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Attributions and Attitudes of Mothers and Fathers in Sweden

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SYNOPSIS

Objective—The present study examined mean level similarities and differences as well as correlations between mothers' and fathers' attributions regarding successes and failures in caregiving situations and progressive versus authoritarian attitudes.

Design—Interviews were conducted with both mothers and fathers in 77 Swedish families.

Results—Fathers reported higher adult-controlled failure and child-controlled failure attributions than did mothers; these differences remained significant after controlling for parents' age, education, and possible social desirability bias. Significant positive correlations were found for mothers' and fathers' progressive attitudes, authoritarian attitudes, and modernity of attitudes after controlling for parents' age, education, and possible social desirability bias.

Conclusions—We conclude that in Sweden fathers are more likely to attribute failures in caregiving situations both to themselves and to children than are mothers and that there is moderate concordance between fathers and mothers within the same family in progressive and authoritarian parenting attitudes.

INTRODUCTION

Swedish Culture

Sweden is a country in northern Europe, with a population of 9.3 million people in 2009. Since 1995 Sweden has been a member of the European Union (EU). About 14% of the people in Sweden were born in another country, and 390,000 are children to foreign parents, which means that 20% of Swedish inhabitants have a foreign background. Sweden historically has been a Lutheran country. Although Sweden is not a particularly religious country, the culture still is founded in Christian traditions (Church of Sweden Statistics, 2008).

Gross National Income per capita in Sweden was USD\$46,060 in 2007, making Sweden one of the wealthiest countries in the world. The proportion of children under the age of 18 who live in low-income families (defined as families that cannot afford to buy basic necessities such as food and clothes) decreased from 8% in 2006 to 7% in 2009 (Statistics Sweden, 2009a). The proportion of children who live in a family with a high economic standard (defined as families with enough financial resources to support two families) increased from 18% to 30%. The gap between children who live in low-income and high-income families has enlarged, but despite these differences Sweden does not have big gaps between poor and rich families. Thanks to high taxes, most people, regardless of their income, can live with

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help from the government and the social safety net. The Swedish welfare state has a long history, beginning in 1930 when three concepts were implemented: democracy, citizenship, and modernity (Ehn, Frykman, & Löfgren, 1995). Equality is an important value in Sweden and is shown both when it comes to equal responsibilities and opportunities between mothers and fathers (Allard, 2007), between children and parents (Harkness, Super, Axia, Elias, Palacios, & Welles-Nyström, 2001), as well as between children and children (Läroplanen för grundskolan, 2011). It is important not only when it comes to income and opportunities in life, but also in an effort to be the same as everyone else. No one should try to be better than anybody else, although every person is viewed as unique. This kind of culture is known as horizontal individualism, where the individual is important but no one is supposed to be seen as better than another. This can be compared to the vertical individualism that is seen in the United States, for example, where individuals are more competitive (Triandis, 2001).

From a health perspective, Sweden is in the top five countries in having the lowest infant mortality rate (.2%) and under-5 mortality rate (.3%), and life expectancy at birth is 81 years. The adult literacy rate is 99% (UNICEF, 2007). Almost every adolescent attends the gymnasium (high school; 2 years or more after compulsory school), and about 89% graduate (Swedish Board of Education, 2009). Among people between the ages of 30 and 50 years (the age of the parents in the current study), 88% have graduated from high school, and 39% have a bachelor's degree (Swedish Board of Education, 2009).

About 1.1 million families have children younger than 18 years living at home. Seventy-five percent of families with children have parents who are married or cohabiting. On average, families in Sweden have 1.8 children; about 10% of all children are the only child in the family. About 2 million people in Sweden are children (20% of the population). Seventy-four percent of children live with both of their parents. Separation is rather common in Sweden, but has decreased since 1999. In 2006, 3% of the children who had married (or cohabiting) parents experienced a separation in the family, and 25% of children lived in separated families. Most children with separated parents live with their mothers, and 21% alternated living with their father and mother every other week (Statistics Sweden, 2006). Although, it is still more common for mothers to take care of the children in a case of separation, fathers' parenting role has increased in recent years and the equality of parenting is greater than before concerning taking care of the children after a divorce. This shared responsibility could have an effect on commonalities between mothers and fathers in parenting attributions and attitudes (Statistics Sweden, 2011a).

In Sweden most children begin childcare in their second year of life. The fact that children attend preschool at an early age has resulted in a discussion concerning the degree of responsibility for different parts of the child's development (Hundeide, 2006). Children attending preschool at an early age gives schools an early responsibility for children's development and adjustment. The curriculum for preschool says that preschools should give parents the opportunity to influence activities in preschool, but also that preschools should cooperate with the home (Läroplanen för förskolan, 1998). Almost 96% of all children between 2 and 5 years of age attend preschool or are in a registered childcare provider's home (Statistics Sweden, 2006). This is a result of both parents working; about 80% of mothers and 90% of fathers work outside the home. Sweden is often internationally seen as a country that gives equal possibilities for men and women to combine work and family (Allard, 2007). Legislation is designed to encourage men and women to take an equal share of domestic responsibilities and to take equal responsibility for the family budget (Haas, 1996). Fathers and mothers each have the right to stay at home with their child for 240 days, with pay. To bring commonality in maternal and paternal views, as well as promote that mothers and fathers both have the capacity to take care of their child, both mothers and

fathers are provided with instruction about child development and how they as parents can support their child's development (Durrant & Olsen, 1997). Haas (1996) argued that Swedish fathers are those who, in the whole of Western society, are best equipped to be able to challenge and subvert traditional gender roles. Although mothers still take most of the parental leave, 21% of parental leave days are taken by fathers (Statistics Sweden, 2006). Furthermore, one of the most important aspects of Swedish employment law aims to create a gender-equal environment and promotes parental leave to be taken by both mothers and fathers (Åhnberg, 1999; JämO, 2000; von Melen, 1998).

Perhaps the most important aspect of Swedish society for understanding mothers' and fathers' attributions and attitudes regarding parenting is belief in the equality of the child. The idea of treating children as equals was fundamental already in the beginning of the 20th century when one of Sweden's most famous pedagogues wrote a book about children and their rights (Key, 1995). Even in 1900, Key advocated for schools for all children, regardless of gender, class, or area of residence; laws against maltreatment and child labor; and the idea that children had the right to a childhood. For example, in 1979 Sweden was the first country in the world to pass legislation prohibiting the use of physical punishment (which is known as *aga* in Swedish) and other forms of insulting treatment towards children (Durrant, 2003). The first aim of the *aga-law* was to change attitudes regarding the use of physical force against children, as an initial step to reduce the use of physical punishment towards children. The second aim was to offer parents and professionals a clear set of guidelines regarding acceptable parenting practices. The third aim was to be able to achieve earlier identification of child abuse, which in turn would lead to earlier intervention (Durrant, 1999, 2003). The dominant opinion is that the 1979 legislation had been preceded by a long process of adjustment, which over time created a negative attitude towards physical punishment in Sweden, thus enabling the *aga-law* to be passed and implemented (Deley, 1988; Durrant, 1999; Durrant, Broberg, & Rose-Krasnor, 1999). At the time when the legislation was enacted, an intensive public awareness campaign was undertaken to inform both adults and children about the aim and contents of the *aga-law*. According to Durrant (1999), the legislation achieved all of its original aims. Swedish parents "negotiate" with their children, instead of dominating them (Carlson & Earls, 2001). In an international study, Swedish parents differed from parents in other countries when it came to the ways and frequency with which they emphasized children's rights in the family and in family life (Harkness et al., 2001).

Parental Attributions and Attitudes within Sweden

In Sweden, there is a widely held desire to strive to achieve a more equal society with respect to children's rights, and children are seen as full human beings (Durrant, 2003). These progressive attitudes were captured by Carlson and Earls (2001, p. 15), who stated: "In Sweden there is a highly developed view of the child based on democratic values, which gives respect for the child as a person in its own right and a belief in the child's inherent skills and potential." Swedish parents tend to view their task as a parent to be a resource and always available. Child development is not regarded as something that has to be formed or shaped; instead, parents express the opinion that children are individuals, not to direct, but to support. Parents' responsibility is to guarantee morally and socially accepted behavior, mainly through role-modeling (Hallden, 1991).

In a cross-cultural study (Lassbo & Hakvoort, 1998), Swedish parents did not distinguish themselves from parents in other European countries with respect to norms and ideas concerning child versus adult orientation or the child's own responsibilities for personal-social routines. Swedish parents place themselves in the middle on both components, with Russia and Great Britain being more adult oriented and putting more demands on the child, and the Netherlands, Denmark, and Finland being more child oriented and putting fewer

demands on the child. In one study, the majority of parents (70% of both mothers and fathers) reported that their most important parenting goal was to rear their children to be honest (Janson, Långberg, & Svensson, 2007). Honesty was regarded as a more important parenting goal than keeping track of the time, being polite, or being just. Parents were less demanding of children younger than 10 years of age and older than 17 years of age, showing that parents gradually increase their demands as the child's capability grows and decrease their demands as the child becomes a more independent adolescent.

Compared to several other countries (Canada, Iran, and the Cook Islands in the Pacific), Swedish mothers view younger (3 – 6 years of age) children's disobedience less seriously and try to find explanations other than internal ones for their children's disobedience. Swedish mothers also offered more excuses for their children's misbehaviors. This parental view can be regarded as less authoritarian, as parents do not view particular behaviors as disobedience (Durrant et al., 1999; Broberg cited in Hindberg, 2001).

Palmérus (1997, 1999) showed that in Sweden, as in other countries, progressive childrearing attitudes are negatively correlated with mothers' harsher discipline methods. In a Swedish study that used vignettes to explore relations between mothers' childrearing attitudes and children's evaluation of mothers' discipline methods, it was found that children's perceptions and evaluations of hypothetical mothers' use of harsh discipline methods varied as a function of their own mothers' traditional childrearing attitudes (Sorbring, Deater-Deckard, & Palmérus, 2006). Mother-father similarities with respect to progressive-traditional attitudes are found in some studies (Palmérus, 1999), but not in other studies. For example, Janson et al. (2007) found that fathers report more traditional attitudes than mothers regarding the use of harsher discipline methods.

The Present Study

Historically, most studies conducted in Sweden concerning parental attitudes and attributions have focused primarily on physical punishment. This is not surprising, as in Sweden the cultural and legal constraints on the use of physical punishment may directly influence parents' attitudes. Few studies have investigated the agreement between mothers' and fathers' attributions and attitudes. Lamb, Hwang, and Broberg (1989) reported a difference between mothers and fathers, with mothers showing more expressive concerns and fathers showing more instrumental concerns. There were few differences between parents of girls and boys. However, one can argue for the need for studies to focus on more general parental attributions and attitudes. The present study provides an up to date comparison of Swedish mothers' and fathers' attributions and attitudes in general, as well as a description of concordance between mothers and fathers within families. The study addresses two research questions. First, are there differences between mothers' and fathers' attributions and attitudes within families? Second, how highly are mothers' attributions and attitudes correlated with fathers' attributions and attitudes?

METHOD

Context

Participants were recruited from Trollhättan and Vänersborg in the western part of Sweden. The population is 55,000 in Trollhättan and 37,000 in Vänersborg. All together, in both cities, the inhabitants (between the ages of 30 – 49) have an average income of 262,000 Skr (about USD\$40,000) a year, compared to individuals in the same age range in Sweden as a whole, who have an average income of 272,000 Skr (about USD\$41,500) a year (Statistics Sweden, 2011b). Both of the cities are a part of the second largest county in Sweden, Västra Götalands län. The leading employer has been SAAB in Trollhättan, which makes the city

an industrial town, whereas Vänersborg is known as a middle-class town. In both cities, about 52% of the inhabitants have graduated from high school and 33% have studied at universities (Statistics Sweden, 2009b, 2009c). Eighty percent of 1- to 5-year-olds attend preschool, and half of the children aged 6 to 12 attend after school centers. In Trollhättan, 16% of the population was born in another country and immigrated to Sweden, and in Vänersborg, 8% of the population are immigrants, compared to 14% in Sweden as a whole (Statistics Sweden, 2009b, 2009c).

Participants

After receiving approval from school principals, recruitment letters were sent to families in 6 different schools. The letter described the study and informed the parents that they would be contacted by phone. Five more families were contacted outside the 6 public schools. A total of 182 letters were mailed, and 173 families were contacted by phone. Nine families that received letters turned out not to fit in the demographic groups. Families with immigrant parents were not included. In all, 102 families participated, and 71 families declined participation. For the present study, analyses were limited to the 77 families in which data were available from both the mother and the father. The families in which both parents provided data have a higher level of education and are more likely to be married or cohabiting than the families in which just one parent provided data. In Table 1 demographic characteristics for the 77 families with data from both parents are presented.

Procedures

Parents could choose either to be interviewed or to complete questionnaires themselves. Those parents who chose to be interviewed were interviewed either at their homes or another place chosen by the parent. Every interview took place out of hearing from other family members and lasted 1.5–2 hours. Two interviewers collected all of the data. They completed a demographic questionnaire, a measure of social desirability bias (Reynolds, 1982), and two parenting measures.

The analyses in this paper focus on constructs from two measures of attributions and attitudes (see Lansford & Bornstein, 2012). First, parents completed the short form of the Parent Attribution Test (Bugental & Shennum, 1984), which was developed to measure parents' perceptions of causes of success and failure in hypothetical caregiving situations. Parents are presented with a hypothetical scenario that involves either a positive or negative interaction with a child (e.g., "Suppose you took care of a neighbor's child one afternoon, and the two of you had a really good time together."). Parents then are asked to respond to a series of questions regarding reasons that the interaction was positive or negative. Parents rate on a 7-point scale (1 = *not at all important*, 7 = *very important*) how important factors such as the child's disposition and the parent's behavior were in determining the quality of the interaction. The amount of power or control attributed to oneself versus children is the key dimension of interest. This measure yielded four variables: (1) attributions regarding uncontrollable success (6 items; e.g., how lucky you were in just having everything work out well); (2) attributions regarding adult-controlled failure (6 items; e.g., whether you used the wrong approach for this child); (3) attributions regarding child-controlled failure (6 items; e.g., the extent to which the child was stubborn and resisted your efforts); and (4) perceived control over failure (the difference between attributions regarding adult-controlled failure and attributions regarding child-controlled failure).

Second, parents completed the Parental Modernity Inventory (Schaefer & Edgerton, 1985), which assesses parents' attitudes about childrearing and education. Each of 30 statements is rated on a 4-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 4 = *strongly agree*). This instrument yielded three variables: (1) progressive attitudes (8 items; e.g., Children have a right to their own

point of view and should be allowed to express it.); (2) authoritarian attitudes (22 items; e.g., The most important thing to teach children is absolute obedience to their parents.); and (3) modernity of attitudes (the difference between the progressive attitudes score and the authoritarian attitudes score). Alphas for each variable are shown in Table 2.

RESULTS

As shown in Table 2, both mothers and fathers reported attributions near the scale midpoints, on average. However, variability was greater for attributions regarding uncontrollable success than for attributions regarding adult- or child-controlled failure. Regarding attitudes, both mothers and fathers reported greater progressive attitudes than authoritarian attitudes. A closer look at the two deviation variables (i.e., perceived control over failure and modernity of attitudes) revealed that the attitude scales result in a much greater differential than the attribution scales (both for mothers and fathers). Thus, Swedish parents are more polarized in their attitudes than in their attributions.

Gender Similarities and Differences in Parents' Attributions and Attitudes

Repeated-measures linear mixed models with gender of parent as the within-subjects fixed factor tested for differences between mothers and fathers in attributions for success and failure in caregiving situations and progressive versus authoritarian attitudes. Test results are presented with and without controls for mothers' and fathers' ages, education, and possible social desirability bias. There were significant main effects of parent gender on two of the seven constructs of interest. Fathers reported higher adult-controlled failure and child-controlled failure attributions than did mothers. Both of these differences remained significant after controlling for parents' age, education, and possible social desirability bias.

Within-Family Correlations Between Parents' Attributions and Attitudes

Correlations were computed between parents in the same family to assess similarity between mothers' and fathers' attributions and attitudes. The final columns of Table 2 present bivariate correlations of mothers' attributions and attitudes with fathers' attributions and attitudes. Three of the seven analyses revealed significant concordance between parents within a family; all three remained significant after controlling for parents' age, education, and possible social desirability bias. Significant positive correlations were found for mothers' and fathers' progressive attitudes, authoritarian attitudes, and modernity of attitudes.

DISCUSSION

The present study examined parenting attributions and attitudes among Swedish parents. Fathers reported higher adult-controlled failure and child-controlled failure attributions than did mothers. These differences remained significant after controlling for parents' age, education, and possible social desirability bias. Progressive attitudes, authoritarian attitudes, and modernity of attitudes were correlated for mothers and fathers within the same family.

The differences between mothers' and fathers' attributions regarding adult-controlled failure and child-controlled failure could be explained by differences in the way men and women perceive control. Earlier studies have revealed that women have lower perceived control than men (Alloy & Clements, 1992; Rosenthal, 1995; Zebb & Moore, 2003). Men are more likely to think that they have control over various outcomes; this could also be the case in parenting. One study concluded that Swedish mothers are more likely to make external than internal explanations for younger children's disobedience (Broberg cited in Hindberg, 2001; Durrant et al., 1999). Fathers (who were not included in the prior study) might not view

disobedience in the same way, but instead might place more responsibility inside the person. Previous studies, together with results from the present investigation, suggest that mothers more often than fathers, tend to use external rather than internal explanations for children's disobedience. The theory of cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957) implies that when individuals perceive contradictions between social realities, they strive for a balance (e.g., by finding alternative explanations). If parents, over and over again, experience dissonance between child disobedience and their own parental attitudes, one way to balance this contradiction is to find external explanations for the child's behavior. As the mother is likely to be the parent who spends more time with the child, the mother might also be the parent who more often experiences cognitive dissonance. Mothers and fathers did not differ in their mean levels of attributions regarding uncontrollable success.

There were no gender differences in mothers' and fathers' mean levels of attitudes. However, progressive attitudes, authoritarian attitudes, and modernity of attitudes were correlated for mothers and fathers within the same family. Both mothers and fathers held more progressive than authoritarian parenting attitudes, which makes sense in the Swedish context of striving to be an egalitarian society where children's rights are emphasized (Durrant, 2003). Carlson and Earl (2001) observed that Swedish children are viewed as individuals with their own rights and own potential. As a culture with horizontal individualism, every person has the same rights but also the same obligations and responsibilities. Progressive attitudes in Sweden are embodied in legislation against physical punishment, which gives children the same rights as adults (Durrant, 2008). Other studies have shown that Swedish parents are not authoritarian and that they often make excuses when their children misbehave (Broberg cited in Hindberg, 2001; Durrant et al., 1999). A predominant idea in Sweden is that as they grow older, children will behave in morally and socially accepted ways (Hallden, 1991). Even in the preschool curriculum, children are expected to develop the ability to take responsibility as well as develop feelings of tolerance toward others (Läroplanen för förskolan, 1998).

In Sweden, mother-father similarities and within-family correlations in attributions and attitudes could be explained by legislation that encourages both parents to take equal responsibility in parenting (Haas, 1996). High percentages of parents work in Sweden; about 80% of mothers and 90% of fathers work outside the home and are given equal opportunities to combine work and family (Allard, 2007). Swedish legislation designed to encourage both parents to stay at home with their child could render mothers' and fathers' attitudes more similar to each other. Both mothers and fathers are provided with instruction about child development (Durrant & Olsen, 1997), which probably contributes to more discussions between the parents about childrearing. These discussions could result in more similar attitudes in the family. Another possibility is that parents choose to be in a relationship with someone who has similar thoughts about parenting (Luo & Klohnen, 2005). Explanations relying on parents shaping each other to become more similar over time and selecting into relationships with similar partners are not mutually exclusive. Romantic partners might select each other because of similar attitudes in general, but not specifically parenting attitudes. Over time, discussions about parenting then contribute to mother-father similarities.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

One limitation of this study is the low alphas on the uncontrollable success variable for fathers and mothers and the progressive attitudes variable for mothers. Uncontrollable success, that is if parents attribute success in childrearing to luck or other uncontrollable factors, did not yield any significant results. It is interesting to note that the standard deviations were fairly large for both fathers and mothers, meaning that fathers as a group as well as mothers as a group are heterogeneous in their attributions regarding uncontrollable

success. This may also indicate that the items for uncontrollable success are hard to interpret for the parents. The progressive attitudes variable yielded a low alpha for mothers, but a high alpha for fathers. The instrument has been used in previous studies of Swedish mothers, but the progressive attitudes variable yielded low alphas in previous work in Sweden, too. There is no good explanation for why the alphas are low for mothers and not for fathers; we advise caution when interpreting the results.

A further limitation is the small and homogeneous sample. The sample includes only Swedish born parents as well as mainly two-parent families, and it is therefore important not to over generalize the results to the entire population of Sweden. We did not include any minority ethnic groups from Sweden in the sample. Fourteen percent of the Swedish population has a foreign background; immigrants from southern Europe and the Middle East are common groups in Sweden that may have other traditions and culturally different ways of approaching children. Future research could represent this diversity within the Swedish population. Furthermore, in the present study, with a focus on comparing mothers' and fathers' attributions and attitudes, we used data only from families in which both mothers and fathers provided data. Single parents in Sweden have been found to endorse harsher discipline strategies (Palmérus, 1999), and other attributions and attitudes may differ for single parents than for parents in two-parent families.

Another interesting area for future research will be to examine parents' attributions and attitudes regarding sons and daughters, as previous research suggests children's gender is related to parenting (Dumka, Gonzales, Bonds, & Millsap, 2009). Gender equality has been an important issue in Sweden for many years, which makes the study of possible gender differences especially interesting from a cultural perspective. Future research would also benefit from focusing on children's attributions and attitudes related to their parents and how children describe their own agency in family situations.

Conclusions

In Sweden, fathers are more likely to attribute failures in caregiving situations both to themselves and to children than are mothers, but there is moderate concordance between fathers and mothers within the same family in progressive and authoritarian parenting attitudes. Given historical changes over time in families' experiences, it is important to update knowledge about parenting through ongoing study. In this sense, culture can be regarded as an evolving force that changes over time in its influence on parenting and families.

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TABLE 1

Demographic Characteristics of Children and Families

Child's gender (% female)	47%
Child's age in years	7.73 (.45)
Mother's age in years	38.07 (4.82)
Father's age in years	40.45 (5.68)
Mother's education in years	13.92 (2.48)
Father's education in years	13.73 (2.98)
Parents' marital status (% married)	58%
Number of children in household	2.23 (.77)
Number of adults in household	1.95 (.75)

M (SD)

TABLE 2
Parenting Attributions and Attitudes: Alphas, Tests of Gender Differences, and Correlations for Mothers and Fathers

	Mothers α	Fathers α	Mothers <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	Fathers <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	<i>F</i>	<i>F</i> ^a	<i>d</i>	<i>d</i> ^a	<i>r</i>	<i>r</i> ^a
Attributions										
Uncontrollable success	.62	.58	4.74 (.80)	4.58 (.80)	.35	.87	.09	.15	.03	-.03
Adult-controlled failure	.84	.65	4.05 (.58)	4.28 (.66)	5.69*	7.62**	-.39	-.43	-.02	.07
Child-controlled failure	.82	.66	3.76 (.46)	3.98 (.54)	7.41**	7.34**	-.41	-.40	.12	.17
Perceived control over failure	-	-	.29 (.73)	.30 (.71)	.08	.39	-.04	-.09	.15	.19
Attitudes										
Progressive attitudes	.45	.70	3.27 (.26)	3.27 (.35)	.00	.40	.00	-.09	.28*	.26*
Authoritarian attitudes	.82	.78	2.26 (.33)	2.32 (.31)	3.85	2.79	-.24	-.20	.42***	.45***
Modernity of attitudes	-	-	1.01 (.46)	.95 (.49)	2.03	.48	.16	.08	.50***	.48***

Note. *N*s range from 76–77. Repeated-measures linear mixed models with gender of parent as the within-subjects factor. Cohen's *d* was computed using Equation 3 for paired samples in Dunlap, Cortina, Vaslow, and Burke (1996).

^aControlling for parents' age, education, and possible social desirability bias.

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

*** $p < .001$.