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The phenomenology of children's influence on parents

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Starting from the core systemic premise that humans influence each other, this paper focuses on child influences in the bidirectional parent–child relationship. Following a co-constructionist approach on bidirectionality, meaning constructions of children and their parents concerning child influences are explored. The authors used in-depth interviews separately with children and their parents. Phenomenological analysis shows similarities and differences in children's and parents' thinking. Both stress the difficulty and existential dimension of the subject and refer to this influence as mainly unintentional. In particular, children disentangle influence from power. Children focus on the responsiveness of their parents. Parents emphasize the overwhelming effects on their personal development. The importance of making room for constructive child influences in family therapy is acknowledged.

Introduction

Systemic psychotherapy starts from the premise that humans influence each other (Hedges, 2005). Interpersonal influence is the process by which relationship partners affect and change each others' thoughts, behaviour and emotions (Huston, 2002). Moreover, the ability to influence each other is crucial to the functioning and development of a relationship (Cook, 2001). In this paper, we report on research on interpersonal influence in parent–child relations – more specifically, the influence of children on their parents. This research was performed in Flanders, the Dutch-speaking region of Belgium.

Recent research in the domain of parent–child relations commonly assumes a bidirectional perspective on interpersonal influence (Parke, 2002). Bidirectionality stresses the co-occurrence of both directions of

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influence – from parent to child and from child to parent – in a complex reciprocal system (Kuczynski, 2003). There is a large body of research on bidirectionality and reciprocity in parent–child relations (Pettit and Lollis, 1997) in several different domains, including developmental psychology (Crouter and Booth, 2003; Kuczynski, 2003), research on parent–infant communication (e.g. Trevarthen and Aitkin, 2001), and the sociology of childhood (Morrow, 2003). In addition, recent proposals on bidirectionality in parent–child relationships emphasize the equal agency of parents and children (Kuczynski *et al.*, 1999). Agency is a multifaceted construct (Bandura, 2001), referring to the human capacity for initiating purposeful behaviour to influence the other, and the ability to interpret and construct meanings out of relational experiences. In this study, we focus on meaning construction in the parent–child relationship. We report on research into meaning constructions of the children's influence in the parent–child relationship: which meanings are constructed by children and their parents concerning the children's influence on their parents.

A bidirectional framework for parent–child relations differs fundamentally from traditional views. Before bidirectionality, research on parent–child relations was dominated by a unidirectional approach. Historically, this unidirectional approach entails two main views (Maccoby, 2003). First, and most traditionally, there are the top-down 'parenting' formulations in which parents are seen as shaping their children. In this classical unidirectional approach, the parents are seen as the only active agents, and children are regarded as passive recipients of parental influence. The second unidirectional view is represented by the notion of 'child effects' (Bell, 1968) – that is, the influence children have on their parents. Unlike the parenting approach, child effects are usually studied in a non-agentic way (Russell and Russell, 1992). This means that, although the influence of children on their parents is recognized, it concerns effects that do not entail much active involvement on the part of the child (e.g. the child's age, gender, temperament).

Despite this constrained perspective on children's influence in parent–child relationships, the study of child effects sets the stage for the development of bidirectional models in which the influence of both parents and children is recognized. A bidirectional framework for parent–child relations adds a child-to-parent direction of influence to the widely accepted parent-to-child influence (Kuczynski and Navara, 2006). In addition to the comprehensive research on parenting, research on children's influence has also received much attention

in recent years (Crouter and Booth, 2003; Cummings and Schermerhorn, 2003). This research shows how children can influence their parents' monitoring and educational efforts (Kerr and Stattin, 2003), their own socialization through influencing parental strategies (Grusec and Goodnow, 1994), and many aspects of their parents' personalities (Ambert, 2001; Palkovitz *et al.*, 2003). In addition, recent approaches to bidirectionality emphasize that agency and bidirectional influence in parent-child relationships must be understood in the context of an intimate, long-term relationship (Kuczynski and Parkin, 2006). This relational perspective implies that parents and children cannot be understood as discrete individuals. Instead, the relationship context – in which parents and children know each other intimately and have their influences intertwined in an interdependent long-term relationship with a past and a future – makes parents and children receptive as well as vulnerable to each other's influence and both facilitates and constrains each other's exercise of agency and power. The interdependent nature of the parent-child relationship may be understood as a consequence of Watzlawick's first axiom of interpersonal communication, 'one cannot not communicate' (Watzlawick *et al.*, 1967). A corollary of this axiom, at least within interdependent relationships, is that one cannot not influence (Griffin, 2006). When there is interdependence, processes of influence are inevitable because each person's behaviour has consequences for the other (Kelley, 1979). Consequently children influence their parents continuously. The basic question addressed in this paper is what meanings are constructed by children and parents about this inevitable and continuous flow of influence.

In sum, there is burgeoning evidence for reciprocal influences in the parent-child relationship and for the importance of the children's influence in this bidirectional relationship context. However, little research has focused on the thinking and meaning constructions of children themselves regarding their influence on their parents. There is a shortage of research relating to children's reports about their own experiences (Hogan *et al.*, 1999). Research in this area has mainly been conducted using procedures in which parents are asked about how they experience the influences of their children, and adult children are asked, retrospectively, about how they have influenced their parents (Ambert, 2001; Dillon, 2002; Palkovitz *et al.*, 2003). Considering children as equal agents in the relationship with their parents implies the assumption that, as human beings with their own agentic features, children construct meanings and beliefs about their

influence that differ from those of their parents. And vice versa: considering parents as equal agents in the bidirectional relationship with their children means that parents construct meanings about the influence their children have on them that differ from those of their children. Moreover, little research has focused on similarities and differences in the thought processes between children and parents regarding children's influence. From this point of view, we have posed the research question: What meanings do children construct concerning their influence on their parents? At the same time, focusing on similarities and differences and extending former research, we have also posed the question: What beliefs (Sigel and McGillicuddy-De Lisi, 2002) do parents construct in relation to the influences their children have on them?

These research questions are both clinically and theoretically important. Clinically, family therapists agree on the constructive nature of mutual influences in family systems and the contribution of child influences in these processes is highlighted (e.g. Rober, 1998). However, the question remains how child influences are constructed in family narratives within a culture that constructs influences in parent-child relationships as predominantly unidirectional, from parent to child (Kuczynski *et al.*, 2003). Although knowing how children and parents understand child influences is important, we currently lack empirical research in this area. Theoretically, recent debates on bidirectionality in parent-child relations emphasize the difference between agentic and non-agentic influence (Kuczynski, 2003; Kuczynski and Parkin, 2006). Agentic influence is conceptualized as intentional and goal-directed behaviour, non-agentic influence refers to processes of automaticity and habit between people. Because historically only parents were considered as active agents and child influences were merely understood as non-agentic, recent research on bidirectionality starts from the premise that parents and children are equally agents and focuses on the agency of children. However, little research has focused on children's and parents' conceptualizations of child influences. The question remains whether or not the distinction between agentic and non-agentic influence is useful and constructed by the relationship participants themselves.

In this study, we have adopted a co-constructionist perspective (Valsiner *et al.*, 1997). A co-constructionist perspective promotes an interest in the thought processes of children and parents regarding their interactions and relationship. Children and parents are seen as 'thinking subjects', acting in a relationship where meanings are

constructed regarding oneself and the other within the reciprocal processes of influence. These mutual meanings are seen as central to the development of the parent–child relationship (Hinde, 1997). Co-constructionism stresses both the uniqueness of a person and the intertwinement of a person and her culture (Valsiner, 1994). Humans and culture create one another in an ongoing dialectical process. That is, meaning construction occurs in a social-cultural discourse and co-occurs with individual and relational functioning and development. Individuals and relations are embedded in social and cultural contexts, while these contexts are created through individuals and relations. Here, the theories of co-constructionism and social constructionism overlap. A constructionist perspective regarding people and relationships emphasizes the central role of meaning constructions (beliefs, understandings, cognitions) for both human and relational development (Bugental and Johnston, 2000). Therefore, in this study, we first focus on the meaning constructions of children and parents separately; and second, we compare these children's and parents' meanings about the children's influence on their parents from a dialectical perspective.

The age group of the participating children in this study was early adolescence (11 to 15 years). We chose this target group for the following reasons. On the one hand, we assumed that talking about this complex influence would require these youngsters to have some reflective cognitive capacities regarding their relational functioning (Piaget, 1981). On the other hand, from a social developmental psychological perspective, these teens are dealing with the themes of self-governance, separation and connectedness (Beyers *et al.*, 2003; Kagitcibasi, 2005). That is, these youngsters are still close to their parents and, at the same time, searching for autonomy in the relationship with their parents. Consequently, this study's research question might well be close to their living experience. Older adolescents probably have more developed meta-cognition for thinking about their interpersonal influence, but they are less engaged in the relationships with their parents as other developmental themes (e.g. peer relationships) have become more important.

In conclusion, the rationale of this study and the research question being addressed may be summarized as follows: what meanings do children and parents construct regarding the children's influence on their parents? Consistent with a co-constructionist approach, similarities and differences between the children's and parents' meanings are studied. This research does not focus on parent–child interactions

at the behavioural level, but instead focuses on *meaning construction* in the parent–child relationship (Lollis and Kuczynski, 1997).

Methods

Interpretative phenomenology

This study was exploratory in nature and we therefore used the interpretative phenomenological approach as described by Smith (1995), a deductive qualitative research method (Gilgun, 2005). This method takes a middle position between a phenomenological perspective (e.g. Giorgi, 1995) and a symbolic interactionist perspective (e.g. Denzin, 2002). Focusing on the lived experiences and meaning constructions within day-to-day community relationships (such as family relationships), this method emphasizes the ontology – i.e. what it means to be human – in these relational contexts. In line with this approach, semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted.

Participants and recruitment

For the sampling of the participants, we focused on the autochthonous Caucasian population of Flanders. Flanders is a multicultural (though predominantly Caucasian) society, and it would be most interesting to study children's agency in the various cultures that enrich Flanders' society. However, the subject of research was quite new to us, and so we decided, as Caucasian researchers, to start within a more familiar cultural context.

A two-way system was used for recruitment and selection of the participants. First of all, participants were recruited through an advertisement in a weekly magazine. Second, and for reasons of convenience, we also included some acquaintances of the researchers as participants. We decided to involve both known and unknown participants because, especially with regard to the interviews with the children, this made it possible to determine whether the child's familiarity with the interviewer had an impact on the interview data. Participants were selected for diversity in age, gender, level of education, profession, marital status and family situation. Finally, thirty children (age range = 11 to 15 years; $M = 13.3$; $SD = 1.2$) and thirty parents (age range = 37 to 52 years; $M = 43.55$; $SD = 2.6$) were selected for the interviews, in each case one child and one parent of the same family. Twenty-one families lived in an urban or suburban

area, nine families lived in a rural area. Socio-economically, all families belonged to the middle class.

The sample of the children included twelve boys and eighteen girls. Three children were in elementary school, six were attending technical and vocational training for 12- to 16-year-olds, six were in junior secondary technical school, and fifteen children in secondary school. Twenty-eight children had siblings. Thirteen participants were the eldest child in their family. One adopted child participated. Five children's parents were divorced, and three of those children lived in step-families (for these children, we interviewed the natural parent).

Regarding the sample of the parents, eleven fathers and nineteen mothers participated. Eleven parents had a university degree, eleven had attended a college of higher education, and eight parents had received vocational training. Two parents were unemployed. The occupations of the other parents were very diverse (e.g., cleaning woman, university professor, physiotherapist, shop assistant, teacher, construction worker, social worker). Fourteen of the thirty families were known to the researchers.

The researchers

The first author (male), a 45-year-old child psychologist and trained family therapist with extensive experience in child and family therapy, conducted the interviews. The interpretation of the results of this study has been facilitated by this experience. The second author (female) is a 38-year-old university professor and relationship researcher with experience in both qualitative and quantitative research. Both researchers are parents. As a family therapist, the first author was struggling with the therapeutic issue of how to acknowledge the influence children have on their parents and in this way to recognize the immense responsibility of parenthood in our society; and, at the same time, how to make room for the children's influence on their parents by recognizing their partnership and agency in the relationship with their parents. As therapists, can we find words to help us create with our clients narratives concerning these constraining and constructive influences of children? As a researcher, the first author started out by assuming equal agency between parent and child. This bias can be problematic, because it can cause the researcher to fail to absorb the participants' stories of inequality. Therefore, the first and second authors made the agreement that, after each interview, the first author, being the interviewer, would give a

verbatim account of the interview to the second author, who would then interrogate the interviewer with a scholarly attitude, especially regarding statements of inequality between parent and child. These critical comments were taken along in the next interview.

The interviews

The two researchers constructed the questions by mutual agreement. A twofold objective guided this construction. On the one hand, the questions should be global enough to serve as stepping stones to yield in-depth data. On the other hand, considering the unusual topic of investigation, the questions should be clear enough to avoid embarrassment for the participants. At the same time, the questions asked of the parents and the children should be complementary, because the objective of the analysis was to compare the children's and parents' data. Consequently, and after rigorous discussion, the following questions were constructed (Table 1). The objective of the first set of

TABLE 1 *Interview questions for children and their parent*

Child questions	Parent questions
1. Can you tell me something about the influence you have on your parents, what influence you have and how you are influencing them?	1. When I ask you to think about the influences your children have on you, what can you tell me about this, can you give me some examples?
2. When do you have the impression you are really influencing them, and can you give some examples?	2. Are you influenced in a different way by each of your children, and if so, does this have an effect on the way you behave towards them?
3. Is the influence you have on one parent different from the influence you have on the other parent?	3. Do you notice a difference in the way you are influenced by your child and the way the other parent is influenced by him or her?
4. Do you sometimes notice that your friends have influence on their parents, and how can you notice this?	4. Do you sometimes observe how another child is influencing his parents and what these influences are, and can you give me some examples?
5. Is this the first time you have talked with someone about this subject?	5. Do you have the impression that other people can see the influences of your child, and if so, when are these influences apparent to other people?
6. Do you find it difficult to talk about this subject (and if so, why do you think it is so difficult)?	6. Is this a subject you can talk about with other people?

questions (children's questions 1 and 2, and parents' question 1) was to introduce the topic in a global way but at the same time to concretize by asking for examples. The aim of the next set of questions (children's question 3, and parents' questions 2 and 3) was to introduce difference in the family regarding children's influence in order to give the participants a stepping stone to detail the children's influence. We decided not to ask questions of the children about their siblings' influence on their parents, because we thought the sibling relationship might be too close or affected to help the participating children talk about their influence. The objective of the following questions (children's question 4, and parents' question 4) was to introduce a perspective from outside the family, inviting the participants to think from an observer position. To conclude, and taking an even broader perspective, questions were constructed regarding the socio-cultural status of children's influence (children's questions 5 and 6, parents' questions 5 and 6).

It should be noted that these questions were merely stepping stones to co-construct the interview with the participants (Branco and Valsiner, 1997). Consequently, other questions emerged during the process of dialogue between the participants and researchers. For example, some children explained that parents learn things from their children. Hence, as researchers, we learned to include this theme more explicitly in the interviews with other children. As a consequence, these children taught us other dimensions of their influence.

The interviews were carried out at the homes of the participants. On average, they lasted about thirty minutes for the children and ninety minutes for the parents. Analysis revealed that this vast difference in length was not associated with the interviewer's familiarity with either the child or the parent participants. We shall return to this subject in the discussion section. The interviews were audio-taped. Before the interview started, the participants were informed about the aims of this study and signed a written consent. Although the informed consent of the parents included permission to interview the child, the children also signed a personal informed consent form.

Analysis

The interviews were written out by the interviewer immediately after the interview. Usually one day after the interview, the interviewer gave the verbatim account of the interview to the second author, and first

reflections were discussed. Next, the interviewer performed the analysis on the texts, which followed the stages described by Smith (1995). To begin with, one transcript was read a number of times and general reflections were written down. Next, keywords that captured the essential quality of the participant's statements regarding child influences were noted in the margin. At the same time, the themes were listed on a separate sheet. Then, the themes were discussed with the second author and attempts were made to cluster them under master themes. Each time a master theme emerged, previous material was checked to see whether the master theme could capture what the participant actually said. After the list of master themes was produced, the verbatim text referring to a master theme was marked. Then, the second transcript was analysed in the same way. Some material referred to existing themes and master themes; for other texts new themes and master themes emerged. The clustering of the emerging themes always took place in a dialogue between the two researchers, so nuances in meaning could be discussed until consensus was reached. During further analysis, attempts were made to create higher order themes. These analyses were performed on the children's data and the parents' data separately. With regard to the levels of analysis, we opted for classification in tandem with complexity and ambiguity. Classification means trying to range meaning units or themes that emerge out of the data. At the same time, following a dialectical perspective (Valsiner and Cairns, 1992), complexity and ambiguity were sought between and within the themes.

Although this is not regarded as a validation process in Smith's (1995) interpretative phenomenological approach, we decided to discuss the results of our analysis with five participating children and their parents who had also taken part in the study. The interviewer did so by presenting the higher order themes of the children's analysis to the children, and the higher order themes of the parents' analysis to the parents, and asking them for comment. These comments were discussed again with the second researcher. This feedback revealed no significant discrepancies with regard to analyses of the data.

Results

Analysis of the children's texts yielded four higher order themes; analysis of the parents' data created three higher order themes. Each higher order theme has been given a name and will be discussed with reference

TABLE 2 *Clustering themes: children*

Master themes	Higher order themes
- I have always an influence because I am a person - I never think about this, it is obvious - I never think about this, therefore it is difficult to talk about - We children never talk about this with one another - Very important to feel this influence because it concerns your parents	Difficult but obvious and even important
- Influence is not the same as power - I have an influence, but my parents stay in charge - Influence is more unconscious than conscious: unconscious means not having particular intentions - Influence is also manipulating the parents: that is something we talk about with one another	The concept of influence: influence versus power and intentional versus unintentional influence
- Parents are interested in what I do - Parents take my ideas and feelings into account - Parents change their ideas - Parents are concerned and involved: they try to understand me - Parents spend much time with their children and sacrifice themselves	Responsiveness of the parents
- Difficult because I have never thought about what my influence on my parents really 'is', but because you ask it . . . - I can teach my parents - I mirror characteristics of my parents - I have an influence on the personality of my parent	Difficulty talking about the contents of the influence

to verbatim quotes from the participants. Detailed analysis revealed no discrepancy between known and unknown participants (Table 2).

Children

Difficult but obvious and even important. All the children stated that talking about their influence on their parents is a difficult exercise. The

difficulty is reflected in an ambiguity they reported. On the one hand, it is difficult because it is unusual. It is more natural to experience the opposite direction of influence (from parent to child) and so it is difficult to find the appropriate words to describe child-to-parent influence. On the other hand, the children argued that they had never thought about it because it is so obvious that they influence their parents. They seem to take their influence for granted, as it is simply part of the relationship with their parents.

Girl (15 years): 'I have an influence, but I wouldn't know how. It is difficult to talk about, you never think about this, it is so obvious. But I think my parents have more influence on me than I have influence on them.'

In addition, they noticed the importance for their own person of a sense of influence regarding their parents.

Girl (11 years): 'It's important to have this feeling towards your parents – I cannot explain it, but it is important.'

At the end of the interview, several children emphasized the positive aspects of the exercise.

Boy (12 years): 'This is the first time I've ever talked about this in this way. It's a bit strange, but I like it.'

Interestingly, many children sent e-mails afterwards with comments they had forgotten to give during the interviews.

The concept of influence: influence versus power and intentional versus unintentional influence. A conceptual issue concerns the difference between power and influence. All of the children were very clear about this topic: influence is broader than power or getting parents to do something by using certain strategies. Having an influence is not the same as controlling your parents. Sometimes it may mean controlling them, but this is only one small part of the influence concept.

Girl (14 years): 'Having an influence on your parents is quite different from getting them to do something. Influence is just the way you are and how you are doing things. When you are trying to get them to do something, you are not quite the person you really are, you are only busy trying to persuade them. If one were to act this way all the time, then nobody would know who she/he really is.'

In line with the difference between influence and power, the children referred to their influence as mainly unintentional. Much of the influence children have on their parents is disconnected from their intentions. Children postulated that, without having a particular intention or without any intention at all, they have an influence on their parents just because they have a certain effect or outcome. Because influence is disconnected from intentions, some children stated that they always have an influence in the relationship with their parents. On the other hand, sometimes their influence is indeed conscious or intended. The children usually referred to their intentional influence as getting the parents to do something or doing something they know in advance the parent will like. In other words, intentional influence coincides with the power side of the influence concept.

Boy (15 years): 'There are two kinds of influence: conscious and unconscious. Conscious means that you are trying to get them to do something. Unconscious means that, although I didn't ask them to do it, they are doing it nonetheless. I don't always have to ask things explicitly, it is more a kind of feeling. Unconsciously, they are always taking me into account.'

Girl (14 years): 'It is totally different from getting them to do something. You can have an influence that you didn't want. I think there is always an influence, and getting them to do something is on purpose. Even a child that is neglected or unwished for has an influence, an object has no influence. A child that is unwished for has an influence on his parents: namely, that it is unwished for.'

Interestingly, when children talk with one another about this influence, they talk only about the power side. The participating children were unanimous about this. The influence one can have on parents is not a topic of conversation among youngsters, with the exception of the power aspect: how one deals with parents to get them to do something. In conversations among the children, the notion of influence equals control or power.

Girl (11 years): 'I can talk with my friends about how we can deal with them [parents], not what to do exactly, but they give advice about what you certainly should not do.'

Boy (14 years): 'When we talk with one another about this, it is about how we can handle them. So I've told them I failed one exam, if this is not the case, then it will certainly be okay.'

Responsiveness of the parents. The children talked extensively about the effects of their influence that they observe in their parents. Observing

an effect in a parent seems to give them a sense of influence. The younger these teens are, the more perceptible their effects need to be in order for them to derive a sense of influence. Younger children reported having influence when their parents listen to them, when they do something special or uncommon, when they get angry, when they help, when they are proud, when they spend time with the children, when they are concerned, when they use the same language as the children.

Girl (11 years): 'My mum is very proud because I am a good gymnast.'

Older teens interpret the behaviour deployed by their parents more actively to derive a sense of influence. These older children think they have influence on their parents when the parents are interested in the children's hobbies and ask questions about them, when the parents try to understand the children's opinions, when the parents empathize with the feelings and ideas of the children. The capacity of older children to change parents' ideas is a recurring theme. In order for these children to observe the influence they have on their parents, the parents must actively cope with the children's opinions: just listening to the children's ideas is not enough. Parents have to take the children's ideas and opinions into account – although the children do not think it is necessary that the parents fully adopt their ideas in order to have influence.

Girl (14 years): 'It's important that they take my opinion into account. Influence also means that my opinions and my parents' opinions melt together and make a whole of it.'

Some children held strong views, stressing that parents are obliged to take the influence of their children into account.

Girl (13 years): 'It's very important that parents listen to you. When a child reaches a certain age, parents are obliged to take the child's opinion into account.'

Thus, an essential point is that these early adolescents seem to infer their influence from the responsiveness of their parents. They interpret their effects in terms of the commitment and concern of their parents. The participating children talk in particular about effects that are constructive for the relationship with their parents and for themselves. One could call this the reflexive side of influence: the influence the child has on the parents tells the child something about her personality. When parents are interested in the child's opinion,

the social significance of the child is confirmed (i.e. the child is someone with interesting ideas). Influence is then conceptualized in a truly bidirectional manner: being a significant person in the relationship by influencing the other person. This interpersonal significance refers to the child as a social being and goes beyond the parent-child relationship.

Boy (15 years): 'It's important to have that sense of influence because it stimulates the relationship with your parents, you can talk more with one another. And I think that when you don't have that sense of influence you have more conflicts with other people.'

Difficulty talking about the contents of the influence. In contrast to the ease with which they described the effects they observed, it seemed difficult for the children to talk about the contents of their influence on their parents. However, explicit questioning resulted in the following themes. Some children postulated that parents can learn much from them in a wide variety of areas: things learned at school, fashion, music, electronic equipment, evolutions in the world, manners, and the habits of young people in society.

Girl (14 years): 'They learn a lot from us: computers, e-mail, fashion, music. If we wouldn't be there, they wouldn't know anything about these things.'

One girl took a quite extreme stance, maintaining that at a certain age the parent and child roles reverse and the child starts educating the parents.

Girl (13 years): 'Until the age of 10, your parents educate you, but above this age you educate your parents. When you become 12 or 13 years old, you start to have your own opinions and you pick up ideas from society that your parents aren't very aware about, that's not their cup of tea anymore. So, you are re-educating your parents, and you can be more successful with one parent than with the other one [this girl went on to explain that the re-education process was much easier with her father than with her mother].'

Some children observed a great variety of influences on the lives and personalities of the parents: their time investment, material and financial investment, inner life, responsibility, personality, marital relationship and even the burden on the parents. With reference to the personality of the parent, some stated that parents learn to control themselves by educating their children.

Boy (14 years): 'It's like the father of a girl I know, he is such a macho, and he would have continued to be a macho if he wouldn't have had children. Now, he also has a kind of responsibility, and he owes that to his children.'

Girl (14 years): 'Parents learn to control themselves when children are going too far.'

Boy (15 years): 'We teach them to look at things in a different way. If you don't have children, it's difficult to stay in touch with young people – as a parent, it's more easy.'

Some children mentioned that they mirror some of their parents' characteristics or personality traits, and thus reinforce the relationship.

Boy (12 years): 'My dad thinks I've got the same kind of humour as he has, and he finds it great!'

Girl (14 years): 'Sometimes my daddy looks at me and then he grins in a way and then I ask him what's the matter and he says: in my early days, I would have acted in just the same way.'

It is important to underline that the children did not automatically speak about these contents. All contents arose during the co-constructed interview process between child and researcher.

Parents

Although parents were instructed to think about the influence of the participating child, most of them talked about the influence of 'the children'. All parents indicated that talking about the subject was difficult, yet a relief. Some parents expressed anger at the beginning of the interview, stressing that their children are not in charge. There is a great deal of ambivalence in the parents' answers (Table 3).

Sense of involvement and influence on the development of the person of the parent. Parents indicated that children constantly appeal to a sense of involvement of the parent regarding the person of the child. This means that the parent continuously feels a sense of responsibility, a compelling engagement in a long-term project and long-term care. Regarding this sense of responsibility, parents referred to an ongoing future-oriented (feed-forward) attitude, whereby goals need to be formulated and reformulated in a flexible way, in addition to financial and material responsibility. Many parents talked about the enormous time investment. Some parents stressed the intensity of the engagement, which can also be frightening, and an educational fatigue at

TABLE 3 *Clustering themes: parents*

Master themes	Higher order themes
- sense of future-oriented responsibility - enduring engagement - dual influence on the personality of the parent: enriching and curtailing children's influence is not power - influence on the social and relational network of the parent - massive influence on the personal and emotional life of the parent: especially learning process that people are not controllable	Sense of involvement and influence on the development of the person of the parent
- feelings of detriment - vulnerability of the parent - duality: need for acknowledgement but lack of social recognition - children co-create their own education	Feelings of detriment, vulnerability, need for acknowledgement and experience of limited influence on children's education
- children educate their parents - children socialize their parents - children teach the parents practical things	Learning

times. At the same time, these parents emphasized the sense of having this unique bond and particular involvement as a fundamental existential experience. Like the children, parents can feel the existential dimension of influence.

Mother (43 years): 'It's a continuous sense of responsibility you have, and it's for a long-term project In a way, you are always asking yourself the question: "What would this mean for my child?" In one way or another, he is – not continuously, but very often – present in my mind You have your own objectives, but every child confronts you with his own questions, so you have to adjust your goals. . . . Sometimes it's more difficult than I thought it would be, but at the same time it's a unique experience – I wouldn't have missed it for anything.'

All parents accentuated the huge influence on their personality. Parents talked about this experience as a duality: as an enriching and, at the same time, curtailing influence. Parents also referred to this influence in a global, not in a concrete, way. 'Global' means the overall impact which having children has on one's personality. Like

the children, parents primarily talked about this influence as unintentional on the part of the child. It seemed to be difficult for the parents to talk about the concrete influences which children, or a specific child, have on a parent's personality. Only a few parents did so. None of the parents could talk about how their child's influences impact upon their concrete interactions with their child. In contrast with the children, parents can give language to the influence from their children, but this is not reflected back in the daily interactions. The following themes were discussed.

Parents talked about the development of their creative and solution-directed thinking and their capacity to organize things practically. As a parent, one must always have answers.

Father (45 years): 'When I make a remark, my daughter will overwhelm me with all kinds of arguments. That's not easy, but it also has a positive side: I'm obliged to justify my reasoning, it has to be coherent and structured. And sometimes, indeed, it's not easy to admit, but I can realize I'm wrong.'

Another theme concerns the development of the social and relational network. Being a parent provides a special kind of solidarity; one belongs to the group 'parents', so one builds up other social contacts. This also has an influence on the relationship one has with one's own parents. One can start looking in a different way at one's own parents and education: one becomes milder but also more critical. In contact with other people, the assessment of situations becomes more complex, trying to understand some situations and accusing others less readily. In addition, the influence on the marital relationship was discussed. Differences between the personalities of the parents can become more visible, which can give rise to tensions and developmental opportunities at the same time. Children force the parents to work on their relationship as a couple.

Mother (44 years): 'Before the children are born, you make agreements with your partner. But as a parent, you have to learn to negotiate, to make compromises. And to make compromises, you may differ with your partner, but the differences have to be within a respectable range. Sometimes it's disenchanting to see how differently he [my husband] thinks about certain matters.'

Parents also stressed the influence on their professional career, namely the responsibility to maintain continuity in employment. On the other hand, children can also function as a lightning rod for the stress of work.

Finally, yet importantly, parents reported many influences on their emotional life and worldview. Priorities and values become confused. As a parent, one can build up self-confidence while, at the same time, one is confronted with one's own objectionable habits. Children mirror aspects of the parents' personalities, which can be positive but also confusing. Children can make the parent feel both proud and embarrassed.

Regarding the emotional life and worldview of the parent, a most central theme concerns the experience of not having control and not knowing. This complicates the views on relational functioning and is enriching in that respect; on the other hand, it makes a parent vulnerable. Parents learn the difference between the efforts they make (and the intentions they have) and the outcomes: they learn that people are simply not controllable.

Mother (38 years): 'In the beginning, you think that raising kids is the same as housekeeping: when you do your best, everything will be OK. But after a certain period, you notice that it doesn't work like that. You cannot keep things under control, because you are dealing with another person. The older they get, the stronger their personality becomes, and the less you can keep things under control.'

Feelings of detriment, vulnerability, need for acknowledgement and experience of limited influence on children's education. In line with the theme of 'not having control and not knowing', some parents – not many, and mostly at the end of the interview – reported feelings of detriment: feelings of having missed things in life, restriction of freedom, the burden, feelings of helplessness and doubt, the grief when one fails and the feeling of being disillusioned. These parents accentuated the vulnerability of being a parent, that one is dealing with difficult and often uncontrollable issues, while at the same time there is a social perception and pressure that says: if you love your child enough, you cannot have problems.

Emphasis was placed on the need for acknowledgement: acknowledgement of the constructive aspects of children's influence as well as of the burden on, and the vulnerability of, the parents. Parents emphasized that others most often notice the influence of children when there are difficulties (a child with behavioural problems, for example), which is not the same as acknowledgement of the burden. Due to this lack of acknowledgement, parents discuss the problems they are having with their children only with people they can fully trust and other parents in particular. There seems to be little language in our culture for the positive side of children's influence.

Father (43 years): 'The acknowledgement of others is very important, the acknowledgement of your engagement, but also of your vulnerability and the fact that you are doing things that you cannot control very easily, although they have such an influence on your person.'

Mother (39 years): 'It's a little bit disillusioning. I had imagined the contact with my daughter totally differently. If I could start all over again, knowing what I know now, I would live childless.'

In addition, only a few parents talked about a developing sense that their influence on their children is limited and the fact that the children themselves co-create their own education. Some parents refer specifically to genetic dispositions, age, gender, personality and number of children; others stress the influence of the child in a more general way.

Mother (43 years): 'People think you have to treat your children in an equal way, but that's not true, because they also influence how they are treated themselves. The fact that a child influences his own education – I can notice this especially in the difference between him and his brother Not being a parent, you think you can mould your children; as a parent, you learn that the elbow-room is very limited.'

Learning. In contrast to the children, only some parents stressed the fact that they learn things from their children, especially about their culture and habits. These parents emphasized the importance and quality of this learning for their own personal development. This doesn't just mean being interested because a parent has to be interested in his child – this concerns full recognition of the agency of the child within the relationship.

Father (45 years): 'Children confront you with their world, the world of their youth culture: their clothing, music, and way of thinking In a very strong way, they keep you informed about how they look at things, in a very fast and direct way. One can say that they teach you to know their culture from inside. And, of course, you can simply learn a lot of things from them – for instance, about computers and other practical stuff.'

Discussion

Summarizing hypotheses with respect to the children's data

In the existing literature, the concept of interpersonal influence is subdivided into three defining parts: intention, behaviour and outcome

(Huston, 2002; Levy *et al.*, 1998). We find this distinction useful for summarizing our results. First, by having a particular intention, a specific behaviour can be deployed to obtain a desired outcome. Second, even without any intention, a person can have an influence by attaining certain outcomes or effects in the other person. Interestingly, when these early adolescents talk and think about their influence on their parents, they especially talk about unintentional influence and they report about this as existential. In other words, in a research context, where these children were addressed as agentic persons with the capacity to think about their own relational experiences, they disconnected their influence on their parents from their intentions and were primarily focused on their effects and the responsiveness of the parents. Unintentional influence concerns their being in this relationship: it is existential, has nothing to do with control or power, and is always present but difficult to talk about. This difference between children's influence and power was confirmed in another study about meaning constructions of children's influence using Q methodology (De Mol and Buysse, *in press*). These findings suggest that there is not much language available for talking about unintentional influence because it is too self-evident. As Huston (2002) observes, there is no parallel concept in social psychology for unintentional influence, as power is linked to intentional influence.

However, when these issues were talked through in the research context, the children discovered some language regarding influence on the person of the parent and the relationship. In their narratives about their (unintentional) influence, children seem to define influence as a dialectical process: influence is not exerting pressure on the parents to fully adopt the children's wishes or points of view (that is, parents do not have to comply); on the other hand, it is not enough for parents to only listen. Parents have to take the opinions of their children into account – this concerns accommodation and negotiation between children and parents to co-construct a new approach in the relationship that is viable for both and that will be challenged in the future. This view of children's influence corresponds with recent dialectical theories on bidirectionality in parent-child relations (Kuczynski and Parkin, 2006), in which agency and influence are primarily understood as processes of accommodation and negotiation and not only as processes of compliance. In addition, when children are together they only talk about the intentional or control dimension of their influence. There is indeed language to talk about this power side. However, children also feel that this power side is completely

inadequate to describe their influence in the relationship, although sometimes it is also important to feel a certain control in the relation with one's parents.

Summarizing hypotheses with respect to the parents' data

The parents' data confirm previous research conducted in this area. Parents acknowledged the massive influence of children on their personal development and relations (Ambert, 2001; Palkovitz *et al.*, 2003) and the experience that children co-create their own education (Grusec and Goodnow, 1994). The themes of ambivalence, power and unintentional influence emerged in the parents' interviews as well and facilitate a comparative analysis of children's and parents' data.

Similarities and differences between children's and parents' data

Similarities. First, both children and parents experienced talking about children's influence on parents as a meaningful yet difficult exercise. Meaningful, because it concerns an existential life experience; difficult, because they are not used to thinking about it. It is not common sense. Within our social-cultural discourse, the parent-child relationship is socially constructed too (Hacking, 1999). In these social constructions there is plenty of room for the influence of parents on children, but not for the inverse direction. Moreover, in our culture parents are seen as responsible for the relationship with their children. Common social perspectives maintain that parents have to influence their children in a constructive way. Yet there is no commonly agreed construction on children's influence. On the other hand, the children and parents fully recognized the existence of this influence. Second, both children and parents felt ambivalence and had difficulty finding words for something that is socially not constructed. In our language, the notion of influence is normally understood as control. Consequently, asking about children's influence might evoke an offended reaction. Indeed, some parents became angry at the beginning of the interview, indicating that their child is not in charge. Parents seem to struggle with the difference between power and influence (Huston, 2002; Kuczynski, 2003). For some children, talking about their influence was an emotional experience. Children may feel that in our culture they are not overtly allowed to think in this direction of influence – children's influence is not so much a socially constructed self-evidence as the influence of parents on children. Asking children about their influence can be a

noncommittal question for them. Thinking about children's influence is not only not common sense, it goes against a cultural discourse about parent-child relationships (Kuczynski *et al.*, 2003). Third, both children and parents primarily talked about unintentional influence. Parents experienced the influence of children on their personal development as unintentional on the children's part. When children and parents talked about intentional influence, they talked about power or control. In fact, the parents did not really talk about this power influence from their children; instead, a few parents mentioned it during the interview. Neither the children nor the parents could talk about constructive intentional influence from children. There does not seem to be much language in our culture for talking about this positive intentional side.

Differences. Parents principally talked about the massive influence on their personality, and they talked about it in a global way. Although parents felt ambivalent talking about the subject, they poured their hearts out to the interviewer because questions about their children's influence on them had never been asked before, which explains the vast difference in length between the children's and the parents' interviews. In this way, the parents put into words the contents of this influence, which seemed to be very difficult – if not impossible – for the children. However, none of the parents could say anything about how this massive influence affected their actual behaviour towards their children or how it influenced the concrete interactions with their children. They had never thought about it, which emphasized the novelty of the subject. On the other hand, the children did not recognize their overwhelming effects on the personalities of their parents, but assessed their influence according to their parents' responsiveness. In this respect, the children were focused on the concrete behaviour of their parents, interpreting their effects with regard to their own personality and the quality of the relationship (the reflexive side of influence). After explicit questioning, they could verbalize some contents of their influence, especially the fact that parents can learn much from them. This content was less pronounced in the parents, while for children it seemed to be an important aspect of their agency in the relationship.

In sum, talking about children's influence on their parents, children and parents seem to teach us something about the relational concept of influence. Children and parents co-construct the children's influence as mainly unintentional, adding another dimension of influence

in parent–child relations. Children and parents use the distinction between agentic (intentional) and non-agentic (unintentional) influence to construct child influences. However, non-agentic influences are not constructed as inferior to agentic influences. In fact, children and parents are talking about a *sense* of non-agentic (unintentional) influence. In the research literature a difference is made between agentic behaviour and sense of agency (Cummings and Schermerhorn, 2003; Kuczynski *et al.*, 1999), with sense of agency referring to control beliefs. In a similar way a difference can be made between non-agentic behaviour and a sense of non-agentic influence. In addition to a sense of agency, a sense of non-agentic influence is crucial in children's and parents' constructions of processes of influence in the parent–child relationship. By approaching influence as an unintentional process beside the traditional intentional (power) view, room is made for a dialectical view of influence in relationships in which there are primarily processes of accommodation and negotiation and, to a smaller degree, processes of compliance (Kuczynski and Parkin, 2006).

This dialectical view corresponds with research on parent–adolescent relationships which indicates that this relationship is not an area of constant conflict or a relationship characterized primarily by power (Smetana *et al.*, 2006). By making a difference (Bateson, 1979) – inviting parents and children to think about the unusual subject of children's influence – different narratives about influence in families are created by the relationship participants. Moreover, possibly the reason why participants had difficulty talking about the subject is that children and parents seem to take children's influence for granted, because influence, and primarily unintentional influence, is intrinsic to their relationship. Influence is a relationship notion because it connects people. Although humans always experience relational phenomena, it is not easy for them as individuals to describe these phenomena. In other words, the hypothesis is that a dimension of unintentional influence indexes the mutual and interdependent nature of close relationships. Influence and especially unintentional influence is embedded in a reciprocal relationship that makes children's influence so taken for granted. This is an issue for further research.

Cultural context of children's influence

A main assumption of bidirectionality is that influence does not stop at the borders of parent–child relations (Kuczynski, 2003). Culture is a

dynamic context for the development of relationships, while socio-cultural contexts are created by humans, their interactions and relationships (Hinde, 1997). This view is consistent with a social constructionist approach (Deaux and Philogène, 2001; Hacking, 1999). The Belgian (Western) culture is an individualistic culture characterized by a relatively democratic family power structure that values children's autonomy and self-expression (Beck, 1997). A development has taken place from a patriarchal family structure towards what is called a 'negotiation-housekeeping' structure (De Swaan, 1983). The fact that negotiation and partnership are constructed by children and parents as fundamental dimensions of children's agency demonstrates the intertwinement of human functioning and culture. However, this family culture of negotiation has been criticized (e.g. Du Bois-Raymond, 2001). A main critique is that through one-sided emphasizing, children's right to negotiate the child is decontextualized from his or her personal (e.g. age, gender, and handicap), proximal (family and parents) and cultural (e.g. poverty) contexts, with risks for (further) marginalization. Focusing on the context of the parent-child relationship, a plea is made for recontextualizing the child within this 'by definition' vertical relationship. The acknowledgement of the vertical power structure of the parent-child relationship is fundamental to the study of this relationship (Maccoby, 2000).

This is in line with notions developed within structural family therapy where hierarchical family structure is viewed as essential for the development of the family and its members (Minuchin, 1974). Power difference between parents and children is a necessary condition to enhance a development of the agency of both relationship partners. The ambivalence that parents report when thinking about children's influence is related to the parents' struggle about the difference between power and agency. The acknowledgement of the embedding of this ambivalence in a cultural discourse has psychotherapeutic implications. Culture does not provide ready-made solutions for the family. This insight can help the therapist to reconnect the family with the cultural discourse, a main goal for the systemic therapist (Hedges, 2005; McNamee, 1996). In fact, by dealing with their difficulties the family participates in a broader societal dialogue.

Some other psychotherapeutic implications

Given that interpersonal influence is a central notion in family therapy, these understandings about children's influence most likely

have psychotherapeutic implications: how to make room for the influence and agency of the child in psychotherapy and especially family therapy (Lund *et al.*, 2002). Is it possible to create room in family therapy for what we can learn from children, what children are teaching their parents, how parents can cope with these children's influences in daily interactions and, at the same time, maintain a parenting position?

Family therapy literature has focused on the importance of including children in family therapy, not only because a family therapist should include children but especially to stress the specific value and contribution children add to the family and the therapeutic process (Korner and Brown, 1990; O'Brien and Loudon, 1985). Children add a dimension of unintentional influence to the more common intentional processes of influence in family systems. This unusual dimension may offer psychotherapeutic opportunities. A consequence of Huston's (2002) definition of influence is that people do not 'own' their influence, as they are dependent upon the meaning of their effects for the other person. In other words, there is a vast difference between intentions and effects. By introducing this unintentional dimension a start can be made with making a difference between intentions and outcomes of influence. Moreover, Cooklin (2001) describes how involving children can enhance a dialectical process in family therapy. An important goal of family therapy is to increase the tolerance of difference in the family. The framework of the existence of unintentional influence in families may help the therapist to approach family functioning differently. A family is principally not an area of strategic action but rather a system of dialectical tuning to one another. Bidirectional influence occurs constantly, which means that family members always have effects. That is, there are always differences between family members. However, when influence is narrowed and equated with intentional influence (or power), as in families with problems, differences between family members may become unbridgeable because the other has to comply. A dimension of unintentionality may invite family members to think differently about the meaning of their or the others' effects. Unintentional influence grasps the relationship and interdependent dimension because the other exists in the relationship independent of one's own strategic or intentional goals. In addition, one's existence as a person in the family does not coincide with the compliance of the other. This is probably a fundamental insight that families might learn from children.

In sum, when relationship partners interact and communicate, processes of influence are inevitable, which means that individuals influence each other continuously, both intentionally and unintentionally. Considering Watzlawick's assumption that psychopathology can be correlated with communication processes between humans, and reflecting upon the inevitability and interdependent nature of unintentional influence, the question may be asked: To what extent can facilitating a sense of unintentional influence, or a sense of being unintentionally influenced, among family members be helpful in coping with problems? This issue needs further research.

Limitations and future research

Although interpretative phenomenology makes no claim to be exhaustive (Smith, 1995), the researchers have been constrained by the sample. The age group of the participating children was limited. Future research should also focus on younger children and older adolescents. Regardless of individual differences, experience from the interviews shows that the youngest children (11 and 12 years) had a lot of difficulties with the subject. Perhaps the questions were too difficult. Perhaps younger children experience their influence in a different way and communicate about this in a non-linguistic fashion. These questions demand adapted research methods. Probably older adolescents will shift the emphasis and stress other themes. From this developmental perspective, a longitudinal research design would be more appropriate.

Because this study was purely exploratory, it adopted a holistic approach. No gender or other differences were taken into consideration. Future research can focus on gender differences, between girls and boys as well as between mothers and fathers. Consistent with our exploratory goal, thinking about children's influence in other cultures must be explored. Using a social constructionist approach, diversity in thinking among people (not only children and parents) within and between cultures can be investigated. Influence and agency of children are fascinating subjects that require a multi-method approach (Parke, 2002).

Both children and parents especially stress the unintentional dimension of children's influence. Probably these results are also due to the methodology. The participants were free to think and talk about the topic without induction of prompts or descriptions of concrete situations. Consequently the participants talked about the

interdependent nature of the relationship which is characterized by mutual responsiveness and inevitable influence. Children's influence is taken for granted as it is embedded in the relationship. Influence 'happens' and therefore it is not primarily linked with intentionality. Future research can investigate when prompts or concrete situations are offered to the participants in order to describe children's influence, whether or not children and parents would concentrate explicitly on the strategic and intentional nature of children's influence. However, capitalizing on our methodology may also be meaningful. It would give opportunities to focus on the inarticulateness, defensiveness, and taken-for-granted nature of influence in close relationships. On the whole, we think children's influence is a very fruitful research area, if we are prepared, as 'not knowing' adults, to learn from children.

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