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General discussion

GENERAL DISCUSSION

The findings in the current dissertation provide support for the argument that maternal sensitivity is a cross-culturally applicable construct. When examining parenting behavior and child development in ethnic minority families, it is important to focus on explanatory factors inherent to minority status, such as lower socioeconomic status, higher general family stress, and acculturation stress, rather than on cultural characteristics alone. Chapter 2 provided an overview of commonly used observational instruments to measure sensitivity, showing the versatility and scientific importance of the construct. The results presented in Chapter 3 suggest that mothers of different cultural backgrounds and socioeconomic groups have a highly similar view on maternal sensitivity. In Chapter 4, the results showed that both acculturation stress and general psychological distress mediated the relation between SES and positive parenting in Turkish minority families with young children. The results of the empirical study presented in Chapter 5 suggested that family stress processes play a role in adolescent's behavioral outcomes, whereas family investment processes play a role in adolescent's cognitive-behavioral outcome in Turkish minority families. Below, these findings will be summarized and discussed in more detail, followed by a discussion on the studies' limitations, some suggestions for future research, and theoretical and practical implications of the results of this dissertation.

Maternal beliefs about sensitivity

In Chapter 3, maternal views of the ideal sensitive mother were found to be highly similar across groups with different cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds. The mean sensitivity scores for descriptions of the ideal mother were high in each group (Turkish minority, Moroccan minority, and Dutch low, middle, and high educated mothers), suggesting that across groups, mothers' views about sensitivity were consistent with behavioral patterns that are considered to be indicative of sensitivity by the authors of the MBQS. As discussed in Chapter 2, the MBQS is one of these most widely used instruments and is strongly linked to Ainsworth's sensitivity construct, as the formulation of the items was explicitly guided by her work (Pederson et al., 1990). The Ainsworth's Maternal Sensitivity Scale (Ainsworth, Bell, & Stayton, 1974) describes that the appropriateness of the response should be mainly inferred from the outcome of mothers' interventions. Thus, not the content of mother's response but the influence of mother's response on child's behavior is what is most important in maternal sensitivity. The statements of the MBQS indeed leave room for individual differences in the specific content of mother's behavior. For

example, item 62 from the MBQS “*Interprets cues correctly as evidenced by B’s response*” refers to a mother accurately interpreting her child’s signals and responding to that signal in an adequate way, which is shown by her child’s satisfaction with her response. This means that although we found that mothers from different cultural backgrounds value the basic components of sensitivity, parenting behaviors (and beliefs) may vary between persons in terms of the chosen concrete response and that these differences do not necessarily mean that one response (e.g., picking up the child) is more sensitive than another (e.g., talking to the child). The influence of the response on the behavior of the child is what is important in determining whether a response was appropriate (Mesman, Oster, & Camras, 2012). There is indeed evidence that there are cultural differences in the specific content or modality of parental responses (Fouts, Roopnarine, Lamb, & Evans, 2012; Kärtner et al., 2008). Thus, from a cross-cultural perspective it could be interesting to specify separate sensitivity subscales per modality to investigate culture-specific patterns of sensitive responding.

Although we found strong convergence between maternal views on sensitive parenting across different cultural and socioeconomic groups, our analyses in Chapter 3 also revealed that socioeconomic factors were related to mothers’ sensitivity beliefs. The relation between ethnic background (Dutch versus minority) and sensitivity belief scores was completely mediated by income. Family income of minority mothers was lower than that of majority mothers, which was in turn predictive of a lower sensitivity belief score. The fact that income was a significant mediator and a more important predictor than educational level seems to support the Family Stress Model, which proposes that economic strains lead to family stress, which in turn leads to less optimal parenting behavior (Conger & Donnellan, 2007). Our findings suggest that economic strains do not only negatively affect sensitive *behavior*, they also negatively affect parenting *beliefs* about sensitivity. Although we did not measure stress directly, it is plausible that parenting stress mediated this association. There is indeed some evidence that parenting stress is related to parenting beliefs regarding the importance of sensitivity and responsiveness (Respler-Herman, Mowder, Yasik, & Shamah, 2012).

Maternal positive parenting behavior

To try to explain within-group differences in positive parenting and examine the role of minority-specific stressors in the prediction of parenting behavior in ethnic minority families, we tested a minority Family Stress Model in Chapter 4. We found that the relation between socioeconomic status and maternal positive parenting was partially mediated by both general psychological distress and acculturation stress. Lower SES was

related to more psychological distress and more acculturation stress, which were both in turn related to less positive parenting. These findings support the general FSM that proposes that economic strains lead to family stress, which in turn leads to less optimal parenting behavior (Conger & Donnellan, 2007). Several other studies found support for the relations between SES, psychological distress, and parenting (e.g., Belsky, Schlomer, & Ellis, 2012; Parke et al., 2004; White, Roosa, Weaver, & Nair, 2009) and for the relations between SES, acculturation stress, and parenting (Kim, Chen, Li, Huang, & Moon, 2009; Martinez, 2006; Stein, Gonzalez, & Huq, 2012; White et al., 2009).

Acculturation stress and general psychological distress only partially mediated the relation between SES and positive parenting, which suggests that there may be additional mediating and moderating effects or independent predictors of positive parenting. For example, there is research that suggests that the relation between more maternal psychological distress and lower mother-child relationship quality is stronger for mothers who experience higher levels of racial discrimination (Murry, Brown, Brody, Cutrona, & Simons, 2001). There is also research that suggests that social support has an effect on parenting stress as well as parenting behaviors, and child development (McConnell, Breitreuz, & Savage, 2011). Factors such as teenage motherhood, single parenthood, and marital discord may also play a role (Berlin, Brady-Smith, & Brooks-Gunn, 2002; Conger et al., 2002; McConnell et al., 2011). Future research is necessary to investigate the unique contribution and role of each predictor in addition to other predictors of positive parenting.

Although both sensitivity beliefs and behaviors seem to be predicted by similar factors (i.e., socioeconomic status and stress), research shows that they are unrelated (Ekmecki et al., 2013; Van Zeijl et al., 2006). A possible reason for this could be that overall all mothers value sensitivity, however, scores on observed positive parenting, including sensitivity, generally vary from low to high. Thus, although mothers generally find it important to observe and interpret children's signals and respond to those signals in a prompt and appropriate way, they may not always have the behavioral repertoire to do so or they are unable to implement their behavioral repertoire because of contextual constraints. A possible explanation for this may be that sensitivity is an aspect of parenting that is less concrete than other parenting aspects, such as discipline. As described earlier, sensitivity does not describe the content of behavior, but rather the influence of mother's behavior on child's behavior. In addition, although sensitivity encompasses planned behaviors, certain aspects of sensitivity refer to intuitive behaviors, such as smiling back when a child smiles, or imitating infant vocalizations (Mesman, 2010), rather than planned behaviors such as having strict discipline rules.

Family stress and investment processes in adolescence

There are very few studies on observed positive parenting in adolescence in relation to adolescent development, especially in ethnic minority families. The findings in Chapter 5 showed that the relation between SES and adolescent behavior was mediated by maternal stress and adolescent-reported parenting, whereas adolescent frustration inhibition was predicted by family investment processes (i.e., observed maternal structuring). Confirming the Family Stress Model, lower SES was related to more maternal stress, which was in turn related to less (adolescent-reported) positive parenting. Less positive parenting was in turn related to more behavior problems. In line with the Family Investment Model, lower SES was related to less maternal structuring, which was in turn related to less frustration inhibition.

It is important to note that in Chapter 4, maternal stress was related to observed positive parenting, whereas in Chapter 5 it was only related to adolescent-reported positive parenting. A possible explanation for this finding may be that parenting behaviors and contexts vary for children of different ages. A parent-child teaching context may be a better representation of parent-child interactions in daily life for young children (Chapter 4) than for adolescents (Chapter 5). Parents may more often need to structure tasks and situations for young children (e.g., having dinner and going to bed) than for adolescents. Thus, although we used the same observational context and measurement scales for both age groups, we may have observed different aspects of parenting, which may explain why we found different results. For adolescents, the self-reported measure of parenting may have captured a longer time period than the observations and thus may be more representative of the adolescents' experiences in daily life, which may explain why this measure was related to maternal stress.

The results in Chapter 5 also showed that positive parenting did not mediate the relation between SES and adolescent school attainment. SES completely accounted for the effect of positive parenting on school attainment. Previous studies did report a significant relation between positive parenting and school performance when SES was taken into account (e.g., Melby, Conger, Fang, Wickrama, & Conger, 2008). It is likely that our observational measure of parent-child interactions did not capture more structural forms of parental investments such as a stimulating home learning environment, that might play a more important role in the relation between SES and school performance (Mandara, Varner, Greene, & Richman, 2009). In the current study we only measured the dyadic part of the parental investment construct. It is also possible that other factors associated with minority status and SES, such as teachers' prejudices, play a more dominant role in minority preadolescent school attainment than parental investments do. Teachers'

expectations, which are generally lower for children from lower SES backgrounds and for minority children, have been found to predict lower school performance (McKown & Weinstein, 2002, 2008). In addition, child factors such as temperamental effortful control and self-efficacy may also play a role in the educational attainment of ethnic minority preadolescents (Yeniad et al., 2013).

Our findings provide support for both the FSM and FIM in ethnic minority preadolescents and suggest that family stress processes play a role in adolescent behavioral development, whereas family investment processes play a role in adolescent self-regulatory (hot EF) development. It seems that it is worth extending research on observed parenting from young children to adolescence and to adapt observational instruments and procedures accordingly.

Limitations and future directions

The sample sizes of the empirical studies were small. This may have resulted in limited statistical power to detect significant effects. In addition, in Chapters 4 and 5 recruitment may have been subject to some self-selection since the response rate was low, and in Chapter 3, a convenience sample was used. The convenience sampling, relatively low response rates, and as a consequence small sample sizes may have resulted in lower representativeness of the general study population. Our samples were indeed generally higher educated compared to the minority population in the Netherlands. However, it may also be considered an advantage because studies on middle class minority families are rare. More studies are needed to investigate within-group variation in education, income and related factors (Cabrera et al., 2013). Since socioeconomic status is such an important factor in explaining between- and within-group differences and there is a large overlap between minority status and low SES, future research may strive to recruit different groups of socioeconomic status within ethnic minority groups. In addition, most studies on ethnic minorities focus on the negative effects of economic hardship. More research is necessary focusing on positive development (Cabrera et al., 2013). The present study showed that a family environment in which children are raised in a sensitive, supportive, and positive way enhanced children's behavioral and self-regulatory competence. In order to find meaningful relations between observed positive parenting and adolescent behavioral development it may be useful to include an observational context that is more representative of daily parent-adolescent interactions, such as a discussion task (e.g., the Family Interaction Task; Allen et al., 2003; Beijersbergen, Bakermans-Kranenburg, Van IJzendoorn, & Juffer, 2008).

We only included Turkish ethnic minorities in our observational study. Minority

families with other cultural backgrounds should be included in observational studies as well. Preferably, future studies should also include a majority group that is comparable in socioeconomic background. In addition, it is important to note that the studies in the present dissertation only focused on maternal views and behaviors. Although all the instruments reviewed in Chapter 2 have been used with fathers, research on (observed) paternal positive parenting is scarce, especially in minority families. There is some evidence that paternal parenting differs between cultures. For example, research suggests that minority fathers show less warmth, but also exhibit more responsibility for child rearing than majority fathers (e.g., Hofferth, 2003). In terms of the FSM and FIM, paternal positive parenting and child development in ethnic minority families may be interesting to investigate, because paternal parenting also has been found to be influenced by economic, psychological, and cultural factors (Coley, 2001; Hofferth, 2003).

Implications for research and practice

Although the studies presented in this dissertation have some limitations and more research is necessary, they contribute to the distressingly small body of research on (observed) positive parenting in ethnic minority families. In addition, we provided an overview of commonly used observational instruments to assess maternal sensitivity and reviewed these instruments in terms of their similarity in conceptualization of the original sensitivity construct. This overview may be informative when choosing an observational measure and reporting or interpreting research results and shows that there are significant differences in how maternal sensitivity is conceptualized and measured. The term sensitivity should not be used too lightly to retain a clear distinction between the original sensitivity construct and other broader constructs such as positive parenting, that also include constructs such as scaffolding and warmth.

Our finding that sensitive parenting is perceived as equally important across professionals and mothers that vary in socioeconomic background, suggests that culture-specific measurement of maternal sensitivity is not required, at least not in terms of the conceptualization of the construct. This is in line with a recent study in Turkey that showed that the validity and reliability of a Turkish version of the PICCOLO (Parenting Interactions with Children: Checklist of Observations Linked to Outcomes), a measure of parent-child interactions developed in the United States (US), were equal to those found in the US. The PICCOLO measures aspects of parenting such as warmth, responsiveness, support, and cognitive stimulation (Bayoglu, Unal, Elibol, Karabulut, & Innocenti, 2013). Our results also suggest that the nature and focus of parenting interventions to promote sensitive parenting can be similar for minority and majority parents.

However, this does not mean that adaptations to make an intervention more culturally sensitive are not necessary. Cultures may differ in daily family routines (Spagnola & Fiese, 2007), factors that cause less positive parenting (i.e., culture-specific stressors), and ways of interpreting and implementing advice given in a context of an intervention (Plass, Timmermans, & van der Wal, 2006), which may be related to the effectiveness of an intervention. Thus although the focus and aim of an intervention may be similar across cultures (e.g., promoting sensitive parenting), certain strategies or contexts in the intervention may be necessary to be culturally adapted to achieve this goal. An example of an intervention that has proven to be effective in enhancing parental sensitive discipline in a Western sample and has been adapted to the child-rearing context of Turkish minority families is the VIPP-SD (Video-feedback Intervention to promote Positive Parenting and Sensitive Discipline; Van Zeijl et al., 2006; Yagmur, Mesman, Malda, Bakermans-Kranenburg, & Ekmekci, 2013).

The culturally sensitive adaptation of the VIPP-SD, the VIPP-Turkish Minority (VIPP-TM), follows the general procedure of the VIPP-SD, but certain toys and materials used in the original VIPP-SD program were replaced, as they would be unfamiliar to Turkish minority families (e.g., mother's reading to the child was replaced by mother and child playing together with a tea set). In addition, all interveners had a Turkish background and were bilingual, which made it possible to them to adapt to the language that the mother preferred to speak (Turkish, Dutch, or a mix). The VIPP-TM has proven to be effective in enhancing maternal sensitivity and nonintrusiveness in Turkish minority families (Yagmur et al., 2013). In addition to (or as part of) such cultural sensitive interventions to promote positive parenting, it is important to try to reduce socioeconomic and other family stressors and to stimulate parents to invest more in their children in terms of time and attention.

In our studies, the broader construct of positive parenting was predicted by socioeconomic status and both general as well as culture-specific stressors. These results are informative for scientists as well as practitioners working with minority families by providing insight in the influence of cultural stressors on maternal behavior. We also found that SES relates to child development in ethnic minority families through family stress and investment processes. The generally lower SES of ethnic minority families is a societal issue that is not easy to change. However, interventions aimed at promoting positive parenting may foster a supportive family environment for socioeconomic disadvantaged ethnic minority adolescents, which in turn may enhance their behavioral and self-regulatory competence. Scientists as well as practitioners should be aware that culture should not be considered as an explanatory factor in parenting behaviors without

taking into account the broader socioeconomic context.

Implications for policy

Our results show that SES is an important factor that relates to family functioning and child development in ethnic minority families. The disadvantaged position of ethnic minorities in the lower socioeconomic classes is an issue in almost all Western countries. Children of ethnic minorities score lower on school performance tests (e.g., CBS, 2012; Mandara et al., 2009), are overrepresented in the lower educational tracks (e.g., CBS, 2012), and show higher drop-out rates (e.g., CBS, 2012; National Center for Education Statistics, 2013), which in turn will put their children at risk for an adverse development as well. However, there are improvements. In the Netherlands, second-generation immigrants have been found to be higher educated compared to first generation immigrants. Nevertheless, there is still an socioeconomic gap between later generation minorities and majority members (SCP, 2011).

Although lower SES is a societal issue that is not easy to change, interventions and policies (i.e., social safety net programs) may help to improve families' economic well-being. There is evidence from the U.S. that suggests that programs aimed at improving families' economic well-being, that do not directly target children, can positively affect children's development (Gassman-Pines & Hill, 2013), which is in line with the FSM and FIM that are investigated in this dissertation. For example, in the US refunding taxes to working people with low and middle incomes positively affects families' economic position, particularly reducing child poverty (Meyer, 2007; Simpson, Tiefenthaler, & Hyde, 2010), and has been found to relate to increases in children's well-being, such as higher birthweights (Hoynes, Page, & Stevens, 2012) and a higher performance on academic tasks (Dahl & Lochner, 2012). In addition, supplementing food to low-income families, which allows families to spend money on other household necessities, is related to fewer reports of abuse and neglects (Lee & Mackey-Bilaver, 2007).

In the Netherlands the effects of social security programs on family functioning and child development have not been investigated and deserve attention, especially because the recent economic crisis is forcing the government to make important decisions in cutting down expenses, including the budget for social security programs. It is important to investigate which programs promote family and child well-being. Examples of social security programs in the Netherlands are food banks, health care subsidy, refunding income tax to low-income working people, and subsidy for children from low-income families to participate in sports and social or cultural activities. Another example of a social security program in the Netherlands is child-care subsidy, which aims to in-

crease parental employment. Research shows that the subsidy only increased employment and the number of worked hours per week for middle- to high-educated woman (CPB, 2011). Particular effects for ethnic minority parents are unknown. In addition, it is unknown what the effect of child-care subsidy is on children's well-being. Research from the U.S. shows that child-care subsidies can have an adverse effect on the developmental outcomes of children (Hawkinson, Griffen, Dong, & Maynard, 2013; Herbst & Tekin, 2010, 2011), possibly due to increases in parenting stress and harsh parenting (Herbst & Tekin, 2012) or exposure to low-quality child-care (Gassman-Pines & Hill, 2013).

In the Netherlands, there are also special preschool education programs, funded by municipalities, directly aimed at improving child-rearing environment (e.g., parental investments and stimulating home environment) and child development particularly in families from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and ethnic minority families. Approximately 53% of at-risk children are reached by these programs (Jepma, Van der Vegt, & Kooiman, 2007). Some programs have been proven to be effective in improving children's development, but the effect is small and there are also studies that did not find a significant effect (Smit, Driessen, Van Kuijk, & De Wit, 2008). In addition, a longitudinal study found that there were no significant effects for the Moroccan and Turkish minority children in particular (Nap-Kolhoff et al., 2008). These findings stress the need for research comparing the effects of different social security programs in terms of their benefits for families and children in general (Gassman-Pines & Hill, 2013), but also for low-income and ethnic minority groups in particular. Policy makers should be aware of the long-term consequences of families' socioeconomic position on children's development.

Conclusions

Overall, the studies described in this thesis have shown that parenting beliefs and behaviors in ethnic minority families can only be understood in light of their socioeconomic background. Factors inherent to minority status, such as lower socioeconomic status, higher general family stress, and acculturation stress, should be considered in explaining parenting behaviors and investments that contribute to children's development. Our findings provide insight into the challenges that ethnic minority families may face, but also show the potential that positive parenting may have in fostering positive child development in these families. These findings suggest an important role for parenting interventions, as well as programs aimed at improving the socioeconomic position of ethnic minorities in order to enhance family functioning and child adjustment.

