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Understandings of children's influence in parent–child relationships: A Q-methodological study

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ABSTRACT

Bidirectional models of interpersonal influence in parent–child relationships underscore the influence of children on their parents. Following a social constructionist perspective, the present study uses Q methodology to explore meanings and beliefs concerning children's influence among members of the Belgian-Flemish culture. Children and adults each performed the Q-sorting tasks that were analysed separately. Q-factor analysis of the children-sorts produced five factors and six factors for the adults. These analyses revealed that a central understanding of children's influence for children and adults is the recognition of the full person and partnership of the child in the relationship. Children's responses focus on the responsiveness of the parents and stress that parents learn from them. Adults' responses emphasize the massiveness of children's influence on the parents' personal development.

KEY WORDS: agency • bidirectionality • influence • parent–child relationships • Q methodology • social constructionism

Lollis and Kuczynski (1997) described a 9-year-old boy who recounted to his mother, “If I look hurt and go to my room after dad gets mad at me, then I know that he will soon come and apologize” (pp. 456–457). This example most likely feels familiar to both parents and children who are aware of the massive influence children have on their parents. Therefore, it is surprising that the influence of children on parents is hard to describe –

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there is no word for it – and even harder to study as the literature on this topic is limited. In the present article we aim to capture the content and meaning of children's influence on parents, starting from the theory of bidirectional influence in parent–child relationships.

Bidirectional models have become more common in recent parent–child relationships research (Parke, 2002). In these models, family socialization processes are not considered unidirectional parent or child effects. Bidirectionality stresses the co-occurrence of both directions of influence – from parent to child and from child to parent – in a complex reciprocal system (Kuczynski, 2003). As Maccoby (2003) argues, bidirectionality goes beyond the two main unidirectional effects and assumes that parents and children continuously and mutually influence each other in an ongoing transactional process. In these mutual influence processes, parents and children are partners in the development of one another and the relationship.

There is a large body of research on bidirectionality and reciprocity in parent–child relations (Pettit & Lollis, 1997) across several domains, such as developmental psychology (Crouter & Booth, 2003; Kuczynski, 2003), parent–infant communication (e.g., Trevarthen & Aitkin, 2001), and the sociology of childhood (Morrow, 2003). Despite diversity in the conceptualization of bidirectional influence in socialization research, we distinguish two general approaches (Kuczynski & Parkin, 2006; Lollis & Kuczynski, 1997). First, the *behavioral perspective* (Patterson & Fisher, 2002) considers bidirectionality as reciprocal exchanges of behaviors producing linear change. Moreover, the *cognitive perspective* considers bidirectionality a process of meaning construction between humans that produces transformational change (Holden & Hawk, 2003; Lawrence & Valsiner, 1993; Smetana, 1997). The notion of human agency is central to this cognitive bidirectionality perspective (Kuczynski, 2003). Agency is a multifaceted construct (Bandura, 2001), referring to the human capacity for initiating purposeful behavior to influence the other and the ability to interpret these relational experiences and to accommodate future behavior according to these meaning constructs.

Recent proposals on bidirectionality in parent–child relationships emphasize the equal agency of parents and children (Kuczynski, Harach, & Bernardini, 1999). In addition to the comprehensive research on parenting, research on children's agency has also received much attention in recent years (Crouter & Booth, 2003; Cummings & Schermerhorn, 2003). A bidirectional framework on parent–child relations must add a child-to-parent direction of influence to the widely accepted parent-to-child influence (Kuczynski & Navara, 2006). Research on children's agency shows how children drive the interaction with their parents (e.g., Kerr & Stattin, 2003), influence their own socialization by influencing parental strategies (Grusec & Goodnow, 1994), and influence many aspects of the parent's personality (Ambert, 2001; Palkowitz, Marks, Appleby, & Holmes, 2003).

In sum, there is considerable evidence supporting reciprocal influence in the parent–child relation and for the importance of children's agency in this bidirectional relationship context. However, little research has focused

on the cultural understandings of children's influence in the parent-child relationship. The present study aims at exploring such understandings in Belgian-Flemish culture.

Basic relationship theory (Hinde, 1997) stresses the reciprocal influences between the various levels of social complexity, that is, individual, interaction, relationship, group and socio-cultural structure. Referring to Hinde's theory, Lollis and Kuczynski (1997) argue how social interactions construct the relationship level, while the context of the relationship forms the dynamics for the interaction level. In a similar way, culture can be understood as a dynamic context for the development of relationships (and other levels), while socio-cultural contexts are created by humans, their interactions and relationships. Although several theoretical frameworks account for the nature of the interpenetrating processes between the various levels of social life (Deaux & Philogène, 2001), culture is defined as founding and constituting human life. Culture is understood as a complex of meanings, a semiotic space, and a set of practices that represent these meanings (Markus & Plaut, 2001).

In this study, we adopt a social constructionist approach (Berger & Luckmann, 1967). Social constructionism asserts that people construct reality through social interaction. As people engage in a process of construction, their knowledge never objectively reflects external reality but is instead a negotiated creation of meaning. We negotiate and interact with each other through language, and in this process we create meaning constructs or shared understandings. These understandings, or common sense knowledge, constitute the semiotic space in which we feel, act, and think. By acting upon – and interacting in – this world of meaning, constructs are reproduced and changed, emphasizing the dynamic nature of the process of social construction. The core of social constructionism is language. Drawing on Wittgenstein's linguistic philosophy, language does not represent a world outside language. Language can only exist in social interactions and, in these contexts, language creates meaning and, consequently, reality. As Gergen (1994) postulates, "It is human interchange that gives language its capacity to mean, and it must stand as the critical locus of concern" (p. 264). From this point of view, reality does not exist outside language (Gergen, 2001). There are many versions of social constructionism in very different scientific fields (for a review, see e.g., Pearce, 1995). Some theoretical approaches, like Gergen's, take a radical ontological position, claiming that there is no reality "out there." Other approaches are less radical (e.g., Hacking, 1999). We embrace the approach of Jovchelovitch (2001). In a critical essay on the semiotic dimension of social representations, she advances the thesis that reality is larger than what we socially construct. The issue is that symbolic knowledge, as the crucial process of cultural production, is central to reshaping and representing reality and producing meaning out of it. That is, the creation of shared understandings as the semiotic space in which we live is of central importance to human social life, and this is perfectly consistent with a reality that exists outside our constructions. In the present study, we investigate children's and adults'

understandings and meanings of children's influence in the bidirectional parent-child relationship. Consonant with social constructionism, these understandings and meanings are not only constructed in the parent-child unit, but in other contexts and social interactions as well. Therefore, child-less adults also participated in this study.

This study elaborates on a phenomenological study (De Mol & Buysse, in press) in which we focused on how meanings concerning children's influence are co-constructed in the parent-child relation. A co-constructionist view (Valsiner, Branco, & Dantas, 1997) belongs to the cognitive perspective on bidirectionality and is especially useful for studying meaning construction in the parent-child relationship, since parents and children are seen as thinking subjects acting in a relationship where meanings are co-constructed regarding oneself and the other in the dialectical processes of the relationship. These meanings and expectancies are cardinal to the development of the parent-child relationship (Bugental & Johnston, 2000). In that phenomenological study, 30 parents and 30 children, one parent and one child from the same family, were interviewed concerning the influences the child can have on his/her parent. These semistructured interviews were conducted separately with each parent and each child. The children's ages ranged between 11 and 15 years ($M = 13.3$; $SD = 1.2$); 12 boys and 18 girls participated. The ages of the parents ranged between 37 and 52 years ($M = 43.55$, $SD = 2.6$); 11 fathers and 19 mothers participated. The results support a dialectical perspective on parent-child relations (Kuczynski & Parkin, 2006). Parents and children describe the children's influence as parents *trying* to understand their children, *taking into account* children's ideas, and *learning that there are several ways to love one's child*. Children's influence does not exert pressure on the parent to adopt children's wishes or points of view completely. Instead, it concerns accommodation and negotiation to co-construct a new approach in the relation that is viable for both parties and that will be challenged in a future episode. In this respect, influence covers a different reality than that of power and control.

The phenomenological study focused on processes of meaning construction in the parent-child relationship and not on understandings concerning the content of children's influence. The latter is the focus of the present study. Because meaning construction issues within the parent-child relationship goes beyond this relationship, we chose a broader social constructionist approach. In this exploratory study, we sought to determine what meanings and beliefs exist in Belgian-Flemish culture concerning children's agency. Considering children as fully agentic implies the assumption that, as human beings with their own agentic features, children construct different meanings and beliefs than do their parents. We therefore asked children and adults to inform us separately about their meanings and beliefs concerning children's influence in the bidirectional parent-child relationship.

Methods

Q methodology

Performing a broad social constructionist analysis requires a methodology that is designed to investigate variety and diversity in understandings within a particular culture. Q methodology meets these requirements (Stainton Rogers, 1995). Participants are asked to rank a sample of statements (Q set) concerning the subject of research to a quasi-normal distribution (Q sorting task). Then, the Q sorts are correlated and factor analyzed (Q factor analysis), resulting in different factors that represent distinct and shared understandings concerning the subject. The aim of Q factor analysis is to look for diversity in cultural understandings concerning the issue of research. The focus is not on the participants themselves, as Q is not designed to provide information about the proportion of people representing a particular understanding. Within Q methodology, participants must be perceived as collaborators and not as subjects under investigation. The aim is to describe a population of ideas and not a population of subjects (Risdon, Eccleston, Crombez, & McCracken, 2003).

More specifically, Q methodology is well designated to explore diversity in understandings in a systematic way, but it is not suited to address the issue of representativeness of particular understandings for certain classes of people. Research questions regarding representativeness demand an appropriate methodology with larger samples. Q methodology combines the strengths of both qualitative and quantitative methods (Brown, 1996), because factor analysis is used to explore human subjectivity. As for qualitative research in general, however, Q methodology can only give indications concerning issues of representativeness. At least two issues are then important for the interpretation of the findings of the present study. First, the number of Q sorts loading on a particular factor does not refer to the spread of that factor in the population. Instead, diversity of factor exemplars gives only an indication about the spread of the particular understanding in society. Second, consistent with our social constructionist approach, the sample of adults contained parents and non parents in order to generate as diverse factors as possible, which is the main goal of Q methodology. Comparative analyses between understandings of parents and nonparents are only indicative and should be interpreted cautiously. In sum, Q methodology is well suited to systematically identify understandings in our society, but can only give indications regarding spread and representativeness of understandings, as these issues need further testing with appropriate methodology and larger samples.

Development of the Q set

A variety of understandings were generated by examining a number of sources. First, the data of the phenomenological study (De Mol & Buysse, *in press*) were used. Second, semistructured interviews concerning the influence of children on their parents were administered to 20 professionals (psychologists, psychotherapists, researchers, and teachers). Third, research

literature concerning child effects and the agency of children was examined. Finally, popular media and websites were searched. Based upon these sources, we produced as many statements as possible relating to children's influence. Three hundred statements were generated and subsequently examined by the researchers regarding their significance and clarity. Similar statements were removed. After discussion, a final set of 82 statements was selected for the Q set and each statement was given a random number. This set is shown in Figure 1. More specifically, Figure 1 exemplifies the distribution of the 82 statements in the final Q sort, after Q factor analysis, of the first factor (Factor 1) of the adults.

Participants

We focused participants sampling on the autochthonous White population of Flanders. Flanders is a multicultural society and it would be most interesting to study children's agency in the various cultures that enrich Flanders' society. Given the novelty of the research, we decided, as White researchers, to start within a more familiar cultural context.

Within the chosen cultural context, participants were selected for diversity age, gender, level of education, profession, marital status and family situation. For the phenomenological study (De Mol & Buysse, in press), participants were recruited through an advertisement in a weekly magazine. Volunteers who could not participate in the initial study were contacted again to participate in this Q methodological study. For this Q study, children and adults were not allowed to belong to the same family. Moreover, there was no kinship between the adults and/or the children. Enlisted participants were asked to suggest other possible participants in a limited snowballing technique.

Thirty children (*age range* = 11 to 15 years; $M = 13.17$; $SD = 1.2$) and 31 adults (*age range* = 18 to 67 years; $M = 38.22$; $SD = 12.45$) were selected to perform the Q sorting task. Thirty participants are recommended as a minimum to achieve stability in the factor structure (Brown, 1980). The children's age range (11 to 15 years) was the same as for the preliminary investigation to develop the Q set and included 16 girls and 14 boys. Six children attended elementary school, three attended special education school, 10 attended secondary school, and 11 attended junior secondary technical school. One child had lost one parent and lived alone with her mother. Six children's parents were divorced, and 4 of those children lived in a step-family. Twenty-seven children had siblings. Occupations of the children's parents were very diverse: Labourers, employees, public servants and independent professionals. Three parents were unemployed, and one parent was mentally disabled.

In selecting adults, no attempt was made to exclude childless individuals: 17 women and 14 men performed the Q sorting task, of which 18 were parents (9 mothers and 9 fathers). In terms of occupation, 5 adults were students participated (all childless), 2 were unemployed (both childless persons), 3 were retired (one childless person and two parents), 2 were housekeepers (both parents), and 19 worked outside the home (5 childless

FIGURE 1
Eighty-two statements in final Q sort arranged as Factor 1 (adults)

-6	-5	-4	-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3	4	5	6
Most disagree						Neutral						Most agree
22. children must be taken into account by their parents	27. parents are faced with many difficulties and troubles	10. this influence is different depending on the gender of the child	16. parents are often insecure	1. especially the trait of the child influence the parents	2. these influences are bounded to our culture	13. parents adopt their ideas about education	24. this influence is different in many ways	8. parents have feelings of guilt when things are going wrong	3. this influence becomes greater as the child is more handicapped	6. this influence becomes greater when the child is more handicapped	5. parents try to understand their children	4. children are taken into account by their parents
38. it regards unimportant matters because parental influence is more important	41. parents must understand themselves regarding their children	29. that it is important for parents that others notice their efforts	21. parents learn from their children's influence on their children is limited	12. this influence starts at the beginning of the pregnancy	18. parents judge people with more charity	20. parents learn to know each other in different ways	26. this influence is different depending on the age of the child	37. parents adopt other values	15. this influence is dependent on the atmosphere in the family	7. this influence is always present in a conscious or unconscious way	11. parents feel responsible for their children	9. children are considered as full persons
80. children play the boss with their parents	65. parents get very tired	34. this influence is dependent on the number of children in the family	28. the privacy of the parents is reduced	22. parents adopt certain practices from their children	25. parents are forced to act forcefully	30. parents notice the differences between their own education in a different way	32. this influence is different if there is an emotional relationship based on mutual trust	42. this influence can be positive or negative	17. parents spend much time with their children	31. parents obtain a greater sense of responsibility	14. there is a respect for both parent and child	39. parents are taking into account the ideas and feelings of their children
	78. parents have difficulties with accepting this influence	61. parents get more self-confidence	49. the freedom of the parents is restricted	40. children learn much about themselves	46. children determine the emotions of their parents	36. parents evaluate their own education in a different way	35. parents must be constantly inventive	57. parents learn to know other people	19. parents reflect more on everything	47. parents are responsible that they do not have control of everything	79. parents show interest in their children	
	75. when children are taken into account it is positive for their development		58. parents become more sensitive to the opinions from others	50. children take part in deciding what is bought	52. parents must express their opinions many times	43. this influence is different from child to child	45. children keep their parents active	59. parents are responsible to negotiate with one another	33. parents are bound to be occupied with the future of their children	56. children are responsible for parents' planning of the day		
		66. parents experience failures regularly		71. there is not much talking about this because one thinks more about parental influences	54. parents are constantly concerned	51. parents think more about how to spend their money	48. parents must change their expectations regarding their children	64. parents adjust their old ideals and become more realistic	44. parents learn many new things from their children			
		74. parents become more serene		76. parents learn how youngsters associate with adults	63. parents and children learn from each other effects than intended	60. parents are responsible to keep their job	53. parents adopt things from the children's social world	67. parents recognize aspects of their own personality	77. parents are responsible to collaborate			
				81. children try to influence the conflicts between the parents	73. parents have less time for each other	68. this influence is more significant now than in the past	55. parents learn how children treat each other	70. parents learn there are different manners to love your child				
					82. parents and children are surprised how much they resemble		62. parents discover other aspects of their personality					
						69. the differences between the parents are more apparent						
						72. parents change their own opinions						

persons and 14 parents). Three participants were divorced (1 childless person and 2 parents), 17 were married (2 childless persons and 15 parents), 6 cohabited (four childless persons and two parents), and 8 participants lived alone (seven childless persons and one parent). Again, participants' occupations were very diverse (e.g., kindergarten teacher, welder, engineer, nurse, architect, cook, and shopkeeper). Adult participants' level of education ranged from technical training to higher education. Thirteen participants had completed technical or vocational training, 4 attended graduate school, 5 were students at a university or college, and 9 had completed higher education.

Procedure

Participants completed the Q sorting task in their home. After recording demographic information, the researcher explained the procedure, and the participants signed an informed consent form. The participants were instructed to prefix each statement with "influence of children on parents means to me that ..." and to rank the statements to a quasi-normal distribution, sorting them into a profile ranging from -6 (most disagree) through 0 (neutral/irrelevant) to +6 (most agree). Statements were presented to participants in numerical order. The number of items placed into each category was specified in advance (see Figure 1). Instructions required that three items be placed into the -6 and +6 categories, four items for -5 and +5, five items for -4 and +4, seven items for -3 and +3, eight items for -2 and +2, nine items for -1 and +1, and 10 items for 0. After performing the task, participants were encouraged to comments on the statements and their sorting choices. This is a helpful and recommended procedure for the factor interpretations (Stenner, Dancey, & Watts, 2000).

Results

Analysis and interpretation

Thirty-one Q sorts performed by adults and 30 Q sorts by children were entered separately into PQ Method, a program specifically designed for Q-factor analysis (Schmolck, 2000). Analyses of the adult sorts and children sorts were identical. First, an intercorrelation matrix was calculated by correlating all Q sorts. Next, this correlation matrix was subjected to a Centroid factor analysis, with the objective of creating an original set of (unrotated) factors. These factors were then rotated using a varimax procedure to arrive at a final set of factors. To be considered a Q factor, a factor had to have an eigenvalue greater than 1 and at least two Q sorts that loaded significantly on it alone and not on other factors (Watts & Stenner, 2005). Q sorts that load significantly on the same factor alone are called factor exemplars (Stenner et al., 2000) and can be understood as sharing a similar understanding of that factor. A standard practice for Q methodology is to generate an "ideal" Q sort from the factor exemplars that represents a factor by calculating the Z-scores for each statement defining

that factor. Based on these Z-scores, statements can be attributed to the original quasi-normal distribution, producing a Q sort of a hypothetical respondent with a 100% loading on that factor. This "ideal" Q sort is called a factor array and can be seen as an ideal representative of, and key to interpreting, that factor. Therefore, to assist in factor interpretations, the items' importance rankings (more specifically the extreme rankings, i.e., +6, +5, +4, -6, -5 and -4) will be given in brackets. In addition to the factor arrays, individual comments and participants' biographical information of factor exemplars are other important information sources for factor interpretation. As mentioned earlier, the number of factor exemplars should be interpreted very cautiously. In Q methodology the focus is on the content and distinctiveness of the factors. Hence, several participants with factor exemplars provide information to facilitate factor interpretation. In addition, because Q has exploratory goals and aims at exploring diversity of understandings, factors with a single factor exemplar can be interpreted if theoretically salient (Watts & Stenner, 2005). In the present study, two factors with a single factor exemplar (factor D and factor 4) were also interpreted.

Q factor analysis produced five factors for the children sorts, and six factors for adult sorts. In the describing the factors, the first number inside brackets refers to the item number, while the second number indicates the ranking.

Q factors for children sorts

Factor A: Children are full relationship partners in the parent-child relationship, recognizing that parents learn much from them. Eight factor exemplars illustrate this factor. These children indicate the meaning of their influence as the parents' recognition of children as complete individuals and partners in the relationship. Representative items include parents must take their children seriously (4: +6), show interest in them (79: +6), and try to understand them (5: +5). In particular, the fact that parents learn much from their children (44: +5) is highlighted, along with reference to the parents' personality development (31: +5; 67: +4). Relational reciprocity is necessary to create this understanding (14: +4) and parents need to accommodate to their children (70: +4). Moreover, children stress the difference between power and agency (80: -6; 23: -5) and do not regard their participation as a burden for the parents (73: -5; 49: -5; 65: -4; 28: -4).

The 8 participants who exemplify this factor cover the entire age range for children (11 to 15 years) and are from both sexes (5 girls and 3 boys). The understanding of children's agency as complete people and relationship partners appears widespread and ingrained among children. A 13-year-old girl expressed it pithily: "Parents have the obligation to listen to their children!"

Factor B: Parents are continuously concerned about, and focused on, their children. Seven factor exemplars illustrate this factor. These children emphasize continuous parental involvement. Children seem to infer their agency

from the parents' engagement (17: +6) and concern (54: +6; 79: +5; 5: +4). Parents cannot easily avoid this influence, as it is ongoing (7: +5) and parents will feel guilty when things go wrong (8: +4). This influence is moderated by child variables (6: +5; 1: +4; 3: +4) – for example, a handicapped child will require more intense engagement. Moreover, children's influence is a natural (human) phenomenon and independent of relational qualities (32: -5) or cultural factors (2: -5). Again, this influence also differs from power (80: -6) or manipulation (23: -6).

The 7 participants who exemplify factor B range in age from 12 to 15 years and include 2 girls and 5 boys. These children are primarily focused on parental responsiveness. As a 13-year-old boy explained, "I can see I have an influence when my dad comes to watch my football match."

Factor C: Parents love their children and feel continuously responsible. Two factor exemplars illustrate factor C. This factor elaborates on the theme of engagement described in the previous factor. Besides the time investment (17: +6), parents are bound to be occupied with the future of their children (33: +6) and have a continuous sense of responsibility (11: +5). Moreover, children recognize the exhausting (65: +5) and constraining (49: +4; 51: +4; 56: +4) effects of this influence. The meaning of children's influence touches the parents' fundamental commitment. These children indicate they can feel their influence if they experience an unconditional parental love. Children also feel this influence in the parents' effort. Once more, this influence differs from power or control (80: -5; 50: -5; 21: -5), but reciprocity between parent and child is important (14: +3).

The 2 participants who exemplify this factor are both younger boys (11 and 13 years old). Neither explicitly commented on the Q sorting task.

Factor D: Parents become more sensitive to the social context and comments of others. One factor exemplar illustrates factor D. This factor indicates that children's influence goes beyond the parent-child interactions. Parenting develops within a social and cultural context, so parents must adjust their ideas about education (13: +6) and become more sensitive to the opinions of others (58: +6). Being a parent means to think more deeply (19: +5), to learn that your own influence on your children is limited (21: +5), and to constantly update your own ideas (72: +4). In contrast with factor A, this factor does not concern specific influences of children regarding their parents (4: -6; 51: -5; 56: -5) or the fact that parents can learn much from their children (39: -4; 44: -4). The development of the parent is also dependent on social and cultural influences, which can be triggered by a particular child (43: +6; 26: +4).

The participant who exemplifies this factor is a 15-year-old girl whose parents are divorced. She lives primarily with her father. The Q sorting task was a difficult and emotional experience for her. She talked about the complexity of the situation. She was especially upset and angry about the many comments her father had to endure from others, even though he took good care of her.

Factor E: Children's influence, although self-evident, is often neglected. Two factor exemplars illustrate factor E. These children indicate a duality. On the one hand, children's influence is an everyday reality. This influence is always present (7: +5), can be positive or negative for the parents (42: +6), and manifests itself in many ways (24: +4). On the other hand, this influence is often neglected. In the children's culture, attention is primarily given to parental influences (71: +6) and even for parents it can be hard to accept children's influence (78: +5). However, this lack of awareness of children's influence is not justified, because this influence does not concern irrelevant matters (38: -6). Once more, children's agency differs from power (80: -6; 23: -4) and is situated in the reciprocal relationship (14: +4).

The 2 participants who exemplify this factor are a 15-year-old girl and a 12-year-old boy. The girl stated that parents cannot deny the influence of children on their personal lives, but it is much more difficult for them to consider the opinions of their children or to admit they learn things from them. The boy goes to a special education school. He and his parents are in family therapy. He enjoyed doing the Q sorting task but gave no comments. Maybe his pleasure was connected with the many positive statements presented in the Q set, an unusual way of thinking about children's influence when the parent-child relationship is problematic.

Q factors for adult sorts

Factor 1: Children are complete people and partners in the relationship. Eight factor exemplars illustrate factor 1. These participants strongly indicate the recognition of the person and partnership of the child in the parent-child relationship. Influence of children means that children are taken seriously by the parents (4: +6) and are regarded as complete people (9: +6). Parents can demonstrate this by considering the ideas and feelings of the children (39: +6), trying to understand them (5: +5), and showing interest (79: +5). Parents must recognize that children's influence does not pertain to unimportant matters (38: -6) and that it differs from manipulation (23: -6) and domination (80: -6). Hence, parents should not have difficulty accepting the existence of this influence (78: -6), recognizing the relevance of this influence to their own development as well (31: +4; 47: +4). The issue of the parent's personal development is further elaborated in other adult factors. This factor highlights the constructive side of children's influence. It does not regard the burden on the parents or the sorrow they may experience (27: -5; 65: -5). A final theme concerns the importance of the relationship context for the development of children's agency. Children's influence is dependent on recognition of the reciprocity between parent and child (14: +5).

Of the 8 participants exemplifying this factor, 5 are parents (2 mothers and 3 fathers) and 3 are nonparents (2 women and 1 man), with an age range of 19 to 50 years, and include both labourers and highly skilled persons. This understanding of children's influence does not seem to be limited to a certain class of people and has more to do with a developing

recognition of children's agency in modern culture. As a participant (39 years old, father and welder) stated, "They [his children] know so much and can do so much, it's incredible, and they dare to give their opinions. I don't have a problem with that, although I don't always agree."

Factor 2: Children's influence is pertinent today and constructive for the parents. Four factor exemplars illustrate factor 2. These participants indicate that children's influence is more significant now than in the past (68: +6) and is bound to our culture (2: +5). Hence, the individual contribution of the child itself is accentuated (26: +6; 43: +5; 34: +4). At the same time, this influence is regarded as constructive and instructive for the parents, in such a way that parents must constantly be creative (35: +5), learn much from their children (44: +4), and are kept active by their children (45: +4). There seems to be an acceptance, not explicitly pronounced, that this influence requires some effort by the parents (74: -6). Again, this influence is situated in the reciprocity between parent and child (14: +5), however, an emotional relationship based on mutual trust is not required (32: -6).

Interestingly, the 4 participants who exemplify this factor are all non-parents with a university education. One of these participants, a 66-year-old retired economist, emphasized that children gain influence in modern society. For example, currently children take part in deciding upon a school choice or how a vacation is spent. This influence was impossible in his young days.

Factor 3: In this joint process between parent and child, parents gradually learn more about themselves. Two factor exemplars illustrate factor 3. These participants indicate children's gradually influence the parents' thinking, emotions, and personality. This influence is dependent on the age of the child (26: +6) and can be positive or negative for the parent (42: +6). Parents find that they need to adjust their old ideals and become more realistic (64: +6), do not have control over everything (47: +5), the influence affects the parents' emotions (46: +5), the parents recognize aspects of their own personality (67: +5), and the parents reevaluate their own education in their family of origin (36: +4). Again, this influence is attributed within the relationship in such a way that it is dependent on the atmosphere in the family (15: +4) and that an emotional relationship based on mutual trust is essential (32: +4), which is not surprising, because, in contrast with factor 2, this factor concerns the personality of the parent itself. Although this influence is not always pleasant for the parents (42: +6), it is a constructive influence in the sense that it has nothing to do with dominating (80: -6) or manipulating (23: -5) the parents, or the fact that parents go through much trouble and difficulty (27: -6) or regularly experience failure (66: -6).

The 2 participants who exemplify this factor are both young nonparents adults (21 and 24 years old, man and woman). In their comments, they emphasized their influence on the personality growth of their parents. Performing the Q sorting task seemed to trigger some very personal matters within these young adults. This may be a function of their recent transition through the developmental phase of adolescence.

Factor 4: Children's influence does not only affect parents' but also children's own development. One factor exemplar illustrates factor 4. This participant indicates that both parent (62: +6) and child (40: +6) learn much about themselves through children's influence. With reference to the parents' learning process, the contribution of the child is recognized in the way parents try to understand their children (5: +5), adopt things from the children's social world (53: +5), and accommodate their ideas about education (13: +4). This parental process of individual development seems to have an ambivalent nature. On the one hand, the parents' great investment of energy is acknowledged – parents get very tired (65: +6) and are forced to keep their job (60: +5); on the other hand, parents become more self-confident (61: +5) and more serene (74: +4). Although this factor is situated within the relationship, the interaction between parent and child is emphasized less than other factors. On the contrary, the parents' individual development is accentuated. This individual development pertains to personality growth and has little to do with practical matters like spending money (51: -6) or planning the day (56: -6).

The participant who exemplifies this factor is a 67-year-old retired grocer with adult children. At the end of the Q sorting task, he stated that in his experience it is important for children to receive enough space so that they can become autonomous, and, therefore, we must approach them seriously. He regarded this as a parental obligation. In addition, parents must not be dependent on, or rely on, their children. Parents must be able to take care of themselves.

Factor 5: Parents are not only committed to their children's current development, but also to a continuous feed-forward responsibility. Three factor exemplars illustrate factor 5. These participants indicate that children's influence means that parents feel obliged to be engaged in the future of their children (33: +6). Parents are committed to, and continuously occupied with, their children (79: +6; 45: +5), and as the relationship progresses (26: +5) they gain a greater sense of responsibility (31: +4). This is not a noncommittal attitude, because parents are forced to negotiate with one another (59: +4), to act forcefully when necessary (25: +4), and when things go wrong parents will feel guilt (8: +4). This influence seems to be even stronger when the child is handicapped (6: +5), which again demonstrates compelling engagement. Children seem to appeal to a sense of responsibility that is inescapable for the parents. Again, this influence is situated in the reciprocity of the relationship (14: +5). Although it concerns an obligation for the parents, it is not pressure (80: -6), and parents do not have to justify themselves regarding their children (41: -6).

The 3 participants who exemplify this factor are a 66-year-old housekeeper (mother), a 50-year-old labourer (father), and a 36-year-old physical therapist (woman, nonparent). In their comments, the 2 parents emphasized the continuous engagement and lasting care. As the mother stated, "In one way or another, you are always thinking of them [your children] ... you always feel a responsibility." The nonparent stated that her childlessness

was a deliberate choice: She could not see herself being constantly engaged in children.

Factor 6: Children's influence inevitably involves a burden on the parents and their quest for appreciation. Two factor exemplars illustrate factor 6. This factor is different from the others in that it accentuates the hardships and difficult aspects of children's influence. Children restrict the freedom (49: +5) and privacy (28: +4) of the parents, so parents also have less time for each other (73: +4). The influence of children is explicitly regarded as exhausting for the parents (65: +6), and when the child is handicapped the burden is even greater (6: +6). However, it seems important to stress this dimension of children's influence, not as a negative impact on the parents' development (62: +5; 44: +4), but rather because parents need recognition from others for their commitment and effort (29: +6). This influence differs from children's power (41: -6); it regards another dimension of the parent-child relationship, which needs recognition and exists beside the emotional dimension (32: -6).

The 2 participants who exemplify this factor are a 19-year-old male student (nonparent) and a 36-year-old speech therapist (the mother of two preschool children). For a number of years, the woman and her partner lived together without children. Both invested much time in their work and hobbies. She emphasized the restriction of freedom and the inescapable responsibility that children entail, but she also accentuated the development of an emotional relationship with the children as something that coexists with the burden.

Discussion

This study investigates meanings and beliefs that exist in Belgian-Flemish culture concerning children's influence on their parents in the bidirectional parent-child relationship. Analysis shows similarities and differences between the children's and adults' factors. Specifically, there are four important *similarities* among the children's and adults' factors.

First, a central common understanding of children's influence is the recognition that child is a complete person and full partner in the relationship. Both adults (factor 1) and children (factor A) highlight this meaning of children's agency. This core meaning pinpointed a basic principle of bidirectionality, namely, the equal agency of parents and children (Kuczynski et al., 1999). Children's agency is socially constructed as a belief that children are full relational partners and that parents are interested in them, listen to them, try to understand them, and take their ideas and feelings into account. This belief demonstrates an equivalence of agency, although parents' agency is intrinsically different than children's (Dix & Branca, 2003).

Second, in both children's and adults' factors, children's influence is clearly distinguished from power, a distinction discussed at length by Kuczynski (2003). In not a single factor is children's agency constructed as dominance, manipulation, or control. Adults recognize the burden on the parents (factor

6) and children believe their influence can be exhausting and constraining for the parents (factor C). Nevertheless, even these factors differ from power. Difficulties and troubles are perceived as an essential part of children's influence, but in the cultural understandings this burden is not equated with dominance. This suggests a hypothesis when the burden and constraining influences of the child become intolerable for the parents (for example, influence of a child with severe conduct disorders), the chances multiply that children's influence will be constructed as power. This issue needs further research regarding social constructions of children's agency in troubled parent-child relations (Kent & Pepler, 2003).

Third, both children (factors B and C) and adults (factor 5) focus on the commitment and concern of the parents. In the constructions about their influence, children seem to derive their agency from the responsiveness of their parents, especially the involvement (factor B) and, even stronger, the love (factor C) they can feel and experience from the parents. The meanings of children's influence seem to be related to the connectedness children feel towards their parents. Research indicates that, in adolescent development, the autonomy of the adolescent and connectedness with the parents are separate, but not incompatible, dimensions (Beyers, Goossens, Vansant, & Moors, 2003). On the contrary, connectedness is considered to be important for an adolescent's development. In children's understandings about their influence, relatedness with the parents is of central importance. The question arises whether children's emphasis on parents' responsiveness must be associated with the children's age. Early adolescence is viewed as a phase where adolescents developing toward autonomy and identity are still closely connected with their parents (Collins & Steinberg, 2006). On the other hand, in adults' understandings, the commitment and engagement of the parents are also accentuated (factor 5). This likely indicates that adults' meaning constructions are not related to a specific development phase, but represent a more holistic understanding about children's influence. In sum, the question of whether the parents' commitment remains important in middle and late adolescents' understandings of influence requires further research.

Fourth, in several factors (C, 2, 3, and 5) – but especially in the central factors A (children) and 1 (adults) – reciprocity in the relationship is designated as important for the development of children's agency. This means that children's influence emerges out of the relationship context. This is consistent with recent bidirectional theories on parent-child relationships, where agency is understood as a property of close relationships (Kuczynski & Parkin, 2006).

There are also important *differences* between children's and adults' understandings of influence. First, adults accentuate the impact on the parents' cognitions, feelings and personality (factors 1, 2, 3, and 4). In addition, adults believe that these intrusive influences of children are prominent in society today (factor 2). That is, children's influences are not only massive for the parents, but also inevitable: A parent cannot not feel children's influences. Adults seem to construct children's agency as essential and of great importance for the parents' personal development. Interestingly, the factor

exemplars for factors 2 and 3 (the factors that stress children's influence on parents' personality) are all nonparents. Although the recognition of the child as a complete person and relationship partner is a shared understanding (factor 1), it seems to be more difficult for parents to specify the content of children's agency. This is in line with the results of the phenomenological study (De Mol & Buysse, *in press*) that showed that parents recognize children's influence on their personal development but are much more focused on the commitment and engagement that children call forth (a meaning also reflected in the broader adults' understandings in this Q study, i.e., factor 5). In fact, none of the parents in the phenomenological study talked about how the child's influences on the parent's personality influenced the parent's actual interactions with the child. Although the observed difference between parents and nonparents is in line with the results of the phenomenological study, this issue needs further research.

These adults' understandings regarding children's influences on the parents' personality are not reflected in any of the children's factors. The massiveness of children's influence is not constructed in the children's beliefs. From this point of view, it is understandable that children do not appreciate their parents' burden, a factor explicitly present in the adults' beliefs (factor 6). Children only assess a kind of vulnerability with the parents in such a way that parents become more sensitive to social influences (factor D), and this entails an indirect influence from the child. On the other hand, a distinct understanding among children is that parents learn a great deal from them (factor A). Although adults acknowledge this learning (factor 2), it is much more explicit in the children's beliefs.

These difference among adults' and children's understanding suggests several hypotheses. In the first place, as children focus on their parents' responsiveness (factors B and C), that likely focus is on behavioral actions in terms of what they can teach their parents. Children seem to emphasize their active contribution. Whereas in the adults' understandings, children's agency entails merely eliciting certain changes with the parents, children emphasize their active and goal-oriented (Valsiner et al., 1997) influence. This is demonstrated by the fact that parents do indeed learn from their children. Moreover, within a cultural primacy of unilateral parental influence (Kuczynski, Lollis, & Koguchi, 2003), an important task of parenting is to create an environment for the child that facilitates internalization processes (Grusec, 1997). Parents have to teach children and, by serving as a good example, children can learn from them. Within this socially constructed meaning of influence, children can sense their influence when parents learn from them. It seems to be more difficult for adults to notice this meaning of children's influence, as they are wrapped up in a parenting discourse. In sum, concerning the content of children's influence, whereas adults accentuate the impact on the parents' personality, this belief is absent in the children's understandings. On the other hand, whereas children stress the fact that they can teach parents many things, this understanding is expressed less strongly in the adults' beliefs.

Another difference between the children's and adults' factors concerns an ambivalence children indicate concerning their agency (factor E), which

is absent in the adults' beliefs. On the one hand, children postulate that influencing the parents is self-evident. On the other hand, such influence is neglected culturally. There is not much language in western cultures for thinking about children's influence (Kuczynski et al., 2003). In the adults' beliefs, this cultural negligence is absent, although adults do recognize the parents' request for appreciation (factor 6). Adults seem preoccupied with the massiveness of children's influence and the resulting responsibility (factor 5) and burden (factor 6), so they did not explicitly assess the cultural negligence of children's agency.

Two other differences focus upon the adults' factor 4 and the children's factor D. Although only one factor exemplar illustrates each factor, we take them into consideration because we believe them to be theoretically salient. The adults' factor 4 postulates that children's agency is important for both parents' and the children's development. The importance of children's influence on their parents to the personal development of the child is not reflected in the children's beliefs. In a culture where language is lacking concerning children's agency, it is difficult for children to describe their influence as constructive for their own development. On the other hand, it is surprising that only children seem to assess that their influence is going beyond the relationship with their parents (factor D). This meaning of children's influence is absent in the adults' beliefs. Adults may be so focused on the commitment and responsibility children call forth that it is difficult for them to acknowledge a broader societal "children's" influence. This is in line with the absence of a cultural negligence of children's influence in the adults' beliefs and the lack of language to describe children's agency in our culture. Acknowledgement of children's agency does not only mean to appreciate children's influence in the daily parent-child interactions, but also to recognize "children-hood" (like parenthood) in our culture. We suggest that children-hood differs from childhood, because childhood principally refers to a time span in life with all kinds of associations of being young. On the other hand, children-hood recognizes children as full agentic persons and partners in the parent-child relationship, with children's own specific contributions and influences, as parents have their "parenting" contributions in the relationship with their children. In a similar way, Valsiner et al. (1997) introduced the notion of "filiating" to counter the unidirectional parenting claims in our culture.

In sum, in both the adults' and children's understandings regarding children's agency, the complete person and partnership of the child in the relationship is highlighted, although the emphasis differs. In the adults' beliefs, children's influence is principally constructed as having a massive impact on parents' personality and the continuous commitment and burden that such influence entails. In these adults' constructs, there is little room for the active contribution of children, as children's influence is mainly constructed as eliciting developments from the parents. In the children's beliefs, children's influence is more actively constructed as parents learning things from children and children deriving their agency from the responsiveness of the parents. Moreover, as agentic human beings (Lee, 1998), children can actively assess the cultural negligence of their agency in the

parent–child relationship. While scientific evidence exists for the importance of children's influence in the bidirectional parent–child relationship, cultural understandings about children's agency reveal that the social construction of children's agentic features is in an embryonic stage of development. A hypothesis concerning this lack of language about children's agency in our social-cultural discourse is that there is a linguistic inadequacy for specifying the difference between power and influence (Huston, 2002). Adults and children are unanimous that children's influence differs from power, but then the question presents itself: how to define influence? This issue needs further research.

Limitations

Although Q methodology makes no claim to be exhaustive (Stainton Rogers, 1995), one limitation is that the researchers are constrained by the sample of the Q set as well as by the sample of the participants. Our sample of participants was limited to the native Flemish population. Even though Flanders is part of a western culture, differences within and between Occidental cultures are significant (Khanh & Huong, 2006). Flanders is a multi-cultural society and similarities and differences in understandings of children's agency must also be studied in other cultural contexts. Another limitation of the sample concerns the age group of the children. We chose early adolescents for the development of the Q set and the performance of the Q sorting task. Younger children as well as older adolescents could have revealed other themes about their agency, and consequently could have affected the development of the Q set. Other understandings probably would have emerged, because the children as well as the adults would have performed the Q sorting task with another Q set. Using a longitudinal design, future research could investigate children's agency beliefs during the different developmental phases.

This study was purely exploratory and took a broad social constructionist approach. Other possibilities are to concentrate on the differences/similarities between parents and childless adults regarding understandings of children's agency, or between birth parents and step-parents. Q methodology offers many possibilities for studying variety in cultural beliefs. However, Q methodology is not appropriate to study representativeness of particular understandings in certain classes of the population. Q methodology is well designated to explore variety, yet other methodologies with larger samples are necessary to tackle questions about representativeness. Moreover, Q methodology is not appropriate for studying the processes of social construction. Again, and making a plea for methodological pluralism, other qualitative and quantitative methods are required to study these complex influence processes. Children's agency and influence are fascinating subjects that demand a multimethod approach (Parke, 2002).

Another important limitation of this study regards the use of self-reports, because this method can involve bias. Moreover, no generalization can be made regarding actual behaviors of children and parents and other participants, as the connections between humans' beliefs and behavior is complex and nonlinear.

Finally, these understandings have important psychotherapeutic implications: How to make room for the agency of the child in family therapy? This much needed research can make a valuable contribution towards bridging the gap between the world of relationship research and psychotherapeutic practice.

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