

Parents' Perceptions of Their Children's Personalities, Abilities, and Interests:
Structure and Relations

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Abstract

We examined parents' perceptions of their children's personality characteristics, and how these perceptions relate to parents' perceptions of children's abilities and interest in math, reading, music, sports, and social activities. 325 mothers and 225 fathers of first, second, and third grade children completed questionnaires assessing these beliefs. Factor analyses showed that the structure of mothers' and fathers' perceptions of children's personality was similar. Factors describing parents' perceptions of children's personality characteristics include Responsible/Motivated Child, Leader, Creative, Warm, Competitive, and Anxious Child. Perceptions of child responsibility related to perceptions of children's ability and interest in math and reading, perceived leadership and warmth related to perceived social ability and interest, and perceived anxiety related negatively to children's ability and interest in sports and social activities.

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Over the past several years researchers studying parent socialization practices have become increasingly interested in parents' beliefs about their children (e.g., Bacon & Ashmore, 1986; Goodnow, 1985; Goodnow & Collins, 1990; Sigel, 1985, 1986). Sigel (1985) defined parents' beliefs as constructions of reality that usually are based on parents' knowledge of their children. However, he also noted that these beliefs may or may not be supported by factual evidence, and are subject to change. He argued that parents' beliefs provide a guide to their activities with their children. Similarly, Bacon and Ashmore posited that parents' beliefs mediate between children's behavior and parents' responses to that behavior; they argued that to understand parents' interactions with their children we must understand their beliefs. They proposed a model of these parental beliefs to describe how parents' beliefs mediate between children's activities and parental socialization practices. In the model, children's activities or behavior are said to activate parents' beliefs. The beliefs then lead parents to behave toward their children in different ways; hence the beliefs' role as mediators. The critical beliefs serving this mediating role include parents' perceptions of the child's attributes, and parents' affective and cognitive structures, such as their goals for the child, affective belief systems, and skills in handling the child.

Goodnow (1985, 1988) also stated that parents' beliefs (ideas, in her terminology) likely relate to how they interact with their children; however she proposed that parents ideas about children are interesting irrespective of whether they relate to parents' actual behaviors. In this sense parents' ideas are important instances of adults' social cognition (Goodnow, Knight, & Cashmore, 1986), and likely serve as general guides to parents' orientation to child rearing. In their recent essay on parents' ideas about children Goodnow and Collins (1990) discussed how the relations between parents' ideas and their behaviors toward children often are complex, and that relations between the two can be difficult to determine (see also Sigel, 1986). They also suggested that parents' ideas about children come from their experiences with children, but also from the shared cultural knowledge coming from the group to which the parents belong. They discussed different aspects of the quality of parents' ideas that need to be further assessed in developmental research, including the accuracy of the ideas, how differentiated they are, how they are shared or not shared between mothers and fathers, and how they are connected or organized.

While some researchers have focused on parents' broad, general ideas about children and child rearing, other researchers have focused on parents' more specific beliefs. One area that has received fairly extensive study is parents' beliefs about children's abilities (see Miller, 1988, for a review). This work shows that parents are reasonably accurate at estimating their children's general abilities, though they tend to underestimate what infants can do and overestimate what elementary school-aged children can do (Miller, 1986). Some studies show that there are individual differences in parents' accuracy, however. Mothers appear to be somewhat more accurate than fathers in estimating their children's abilities (see Bird & Berman, 1985; Miller, 1987). Phillips (1987) showed that certain parents believe their children are relatively incompetent despite the fact the children were performing well in school, whereas other parents accurately perceived their children's competence.

Parents' beliefs about their children's abilities have been shown to influence children's performance in school; hence these beliefs not only relate to parents' behavior but also to their children's behavior. For instance, Hess, Holloway, Dickson,

& Price (1984) showed that mothers' expectations for their children's academic performance predicted their children's reading readiness scores. In an important longitudinal study of relations between parents' expectations for school performance and children's achievement outcomes during the first two years of school, Alexander and Entwisle (1988) found that parents' expectations for their children's performance have a strong influence on children's performance during the first year of school, and (at least for white parents) continue to have an influence during the second year of school. However, children's performance on school tests related to parents' subsequent expectations for their children, suggesting that the relations between parents' expectations and children's performance are bidirectional.

Eccles and her colleagues (Eccles, 1984a,b; Eccles et al., 1983; Wigfield & Eccles, in press) have proposed a comprehensive expectancy - value model of children's achievement behavior that posits an important role for parents' beliefs in determining children's academic performance and motivation. In the model parents' beliefs about their children's abilities and values are proposed to influence children's ability perceptions and values, which in turn influence children's performance and motivation. In empirical tests of the links between parents' beliefs and children's beliefs and behavior, Parsons, Adler, & Kaczala (1982) found that parents' beliefs about their fifth through 11th grade children's competencies had a stronger influence on children's own beliefs than did either parents' role modeling of different activities or children's own grades in school. Results also showed that parents of sons think math is more important for their children than did parents of daughters. Eccles et al. (1983) found that the influence of parents' beliefs about the difficulty of math for their children and its importance on fifth through 12th grade students' beliefs was mediated through students' perceptions of those beliefs. For instance, parents' perceptions of the importance of math related to students' perceptions of their parents' aspirations for them, which in turn related to students' valuing of math. Eccles et al. also found that mothers' perceptions of the difficulty of math for their children had a stronger impact on students' beliefs than did fathers' beliefs about difficulty.

The empirical work assessing the Eccles et al. (1983) model has focused primarily on parents' perceptions of their children's competence for different tasks, the effort they must exert to exceed, the difficulty of various tasks for different children, and their valuing of those tasks; thus the beliefs measured have been relatively specific. Also, this work has been done primarily with parents of junior and senior high school students. In the present study we extend this work by assessing how parents view their elementary-school aged children's personality characteristics and how those perceptions relate to parents' views of children's competence in different domains and interest in activities in those domains. Thus from a theoretical perspective we are testing a possible extension of the Eccles' model to determine if a more general set of parental beliefs about their children should be proposed as mediating parents' more specific beliefs about their children. We also are testing aspects of Bacon and Ashmore's (1986) model, since they posited parents' perceptions of children's characteristics as an important mediator of parents' behavior toward their children. To date there has been almost no work on how parents' view these characteristics of their children.

There are several important design features of the present study. First, we examined parents' beliefs about their own children, rather than children in general, and so the target of parents' beliefs is quite clear. Second, we examined the beliefs of parents of children in elementary school, a time in which parents' beliefs about children's personalities, competencies, and interests likely are taking shape. Third, we looked at parents' perceptions of children's competence and interest in several activity domains that are common to childhood, including school activities, sports, music, and social activities. These across-domain comparisons allowed us to examine

whether parents' perceptions of certain personality characteristics (e.g., the child's creativity) relate more to their beliefs about children's abilities in certain domains (e.g., art and music) than other domains. We predicted that parents who see their children as responsible and motivated would have higher perceptions of children's competence for academic activities. Also, parents' viewing children as outgoing and warm should see them as more socially competent and interested in social activities.

The particular personality characteristics measured come from recent theoretical work in personality research showing that certain dimensions of personality emerge with relative consistency in many different studies of personality (see Digman, 1989). These dimensions include introversion/extroversion, friendliness/warmth, industriousness/motivation; anxiety/neuroticism, and curiosity/creativity. Though there is some variability across studies in the exact make-up of these characteristics, these broad factors emerge consistently. In the present study parents responded to items assessing these (and other) personality characteristics. We chose these dimensions because of their prevalence in current personality theory, and also because we believe certain of them, especially industriousness/motivation and curiosity/creativity, would relate to the more specific task-related beliefs we assessed.

Method

Participants

The present study is part of a four-year longitudinal project that is investigating the early development and socialization of children's achievement self-perceptions and activity choices. Children, parents, and teachers completed questionnaire and interview measures over the four years of the study. The data reported here come from the first year of the project. During that year approximately 550 children were participating in the study, and the children were in kindergarten, first, and third grades. The children come from eight different elementary schools in three school districts located outside of a large midwestern city. The children are from lower middle class to middle class backgrounds, and over 95% are white. The children agreed to participate in the study, and also received parental permission to participate. The parent sample Year 1 included 325 mothers and 225 fathers of the children.

Measures

Parent Questionnaire

Parents completed questionnaires tapping a large set of constructs regarding their general beliefs about socialization practices, descriptions of their own and their children's participation in different activities, perceptions of their own and their children's personality characteristics, and perceptions of their children's skills and interest in academic activities, social activities, and physical skills activities. In this paper we focus on the last two sets of constructs. Most of these questions were answered on 7-point Likert-type scales.

Parents' Perceptions of Personality Characteristics. Parents completed items asking them to rate the extent to which different characteristics described their child who was participating in the study. There were 44 such items assessing parents' perceptions of their children's personalities. Some of these items were selected from existing personality scales and others were developed for this study; the items were designed to assess many of the dimensions thought to be central to personality. As mentioned earlier, these dimensions include competence, introversion/extroversion, friendliness/warmth, industriousness/motivation;

competitiveness, anxiety/neuroticism, and curiosity/creativity. Many of the items are listed in Table 1.

Parents' Perceptions of Children's Task-Specific Skills and Interests. Parents answered questions assessing their perceptions of their children's skills and interest in academic activities, social activities, and sports activities. For this report, the items in the academic area assessed parents' perceptions of their children's abilities and interests in mathematics, reading, and music. The non-academic activities included parents' perceptions of their children's abilities and interest in sports and social activities/making friends. The questions tapping parents' beliefs about specific activities were modified from earlier questionnaires developed by Eccles and her colleagues and used in studies of parents' beliefs about their children's participation in math and English. The items have excellent psychometric properties (see Parsons et al., 1982). Items identical to those for math and English were developed for the new activity domains under study here.

Scoring

The items were scored on the 1 to 7 scales on which they were answered, and all were coded in the direction that higher scores meant the child had more of the personality characteristic or skills/interest asked about in the question.

Results

Structure of Parents' Beliefs

Principal components factor analyses (done for the whole sample, mothers, and fathers) were used to determine the structure of parents' perceptions of their children's personality characteristics. Results were very similar across analysis regarding the number of factors and items loading on each factor. An inspection of the eigenvalues in each analysis suggested that a six factor solution best represented the relations among the items. The factors were labeled as follows: Factor 1 Responsible/Motivated; Factor 2 Leader/Socially Confident; Factor 3 Creative; Factor 4 Likes Challenge; Factor 5 Anxious; Factor 6 Antisocial. Table 1 presents the items loading on each factor. Unit-weighted scales of items loading on each factor were created; internal consistency reliabilities for all but one scale exceeded .90.

Relations Among Personality Scales

Correlations among the scales assessing parents' perceptions of children's characteristics are shown in Table 2. While nearly all the relations are significant, of more interest is the patterns among them. Parents' perceptions that their child is anxious relate negatively to all the other scales (especially the warmth and leadership scales). Perceived responsibility/motivation relates most strongly to perceived warmth and creativity. The cluster of leadership, warmth, and creativity all relate positively to one another. Perceptions that one's child likes challenge relates most strongly to leadership and creativity.

Relations Among Personality Scales and Domain-Specific Beliefs

Correlations among the scales assessing parents' perceptions of children's characteristics and their perceptions of children's abilities and interest are shown in Table 3. There are interesting differences in which of the personality scales relates to perceptions of children's abilities and interests in different domains. As predicted, perceptions of children's responsibility/motivation related most strongly to perceptions of children's mathematics and reading ability and interest, and less strongly to perceptions of ability and interest in the other domains. As expected,

perceived leadership related most strongly to social ability and interest, and also sports ability and interest. Perceived creativity related most strongly to music ability and interest, but also related to abilities and interests in each of the other domains. As expected, perceived warmth related to social ability and interest. Perceptions that children like challenge related most strongly to sports and social abilities and interest. Somewhat surprisingly, in general the relations between perceived anxiety and the domain-specific beliefs were weaker. The strongest relations for this construct were the negative relations to social ability, and sports ability and interest; hence parents' perceptions of children's anxiety appeared to focus on non-academic activities.

Discussion

Results show that parents' broader views about their children's characteristics relate to their sense of how competent and interested children are in activities in specific domains. Further, there are interesting differences in these relations across activity domains; for instance, characteristics such as perceived motivation related more strongly to perceptions of children's abilities and interests in the academic domains assessed, whereas characteristics such as leadership related more to parents' perceptions of their children's ability and interest in social activities. These results have implications for theoretical models of parents' beliefs (Bacon & Ashmore, 1986; Parsons et al., 1982; Sigel, 1985) and how those beliefs relate to children's beliefs and behavior; they suggest parents' perceptions of children's characteristics should be incorporated into these models.

The purpose of this paper was to establish that parents' perceptions of their children's personality characteristics could be reliably measured, and to determine how those perceptions relate to parents' beliefs about children's domain-specific competence and interest in different domains. Since the study from which these data come is longitudinal, we are beginning to explore a number of quite interesting issues regarding these beliefs that build on the findings reported in this paper. One is how parents' perceptions of their children change over time as children go through school and participate more in a variety of different activities. A second is how these beliefs relate to children's own perceptions of ability and interest in the different domains, as well as children's choices about which activities in which to invest their time and energy. A third is the relative accuracy of parents' beliefs, which will be assessed by looking at relations between mothers' and fathers' beliefs, as well as relations between parents' and teachers' perceptions of these children. These analyses are ongoing, and will be the subject of future reports.

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Table 1

Items Loading on the Six Factors

Factor 1 Responsible/Motivated

aggressive (-)
 perfectionist
 annoys others (-)
 noisy (-)
 follows rules
 restless (-)
 impulsive (-)
 stays with things
 obedient
 well-organized
 doesn't give up
 likes difficult problems
 responsible

Factor 3 Creative

humorous
 independent
 curious
 imaginative
 creative

Factor 5 Likes Challenge

competitive
 likes to take risks
 likes challenges
 athletic

Factor 2 Leader/Socially Confident

assertive
 initiates activities with peers
 peers ask for help
 leader
 likes to be alone (-)
 shy (-)
 eager to try new things
 self-confident
 outgoing

Factor 4 Flexible/Warm

cooperates with peers
 concerned with others
 easy going
 flexible
 warm
 affectionate

Factor 6 Anxious

nervous
 overly sensitive
 dislikes change

Note. All loadings exceed .40.

● Table 2.

Correlations Among Parents' Perceptions of Children's Personality Characteristics

	Responsible Leader	Creative	Warm	Likes Chal	
Responsible	1.0				
Leader	.17**	1.0			
Creative	.45**	.50**	1.0		
Warm	.47**	.41**	.39**	1.0	
Likes Challenge	.07	.55**	.43**	.17**	1.0
Anxious	-.20**	-.27**	-.15**	-.29**	-.15**

* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$

Table 3

Correlations Among Parents' Perceptions of Children's Personality Characteristics and Their Perceptions of Children's Abilities and Interests.

Characteristic	Perceived Ability				
	Math	Reading	Music	Sports	Social
Responsible	46**	40**	20**	12**	20**
Leader	08*	08*	26**	41**	59**
Creative	26**	24**	32**	24**	27**
Warm	10**	13**	15**	25**	47**
Likes Challenge	05	-04	08*	68**	34**
Anxious	-03	04	-04	-15**	-24**

Characteristic	Perceived Interest				
	Math	Reading	Music	Sports	Social
Responsible	41**	40**	16**	09*	08*
Leader	11**	08*	26**	32**	38**
Creative	18**	21**	27**	20**	21**
Warm	07	19**	16**	13**	33**
Likes Challenge	09*	-06	06	60**	20**
Anxious	-08*	-01	-06	-13**	-09*

* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$

