognitive consequences. In general terms, engaging in an action consistent with our ideas and motivations causes ideas to be less prone to influence and change; when action contrary to our ideas or motivations is taken, the content of ideas is itself modified, as actions become more rationalized (Joule & Beauvois, 1987).

We now turn to the consequences that have been for many psychologists the starting point to an interest in parents' ideas: namely, the actions parents take towards children (Goodnow & Collins, 1990). Attention on parents' ideas has been set off by the wish to understand the conditions that influence development and by the assumption that ideas are the underlying force directing parents' childrearing strategies and behaviors (McGillicuddy-De Lisi & Sigel, 1995). Research on the topic has widely expanded and attracted several reviews (e.g., Goodnow, 1988; Goodnow & Collins, 1990; Hirsjärvi & Perälä-Littunen, 2001; Miller, 1988; Okagaki & Bingham, 2005; Sigel, McGillicuddy-De Lisi, & Goodnow, 1992). Sources of interest have also widened. These changes have brought along several views taken as the possible bases for various cognitive aspects and emphasized different kinds of theory that might offer a useful conceptual backing. In fact, research in the field has appeared under a wide variety of conceptual labels, most of them often used interchangeably. A literature review might easily identify headings such as parental beliefs, ideas, perceptions, attributions, attitudes, values, expectations and knowledge.

In line with Goodnow (1988) and Goodnow and Collins (1990), the term "ideas" has so far been used as the most generic and neutral term available to refer to parents' cognitions. However, from now on and to the extent possible we separately consider parents' beliefs and attitudes as different conceptualizations applied to the study of parents' ideas about children.

Therefore, before we proceed, some definition and distinction of these concepts is in order at the outset. Parental beliefs are ideas or knowledge that parents consider to be factual and accept as true (McGillicuddy-De Lisi & Sigel, 1995). Sigel (1985) has offered the following definition: "beliefs are mental constructions of experience – often condensed and integrated into schemata or concepts that are held to be true and that guide behavior" (p. 351). Attitudes build on beliefs by adding an evaluative dimension – a negative or

positive valence – to ideas about the target entity or attitude object (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993; Holden, 1995). Furthermore, although attitudes present a cognitive component, they are not seen as facts or truth.

A different conceptualization to the study of ideas is presented by social representations theory. Taken as a "set of concepts, statements and explanations originating in daily life in the course of inter-individual communication" (Moscovici, 1981, p. 181) social representations are rich containers of symbolic meaning, deeply rooted in the history of social groups and solidified in cultural practices. But representational processes depict much more than the object-world and representations go far beyond their cognitive and symbolic functions, to include a prescriptive character in terms of practices and to function as guides for action, which legitimate and orient behaviors (Jodelet, 1989). However, little research has been dedicated to the relation between parents' social representations concerning children's global development and their childrearing practices and behaviors. For that reason, no empirical studies on the area will be presented and the socio-representational approach will be left for discussion.

As we attempt to provide some insight into the actualization of ideas into actions, empirical findings from research and individual studies are summarized to illustrate the relation between parents' ideas and their actions toward children as well as to organize current knowledge in terms of both consistencies and contradictions in understanding of how ideas mothers and fathers hold influence them in their childrearing behaviors.

Parental beliefs and behaviors

Following the popularity of parents' beliefs as a topic of study, an increasing number of research reports document the relation between parents' beliefs about child rearing and their parental behaviors. For example, research has demonstrated that mothers' and fathers' beliefs about the importance of teaching children mathematics are positively correlated with parents' self-reports of engaging in mathematics-related activities with their children (Musun-Miller & Blevins-Knabe, 1998). Donahue, Pearl and Herzog (1997)

examined the relation between mothers' beliefs about the power of the environment to effect positive developmental outcomes (e.g., the extent to which mothers believed that a child's school success depends on how much they are taught at home) and mothers' questioning strategies during a referential communication task. In this study, the degree to which mothers believe that children's development can be facilitated by a positive social environment is positively correlated with the amount and type of language mothers use in their interactions with children. More specifically, mothers endorsing this belief were more likely to use questions (r = .38), as opposed to other forms of communication, to help focus their child in the important details of the task. Yamamoto, Holloway and Sawako (2006) examined the relation of maternal beliefs to several dimensions of parental involvement and found that mothers who felt more efficacious in the role of parent, and who construed their family's role to include supporting children's intellectual development, were more likely to report being involved in certain aspects of their children's education. Specifically, the results of the study have shown that maternal beliefs about family role construction (beliefs about the activities deemed to be important, necessary and permissible for parents' actions on behalf of the child) predicted preschool selection strategies (conceptualized in terms of how mothers collected information about the preschool before enrolling their child) and also indicate that mothers with higher parenting self-efficacy beliefs were more likely to report reading to their children on a daily basis. Other research has demonstrated that parents' use of a particular conflict management strategy was based, in part, on their perception of how effective the strategy was and how well they could carry out the strategy (Perozynski & Kramer, 1999). In this study, fathers were observed to use behaviors directed towards helping children negotiate, reason and problem solve more often when they viewed these child-centered strategies to be relatively effective for resolving children's conflicts. Mothers' engagement in passive nonintervention was predicted by both their appraisal that this was an effective strategy for resolving children's conflicts and the perception that they could carry out this strategy relatively well. In addition, mothers were more likely to engage in parental control strategies, seeking to eliminate sibling conflict through punitive behaviors and controlling actions, when they reported feeling relatively confident about their

ability to enact this strategy. A research by Machida, Taylor and Kim (2002) has demonstrated that maternal self-efficacy beliefs was significantly related to more frequent involvement in home learning activities with the child (r = .23). An observation study by Kochanska (1990) showed that maternal beliefs turned out to have a predictive value in relation to the mothers' control behavior even after a lapse of 2-3 years. Damast, Tamis-LeMonda, and Bornstein (1996) observed 50 mothers and their 21-months-old children interacting while playing with a standard set of toys. Correlation (r = .33) shows that mothers who were more knowledgeable about early play development more often responded to their children's play by introducing higher level and more sophisticated play.

In fact, studies reviewed provide support for one of the most central tenets underlying the study of parents' beliefs: that beliefs *do* relate to behavior. As Miller (1988) states, "evidence indicates that there is a relation between what parents believe about children and how they behave toward children" (p. 277).

Moreover, some results show that those relations are in the expected direction. In a study by McGillicuddy-De Lisi (1982), mothers and fathers of a 120 two-parent families sample were interviewed individually to assess beliefs about the nature of child development and videotaped interacting with his or her pre-school-age child on a story task and on a paper-folding task. Parental responses and behaviors were coded into different constructs and teaching strategies. Evidence shows that, in general, both mother's and fathers' beliefs about how children develop were predictive of their teaching behaviors in the two different contexts. For example, mother's belief that children develop concepts through their own accumulation of knowledge was positively related to their use of high-level questions, total number of questions and number of high-level mental operational demands, disclosing the fact that mother's beliefs reflecting a view of the child as an active processor in her own development was associated with types of distancing teaching behaviors. Also a study by Sigel (1992) illustrates that constructivist beliefs relate to distancing behaviors. During a semi-structured interview, fathers and mothers responded to vignettes designed to tap their ideas about how children learn in four knowledge domains: physical knowledge (dealing with space, time and distance), social knowledge (knowledge of social rules dealing with social conflict), moral

knowledge (dealing with matters of right and wrong) and self-knowledge (awareness of inner feelings and emotional states). Parents' responses disclosed four belief categories: (1) children acquire knowledge through cognitive processing, by thinking and reasoning through problems, (2) children learn through direct instruction and guidance, (3) children learn through positive feedback and (4) children acquire knowledge through negative feedback. In addition, parents were asked how they would handle each situation presented in the vignettes. Their proposed and self-reported strategies were coded as representing either distancing (parents place mental operational demands on the child to separate self from the ongoing present), rational authoritative (parents provide explanations), direct authoritative (parents give direct rules), positive reinforcement (when a parent bribes or gives a privilege) and negative reinforcement (when a parent punishes or deprives a child). Finally, parents were observed helping their children learn how to tie a knot. Their behaviors were coded in terms of the mental operational demands the parent makes for the child to think or reason through the problem himself. Three behavior categories are to be considered: high cognitive demands (requires the child to think abstractly), low cognitive demands (demands for focused and concrete answers and requires minimal representational thinking) and structuring (defining or facilitating the task by telling what to do). Results yielded significant and moderately strong relationships between parents' stated beliefs about how children learn and parents' self-reported descriptions of what they would do to help the child solve the problem presented in the vignettes. As expected, mothers who believed children acquire knowledge through their own acts of thinking and reasoning were more likely to report distancing strategies that involved mental operational demands and less likely to report giving children explicit instructions for solving the problem (r = .72 and r = –.60, respectively). In opposition, mothers advocating children learn through direct instruction were more likely to report using this strategy and less likely to employ distancing strategies (r = .56 and r = –.60, respectively). The degree to which fathers believed that children learn by thinking through problems themselves was positively correlated with father's reports of distancing strategies (r = .77). Although father's beliefs in direct instruction were negatively related to their reports of distancing strategies (r = –.37), no

significant correlation was found between these beliefs and father's reported use of this strategy. In sum, general conclusions show that a similar pattern emerges for mothers and fathers: when they think that their children learn through cognitive processing, they are likely to propose distancing as the strategy of choice and are less likely to propose direct authoritative strategies; when they propose direct instruction as a belief, direct authoritative strategies are predicted. Also concerning parents' observed behaviors in the knot-tying task, some results were as expected: mother's use of direct instruction significantly relates to how they talk to their child about the steps that were necessary to complete the task (r = .27) and, in addition, the negative relation between the degree to which fathers asked questions that required their children to think through the problem and beliefs in direct instruction (r = –.34) is as predicted.

These studies explore the connection between what parents think and their behavior toward the child and show that parents' beliefs about childrearing are related to a variety of parental behaviors. However, the complexity of this connection has turned out to be more unraveling than expected at first and findings are not always easy to interpret. In an investigation by Ventura and Monteiro (1997), mothers answered a questionnaire assessing their beliefs about children's education and development, learning difficulties and the advantages and disadvantages of integrated special education and were asked to answer to a series of vignettes designed to tap their behaviors in daily interacting scenarios with their children. Overall results present only one positive and significant predictor of maternal strategies: the more mothers agree with traditional education (e.g., the importance of books in learning) the more they engage in rational authoritative practices (providing children with information and explaining them the reasons for behaviors) and medium level distancing strategies (β = .35). What is more, results demonstrated significant relations between beliefs mothers hold about children and their reported non-use of specific strategies and educational practices. For example, mothers who believed that educating a child means prompting her autonomy and individuality presented a negative association with their acquiescent practices (complying with children's wishes) (β = –.45). Additionally, mothers who agree with a democratic perspective (all children are equal at birth) report to

engage less in strategies which reflect some tension reduction in child (trying to calm the child) (β = –.30). Therefore, in this case an exclusion relation between beliefs and practices seems more evident than their positive association: we seem to know more about what strategies mothers do not use when they hold certain beliefs than we know about beliefs that positively influence behaviors.

Furthermore, although there is belief-behavior connection, this is usually not a strong one. In many studies results were disappointing as correlations between parents' beliefs and behaviors have been relatively weak ($r < .30$) or non significant. For example, in Sigel's (1992) study, contrary to what was expected, mothers' and fathers' beliefs in cognitive processing yielded non significant correlations ($r = .25$ and $r = .24$, respectively) to the observed frequency with which they asked their child questions during the knot-tying task. However, some possible explanations can be put forward to understand these results. First, as Sigel (1992) suggests, parenting strategies may be context or task sensitive. In fact, although parents' self-reported strategies were contextually related to hypothetical situations presented in the vignettes, the knot-tying task used for observing parents' teaching strategies was entirely unrelated in content and structure to the vignettes. Additional support is provided by McGillicuddy-De Lisi (1982) who reports that the belief that children absorb knowledge was the single best predictor of length of interaction on a paper-folding task for mothers and length of interaction on the story task for fathers and concludes that "patterns of beliefs that were predictive of actual teaching behaviors appeared to be dependent on the task the parent was teaching to the child" (p. 294).

Second, it is also conceivable that global beliefs about children's development do not relate to specific practices. For example, mothers' early literacy beliefs were highly predictive of the degree to which mothers exposed their children to joint book-reading and the quality of mothers' book-reading interactions (DeBaryshe, 1995). In this study, mothers with more facilitative beliefs (e.g. mothers' beliefs about the importance of reading to young children, their role as educators and the importance of making reading an enjoyable experience for the child) provided their children with broader and more frequent reading experiences (β = .69) and a more stimulating,

discussion-oriented reading style (β = .48). On the other hand, Hammer, Rodriguez, Lawrence and Miccio (2007) examined mothers' traditional and progressive beliefs regarding childrearing and education in order to determine if relationships existed between these beliefs and mothers' literacy practices. However, relations between these general beliefs and practices were not observed. These investigations suggest that the strength of correlations between parents' beliefs and behaviors depends, in part, of a close fit between the content of the belief and the type of behavior that is measured. As Okagaki and Bingham (2005) state, "one explanation for variation in the strength of belief-behavior correlations is the degree to which the content of the belief being measured matches the nature of the observed parenting behavior" (p. 17).

Third, we may have to posit that beliefs may guide behavior but that they may not fully determine behavior. Beliefs take a variety of forms and vary on how closely they link to action. Moreover, behaviors also take a variety of forms and always have multiple determinants. For example, intentionality of behavior will be involved whenever beliefs are expressed as overt actions that have an effect on the external world. Although parents may hold specific beliefs, they may refrain from acting accordingly due to a variety of circumstances or they may choose timing and setting for action. The intention to act is influenced not only by parents' beliefs, but also by time or place. As McGillicuddy-De Lisi and Sigel (1995) state, "it is this type of relation between belief and intentionality that contributes to difficulties in drawing the connections between beliefs and practices" (p. 351). Given that behavior is multiply determined, it is unlikely that just childrearing beliefs could be found to determine behavior.

Finally, parental cognitions can be conceptualized as mediating factors that filter experiences with the child into strategies for parental practices (McGillicuddy-De Lisi & Sigel, 1995). According to Belsky's (1984) influential model on the determinants of parenting, how parents respond to their children is likely to depend, amongst other determinants, on the characteristics of the child. For example, Russel (1980) reports, when dealing with mother's beliefs as to how much they should leave their baby alone, that the practices in this respect are not determined solely by the beliefs of the mother. The infant's reactions greatly affect the mother's practices. Several

child characteristics are particularly likely candidates to influence parenting. These include child temperament, usually defined by most conceptualizations as encompassing relatively stable individual differences in three broad areas: negative emotionality, self-regulation (control of attentional and emotional processes) and inhibition/ sociability (Sanson, Hemphill, & Smart, 2002). A large literature base has explored the structure and function of temperament from the infancy period throughout childhood and adolescence, including its role in influencing parent-child relationships and determining child outcomes. Much of the research devoted to understanding how children's temperament-driven behavior impacts parenting in more specific ways has focused on those temperament qualities that are hard to manage. Although findings suggest that the challenges inherent in parenting a temperamentally difficult child may cause many parents to invest minimal energy in parenting and emotionally withdraw from the relationship (Kingston & Prior, 1995; Mangelsdorf, Gunnar, Kestenbaum, Lang, & Andreas, 1990; Morris et al., 2002), a number of studies have indicated that in some cases having children with challenging temperaments can lead to the development of skillful parenting behavior (Belsky, Rha, & Park, 2000; Park, Belsky, Putnam, & Crnic, 1997; van Bakel & Riksen-Walrven, 2002). As Karraker and Coleman (2005) state, "findings suggest that some child characteristics can elicit complex behavioral patterns from parents. Some parent behaviors may reflect the parent's irritation with the child's undesirable behavior whereas others may represent the parent's attempt to positively redirect or change the child's behavior" (p. 163). Besides temperament, evidence shows that child age also appears to have influences on parenting. Given the many changes that characterize the infancy period throughout childhood and adolescence, parents are challenged to make modifications across a variety of parenting practices and, therefore, must continuously fine-tune their parenting practices so as to be in line with the changing developmental needs of the child. Evidence shows that both adolescents and their parents perceive lower levels of responsiveness as children grow older (Paulson & Sputa, 1996), that parents hardly use physical punishment with their adolescent children (Baumrind, 1996) and that, since authoritative and authoritarian parental styles are associated with younger adolescents and permissive and neglectful styles are associated with older ones,

control becomes less effective and less central to positive parenting during adolescence (Shucksmith, Hendry, & Glendinning, 1995). This brief summary of studies provides evidence that certain child characteristics may, indeed, elicit differential responding from parents.

To summarize, the relations of beliefs and practice, though often found, can not be stated to form a straightforward rule. The impact of beliefs on behavior seems to be mediated through various factors and beliefs or cognitions of parents are themselves affected by these same factors.

Parental attitudes and behaviors

"The single most important assumption underlying the parent attitude research is that attitudes determine behavior, or at least are related to behavior" (Holden, 1995, p. 379). Reliance on parental attitudes as indicative of parent behavior or the home environment has stimulated an eager reception to the construct of parental attitudes and has resulted in a wide variety of attitudes being studied and concerted efforts to link childrearing attitudes with both parent and child outcomes.

Some studies have investigated the links between childrearing attitudes and parenting behavior. Although it is clear that parental attitudes have not yet provided the key for fully revealing the mysteries of childrearing behavior, investigation in the area has generated interesting findings for understanding determinants of parental behavior and influences on behavioral outcome of parents. For example, Iverson and Segal (1992) achieved success at linking attitudes with behavior when observing parents interacting with their preschool children. Evidence showed that attitudes toward such goals as responsibility, independence and creativity in their children (vs. obedience) were positively correlated with spending more time with children, asking more questions and being less critical of their children. In an observational-based study, patterns of paternal stimulation of their infants were related to paternal attitudes (Beitel & Parke, 1998). In this study, results demonstrate that basic attitudes about the "value of paternal involvement" and the "difference in innate ability" to nurture held by men account for significant variance in the level of father involvement

when the mother is present. Therefore, fathers holding attitudes about men's ability to nurture (relative to women) lead them to involve themselves more intensively with their infants or defer to their wives. Other study by Kochanska, Kuczynski and Radke-Yarrow (1989) found a reliable correspondence between mothers' childrearing attitudes (assessed by the Child Rearing Practices Report) and observed behavior when the attitude items matched the content of the action. More specifically, results provided evidence to the fact that the endorsement of the authoritarian/restrictive pattern of attitudes toward childrearing was clearly associated with the use of direct and restrictive strategies, whereas verbal endorsement of the authoritative/democratic pattern was associated with relatively indirect, positive and nonconfrontational forms of control. Other research has focused on the effects of situational pressures and maternal characteristics (namely, controlling parenting attitudes) on mothers' autonomy support *versus* control in the social domain (Grolnick, Price, Beiswenger, & Sauck, 2007). Mothers were observed working with their children in a laboratory task in preparation for meeting new children. Results evidenced that parents' attitudes toward supporting *versus* controlling children's behavior, as assessed by a 10-item self-report questionnaire, presented main effects for all the outcomes in the task. Mothers who endorsed more controlling attitudes were more controlling on the behavior rating during the task and were lower on the two autonomy supportive content codes (offering information and giving feedback) than were those who endorsed more autonomy supportive attitudes. Moreover, mothers who endorsed more controlling attitudes were higher in directing and giving answers than were those who endorsed more autonomy supportive attitudes. The results of a study by Dagget, O'Brien, Zanolli and Peyton (2000) indicate that parental attitudes play an important role in the quality of the child-rearing environment that parents provide for infants, toddlers, and preschoolers. Analyses indicated that mothers who viewed their child's behavior negatively and those who had negative attitudes toward life in general provided lower quality environments for their child. Also a study with Mexican immigrant mothers demonstrated that low-educational parents often value education, have a verbal commitment to their children's education and exhibit a vision of academic future for their children. Though they lack an extensive academic

background, their positive attitude manifested in daily pro-educational behaviors overcomes their low education level because they both motivate their children to pursue academic success and participate in their children's learning (Schaller, Rocha, & Barshinger, 2006). In a certain sense, these results parallel the ones by Siano (1985): despite cultural handicaps, farmers from the south of France valued their children's education and supported their academic work towards a qualified degree, as long as children manifested a "natural gift" and success towards the school subjects (see also Paillard & Gilly, 1972, and for a discussion, see ; Valentim, 1997).

The studies reviewed allow us to conclude that there is indeed evidence relating parental attitudes with actions. Even so, as in the case of beliefs, the magnitude of the correlation found in most studies on childrearing attitudes and behaviors is quite modest (Holden & Edwards, 1989). However, that attitudes do not fully reflect behavior comes as no surprise, especially considering the complex relations between attitudes and behavior. In fact, work on attitude-behavior relations has shown clearly that attitudes alone are insufficient for predicting behavior.

In the past few decades, enough careful research has been conducted to conclude confidently that attitudes *are* related to behaviors and to outline the conditions under which the relationship is likely to be strong rather than weak. Attitudes are seen as multidimensional and consisting of different elements which, only in conjunction, serve to predict behavior (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980; Fazio, 1986). They are conceptualized as operating within a system of beliefs, beliefs about social norms concerning the object, motivation to comply with those norms and a weighting of attitudes and norms. Therefore, according to this model, behavioral intentions are a function of attitudes toward performing the behavior and subjective norms regarding its performance. Subjective norms involve "perceptions of significant others' preferences about whether one should engage in a behavior" (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993, p. 171). So, when it is widely recognized that a behavior is socially desirable, normatively appropriate and politically correct, many might perform the behavior in the absence of a favorable attitude. In this case, attitudes are not expected to predict behavior well. Conversely, weak subjective norms create a situation in which participants are free to as they please and attitudes have a better chance of

predicting behavior. In addition, behavior is a function of attitudes, subjective norms and perceived behavioral control, with the latter being defined as "one's perception of how easy or difficult it is to perform the behavior" (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993, pp. 186-187). When a behavior is difficult to enact, few people can overcome situational obstacles, so one would not expect attitudes to predict behavior very well. Conversely, confident perceptions of behavioral control create a relatively "easy" situation and attitudes have a better chance of predicting behavior. A recent meta-analysis (Wallace, Paulson, Lord, & Bond Jr., 2005) tested a theoretical hypothesis that situational constraints, such as perceived social pressure and perceived difficulty, weaken the relationship between attitudes and behavior. Both perceived social pressure and perceived difficulty were shown to be significant moderators of the attitude-behavior relationship, and they were shown to moderate the relationship significantly and in the same direction in studies that involved attitudes toward targets as in studies that involved attitudes toward behaviors. Overall results might be interpreted as strongly supporting the tenet that attitudes are just one of several factors that influence behavioral intentions and behavior.

Having reached consensus that the relationship between attitudes and behavior is far from perfect but adequate to merit study, researchers focused on identifying conditions under which this relationship is larger or smaller. Taken together, the work on attitude-behavior relationship has demonstrated how other aspects of social cognition interact with attitudes and are necessary to predict behavior. For that reason, Holden (1995) has suggested that these models provide an "useful avenue for making theoretical progress toward understanding the attitude-behavior link. That in turn will be useful for predicting parenting behavior" (p. 383).

So far, we have focused on the relation between parents' ideas about children and caregiving and their behavior. However, before proceeding to discussion, a few points need to be noted. First, most of the research presented is based on nonexperimental and correlational studies and thus it does not document cause-and-relation effects. Moreover, studies are presented in which parents' ideas are differently measured: while some studies are based on observational approaches, others rely on parents' self-reports both to measure their ideas and behaviors. Second, studies are presented that involve mothers

or/and fathers. Literature seems to point to differences in parenting associated with gender, as being a father or a mother seems to orient and modulate certain specific aspects of parenting ideas and childrearing behaviors. However, regardless of the methodologies employed in each study and gender differences associated with parental roles, literature was discussed for heuristic purposes – that is, to advance thinking about the influence of ideas in parental functioning.

Discussion

Parental ideas are of undeniable importance generally because they have been considered the key to understand parenting in its own right, as they help to organize the world of parenting and afford organization and coherence to the tasks of childrearing. Further, it has been argued that parents' ideas generate and shape parenting practices. The underlying assumption that parents' appraisals about their children's nature and development and about their role in childrearing would influence parenting practices has led to increasing attention on the role of parent's ideas in mediating parenting behaviors. In fact, the connection between what parents think and their behavior toward the child has been explored in a number of studies and under a wide variety of conceptual headings (parents' beliefs, attitudes, goals, theories, schemas).

Irrespective of the labels researchers give to their constructs, the shared conviction is that parents' ideas *do* matter and that ideas parents hold ***do*** **relate** to their childrearing behaviors. However, literature reviews (Goodnow, 1988; Goodnow & Collins, 1990; Holden, 1995; Holden & Edwards, 1989; Miller, 1988) have emphasized the complexity of this connection and shown that parents' ideas and their relations to parenting behaviors are more unraveling than initially acknowledged. Although parental ideas have been linked to parenting practices, the majority of these links are weak and research has generally failed to establish a causal relation between parents' ideas and behaviors (Okagaki & Bingham, 2005).

One of the ways in which this complexity emerges is by emphasized consideration of the need of a closer fit between content of ideas reported and the content of the action (Goodnow, 1988; Kochanska, Kuczynski, & Radke-

Yarrow, 1989; Sigel, 1992). As already has been argued in this paper, global ideas are not expected to predict specific behaviors. Therefore, the greater the overlap between the content of the ideas and the behavior that is measured, the greater will be the relationship.

Second, the complexity of the idea-behavior link has become more striking as researchers tended to consider parents' ideas as interrelated, rather as isolated or distinct factors that have a one-to-one effect on childrearing behaviors. McGillicuddy-De Lisi and Sigel (1995) proposed the belief complex model and noted that if we are to study the effect of ideas on parenting, the various components of beliefs should be incorporated into a single unit of interrelated parts, where each components is connected to the other through a core cognitive component. They assumed that the various components of the belief complex (cognitive content, structure, source, function and relation to affect, intention and value) encompass the relevant features that enable the identification of aspects of beliefs that influence parents' development and allow us to assess the relation between parents' beliefs and behaviors. The belief complex postulates that "the expression of a belief is influenced by the parents' ideas (knowledge or beliefs about what is true), by the feelings that are attached to those ideas, by the parents' desires (intentions) and by the value assigned to particular behaviors, child outcomes or events" (p. 352). In summary, albeit beliefs are a source of parenting practices, the belief complex calls attention for the non-cognitive components affecting the belief-behavior relation and emphasizes that actions stemming from beliefs vary depending on a number of intervening and constraining factors. Nevertheless, the belief system approach is actually concerned with individual perceptions and logical analysis of information held by each parent about the child's development. Moreover, beliefs are generally taken for granted, as patterns of schemata individually processed, usually seen as arising from social experiences and as defining an individual's social reality (Carugati, 1990). Based on the information-processing metaphor, belief systems are used to explain observed biases, errors and imperviousness to new information. Knowledge is used in a sense of an individual knowing espoused as being true and the social construction ok knowledge is disregarded. As a result, "this theoretical lacuna presents a view of social cognition as the activity of individual minds

confronting the social world" (Duveen & Lloyd, 1990, p. 3). These considerations suggest that everyday ideas or beliefs can no longer be considered in isolation, but rather that their properties must be grasped within the cultural settings in which they are produced, maintained and transformed (Carugati, 1990). By locating psychological activities in social life, the theory of social representations constitutes a privileged focus for the understanding of social psychological phenomena as it permits the elucidation of the link between knowledge and context. Representation is not a static entity and social life is always considered as an active construction of social actors, rather than being taken as given. When pointing to the emergence of particular views of children or parenting, families and parents do not exist in a *vacuum*. They exist in a cultural milieu and researchers have increasingly considered the need to devote particular attention to conditions outside the individual, such as social and economic factors, influencing parenting functions and the nature of parent-child interactions (Maccoby & Martin, 1983). In modern society, and while humans are private persons, they nevertheless share ideas, communicate and consume scientific knowledge, use it in their everyday conversations and behavior, have a common existence, form groups, construct meanings and invent institutions (Moscovici, 1981, 2001; Moscovici & Hewstone, 1984). In this unceasing give and take, ideas about children are conveyed. There is always a formal and common sense view of education, childrearing and parenting. Given this state of affairs, it seems reasonable to propose that the study of parents' ideas may also benefit from the concept of social representations which stresses social life as the basis for the ideas that parents come to hold, and adds an emphasis on people as belonging to social groups. In that sense, social representations are essential for a socio-cognitive adaptation and reconstruction of everyday reality. Representations shape a symbolic reality and express "the complexity of the interrelations between internal and external worlds, between individual persons and the collectivities to which they belong, between psychic structures and social realities. The work of representation is multifaceted and moves incessantly from the individual to the social and from the social to the individual" (Jovchelovitch, 2007, p. 34). Unlike the belief systems approach, from the social-representations perspective the issue is not one of biases or imperviousness to information but rather a

search for the dynamics of content areas that contribute and shape a symbolic reality. By providing collectivities with intersubjectively shared meanings for understanding and communicating, social representations search for the articulation of the collective or social which the individual is an indivisible part (Carugati, 1990). To sum up,

the concept of representation is not equivalent to that of cultural model or belief systems because the term «representation» does not merely imply the description of the content of information, but elicits the process of selective organization of information within a system of relations which links the subject to a given object, and defines them on the basis of that link which becomes the filter through which all information is interpreted and elaborated (Emiliani, 1993, pp. 2-3).

In considering the social origin of knowledge, social representations drive attention on the specific social context in which ideas emerge, taking into account the cultural complexities of local communities. A fundamental parental idea has to do with what it means to be a parent and what is the proper role of a father/mother. Education and parenting are ever-present subjects underlying people's regards and providing topics for conversation, general *themata* (Moscovici & Vignaux, 1994) which cross different cultures and have a long tradition of concern. However, despite similarities and common-ground concerns and values (e.g., see Schwartz & Bilsky, 1990), cultural groups vary in the ways in which they understand the role and responsibilities of parents. Parenting patterns may be emphasized differently and retain varied aspects in different cultural contexts because certain aspects of parenting and specific child outcomes may be valued more in one context than another. For example, based on research with immigrant Chinese and European American mothers, Chao (1994) observed differences in the ways in which mothers defined their roles. As opposed to European American mothers, Chinese immigrant mothers believed that young children should only be cared for by their mothers or by some other family member and placed a strong emphasis on training and teaching children. Also in a recent review, Okagaki and Bingham (2005) have shown that parents' ideas vary across social contexts and appear to be related to broader cultural values. But besides ideas, also parenting is considered to be heavily influenced by cultural background. Thus, parents with specific cultures

may have varying ideas about and use different practices in childrearing which provide a developmental niche for children living in diverse contexts. For instance, Wu and colleagues (2002) have found that even though several parenting practice constructs derived from Chinese cultural notions could also be empirically identified in a US sample, significant cultural differences in parenting existed between these two cultures. For example, one distinctive feature unique to parenting practices emphasized in China involved the strong focus on modesty and cooperation among young children and results indicated that Chinese mothers perceived themselves as engaging in greater modesty encouragement than US mothers. Therefore, findings support those who argue that modesty is more valued in collectivist societies (Triandis, 1995), where individuals are encouraged to restrain their personal desires for the benefit and interests of the society at large. As Baumrind (1996) states, "differences between groups in childrearing goals and socialization practices reflect culturally specific adaptive solutions to problems posed by the demand characteristics of particular environments" (p. 409). Information and ideas acquire meanings when absorbed into the context of particular life-worlds. Given the high degree of plasticity of human social behaviors, local representations and cultural practices must, therefore, be taken into account in order to understand the role of culture in shaping parental ideas and behaviors.

Third, researchers have begun to consider a developmental perspective of parents' ideas as they have begun to recognize that ideas are not static and develop over time. Since individuals are by and large sensitive to new information and experiences, there is reason to suspect that change – rather than only stability – also characterizes childrearing ideas, as they are acquired and molded in the course of day-to-day interchanges. An example where the assumption that change is likely to occur has been made explicit is a study by Goodnow, Cashmore, Cotton and Knight (1984). They divided Australian-born and Lebanese-born mothers into two groups: those with and without experience with an Australian school system. This particular experience, involving advice from teachers on what children should be able to do before entering school, was considered likely to influence mothers' expectations about ages for achieving various skills. Other investigation has recognized that mother's ideas about controlling and nurturing behaviors are modified as a consequence of six

months of parenting experience (Scott & Hill, 2001). Further, as evidence provided by studies reviewed previously, children characteristics may influence childrearing practices (Belsky, 1984). In fact, children provide immediate feedback to parental behavior, indicating its (in)effectiveness. Such information may well prompt parents to reevaluate their ideas and redirect their practices. Mugny and Carugati (1985) have also provided an example of the mutable nature of ideas by illustrating the way parents change in the degree to which they endorse one viewpoint or another as they become swept up in the school system or as they find themselves in a position of double responsibility. They noted two main definitions of intelligence: intelligence as a social skill and adaptability, and intelligence as the ability to solve abstract problems, especially in logic and mathematics. Before their children enter school, Swiss and Italian parents favor social definitions. Entry into school, however, brings an increase in the extent to which problem-solving definitions are endorsed. The shift, Mugny and Carugati argue, is not only the larger exposure to school-based definitions, but is to a greater extent a consequence of the shift in the social group to which parents belong (a parent of a school child) and the fact that they are expected to take the views of this new social position. To summarize, although parents may hold well-developed ideas about childrearing, evidence suggests that plasticity, rather than just fixity, is a prime attribute of parental ideas.

The ability to understand and establish a causal connection between parents' ideas and their childrearing behaviors reflects a very important theoretical goal, as it enables a wide comprehension of why people hold beliefs, what functions they serve and their effects on parents, children and families. Yet, this line of research also bears an outstanding practical aim. Indeed, it has important implications for parenting intervention and education programs. As parenting interventions seek to change parents' behaviors, the argument that ideas permeate parents' actions leads to the conviction that changing parents' ideas might bring a corresponding change in their behavior. In addition and as just discussed before, ideas hold the potential to be transformed, created and reorganized in every experience. The recognition of the mutable nature of ideas reinforces confidence that if ideas can be manipulated to a certain extent, this manipulation does, in fact, influence behaviors.

Over a decade ago, developmental researchers were challenged to consider work by social psychology (Goodnow, 1988; Holden, 1995) and to borrow models and methods which can be used to benefit research on parents' ideas. As social and developmental researchers share the same concern for the study of ideas and the ways by which these connect to behaviors, they have answered the call and links between social and developmental psychology have been deepened, as those interested in parents' ideas have drawn more heavily on research from social and cognitive psychology (Okagaki & Bingham, 2005). As Moscovici (1990) wonderfully states, "after being separated almost to the point of losing all contact, social psychology and developmental psychology are beginning to return to a shared line of research, as pendulums which have been separated return by themselves to the vertical" (p. 169). Representations predominate in the mental life of individuals. Extending parental research towards considering the social origin of parents' ideas may provide a framework to understand the nature and consequences of thinking in the course of everyday life.

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