Parenting Culture(s): Ideal-Parent Beliefs Across 37 Countries

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Author Note

Author Contribution

Isabelle Roskam (I.R.) and Moïra Mikolajczak (M.M.) designed the study and initiated

the International Investigation of Parental Burnout (IIPB) consortium, from which the current

data were drawn. Gao-Xian Lin (G.-X.L.) suggested performing semantic network analysis

on the patterns of ideal-parent beliefs and performed the data analyses. G.-X.L., I.R., M.M

and Heidi Keller (H.K.) interpreted the results. G.-X.L., I.R., and M.M. drafted the first

version of the manuscript and H.K. provided critical revisions. All other authors are members

of the International Investigation of Parental Burnout (IIPB) Consortium; they collected the

data in their own country and performed or supervised the translation process of the material

into French or English. All authors approved the final version of the manuscript for

submission.

Protections of Research Participants

The study was carried out in accordance with the World Medical Association

Declaration of Helsinki. The original study program was approved by the Ethics Committee

of the Psychological Sciences Research Institute at UCLouvain in Belgium (Reference

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committee for approval except where ethics approval was not mandatory. Information

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Open Practices Statement

This study was not formally preregistered. However, the database of study variables and

the supplementary material have been made available on a permanent third-party archive,

Open Science Framework:

https://osf.io/y9e2u/?view_only=c94f6d223365442e9167605384b873ac

Declaration of Conflict of Interest

M.M. and I.R. founded the Training Institute for Parental Burnout (TIPB) which delivers

training on parental burnout to professionals. The TIPB did not participate in the funding of

this study nor did it influence the process, the results, or their interpretation in any manner.

Contact Information

Correspondence regarding this article should be addressed to Gao-Xian Lin, Psychological Sciences Research Institute, Department of Psychology, University of Louvain (UCLouvain), Place Cardinal Mercier, 10, Louvain-la-Neuve, 1348, Belgium. E-mail: gao-xian.lin@uclouvain.be

Abstract

What is it to be "an ideal parent"? Does the answer differ across countries and social classes?

To answer these questions in a way that minimizes bias and ethnocentrism, we used open-

ended questions to explore ideal-parent beliefs among 8,357 mothers and 3,517 fathers from

37 countries. Leximancer Semantic Network Analysis was utilized to first determine

parenting culture zones (i.e., countries with shared ideal-parent beliefs) and then extract the

predominant themes and concepts in each culture zone. The results yielded specific types of

ideal-parent beliefs in five parenting culture zones: being "responsible and children/family-

focused" for Asian parents, being "responsible and proper demeanor-focused" for African

parents, and being "loving and responsible" for Hispanic-Italian parents. Although the most

important themes and concepts were the same in the final two zones – being "loving and

patient", there were subtle differences: English-speaking, EU, and Russian parents

emphasized "being caring," while French-speaking parents valued "listening" or being

"present." Ideal-parent beliefs also differed by education levels within culture zones, but no

general pattern was discerned across culture zones. These findings suggest that the country in

which parents were born cannot fully explain their differences in ideal-parent beliefs, and that

differences arising from social class or education level cannot be dismissed. Future research

should consider how these differences affect the validity of the measurements in question and

how they can be incorporated into parenting intervention research within and across cultures.

Parenting Culture(s): Ideal-Parent Beliefs Across 37 Countries

Parenting is a flourishing topic in the field of developmental psychology, and with good reason: the survival of the human species depends on it. Yet, despite several pioneering studies (Keller et al., 2006; Super & Harkness, 1986), many psychological studies published in English-language journals devoted to parenting concern predominantly white, middle-class parents in the USA (see Arnett, 2008; Bornstein, 2013; Keller, 2018; Lansford, 2021; Mistry & Dutta, 2015). Besides, many psychological studies that have included non-Western (i.e., non-Euro-American) cultures have merely imposed a framework established in Western (i.e., Euro-American) cultures, preventing the discovery of concepts from the non-Western world (Harkness & Super, 2020; Lansford et al., 2016; Segall et al., 1998). As a result, how humans parent in the non-Western cultural space, as opposed to the well-examined Western cultural space, remains less clear. In this study, we aimed to examine ideal-parent beliefs—a crucial characteristic of parenting culture—in an *exploratory* (without setting specific hypotheses), *bottom-up* (from the perspective of the principal actors—mothers and fathers) manner across 37 countries.

The Notion of Culture

Culture consists of ideas, beliefs, values, conventions, representations, and meanings widely shared within a community (Triandis, 1996). It can vary according to environmental conditions or contexts, including race and ethnicity, urban and rural contexts, religion, and

many other dimensions (Keller, 2020). The intersection between these conditions, for

instance, the country in which parents are born and their social class (Keller, 2020; Lansford

et al., 2016), creates distinct cultural settings for parenting and child development (Super &

Harkness, 1986, 2020b). Individuals in countries may share distinct cultures in terms of

values, ideologies, norms, and beliefs (Yang, 2018). Nevertheless, different social classes

have distinct subcultures and, in most cases, it is the country's dominant group that shapes its

culture (Keller, 2018). By setting the standards and defining the competencies that are valued

(Markus & Hamedani, 2020), cultures and subcultures provide benchmarks for what to do

and what not to do, what attitudes to adopt and what not to adopt, and even what content is

relevant to the construction of self and identity (Harkness & Super, 2021; Super & Harkness,

2020a).

Parenting Culture and Ideal-Parent Beliefs

What is true of culture in general also applies to parenting culture—ideas, beliefs,

values, conventions, representations, and meanings associated with parenting that are widely

shared within a community (Harkness et al., 2015; Harkness & Super, 2002; Keller et al.,

2006). All parents hold ideas about what good parents should ideally do and be to promote

their children's health, development, and well-being (Mayseless, 2006; Weaver et al., 2020).

Those so-called "ideal-parent beliefs" are a universal phenomenon: all parents in all cultures

rely on these beliefs to know how to fulfill their parental role (see Chao, 1995; Super &

Harkness, 2020b). However, although some of their components are considered universal,

including the belief that ideal parents must care for their children, the definition of the "ideal"

parent seems to vary according to the cultural setting (Bornstein, 2012, 2013; Choate &

Engstrom, 2014; Lo Cricchio et al., 2019). What is considered good or even ideal in one

cultural setting may be considered inappropriate in another[1] (Choate & Engstrom, 2014;

Fontes, 2005; Li, 2012). The ideal-parent beliefs shared by a community of parents thus

represent a crucial aspect of its parenting culture (Mistry & Dutta, 2015; Super & Harkness,

2020b).

Ideal-parent beliefs or good-parent beliefs—the features parents consider a good parent

should ideally possess—play a crucial role in parents' daily life (Super & Harkness, 2020b).

These beliefs act as a guide for parenting behavior (Hale et al., 2017), parental decision-

making, and parental duties in daily and challenging situations (Lo Cricchio et al., 2019;

Weaver et al., 2020). For instance, Zhong et al. (2020) found that if caregivers have a stronger

ideal belief that engaging in specific stimulating parenting practices will benefit child

development (e.g., reading stories to the child), they will actually adopt such strategies, which

will, in turn, have an impact on child development (e.g., language and literacy outcomes; see

Ece Demir-Lira et al., 2019). Moreover, ideal-parent beliefs help guide parenting decisions,

especially at critical moments (Karlsson et al., 2013; Keller, 2012). For example, Feudtner

and colleagues (2015) found that when parents have to make critical decisions about children

with a serious illness, their ideal-parent beliefs have implications for their preferred decision-

making style (i.e., their beliefs guide them about whether to decide on their own or whether

to leave the decision to doctors). Ideal-parent beliefs are so important that parents experience

guilt, self-stigma, self-criticism, and sometimes even despair when they find themselves

unable to meet their parenting ideal (Eaton et al., 2016).

A Bottom-Up Exploratory Research Approach

Because ideal-parent beliefs are an important feature of parenting cultures, researchers

have recently identified the examination of these beliefs as a potentially fertile direction in

parenting science (Super & Harkness, 2020b). In psychological research, one of the most

common ways to describe cultural differences in parenting is to adopt an existing theoretical

framework (e.g., the universal dimension of independence and interdependence; see Harkness

& Super, 2020; Huppert et al., 2019; Kağıtçıbaşı, 1996, 2005; Tamis-LeMonda et al., 2008).

Although adopting universal dimensions makes it possible to position communities or

countries relative to each other, the direct imposition of this conceptual framework in specific

cultures may exclude some relevant indigenous concepts or processes from consideration (see

Greenfield, 2000; Greenfield et al., 2003; Keller, 2012; Lansford et al., 2016; Raeff, 2010;

Yang, 2018). One way to overcome this limitation is by taking a *bottom-up exploratory*

approach. By starting directly from culture insiders' understanding of ideal parenting and

without making any assumptions, this approach uncovers the core concepts for the culture

that might be overlooked by imposing an *a priori* framework. For this reason, this way of

studying culture has been advocated by researchers in disciplines such as anthropology for

decades (Geertz, 1974) and more recently in psychology (Harkness & Super, 2020; Lansford

et al., 2016; Segall et al., 1998; Super & Harkness, 2020b; Yang, 2018).

The Present Study

The aim of the present study was to uncover parents' beliefs about ideal parenting and

organize them into (sub)types based on their similarities and differences across countries and

educational levels. To do so, we used a bottom-up exploratory approach. We collected and

analyzed the beliefs of fathers and mothers (i.e., culture insiders) from 37 countries and

different levels of education with the goal of exploring parenting (sub)cultures around the

world.

Method

Participants and Procedure

A total of 8,357 mothers and 3,517 fathers from 37 countries participated in the study.

Parents were eligible to participate if they were born in their current country of residence and

met the inclusion criterion of still having at least one child living at home, regardless of their

age. Tables S1 and S2 in the Online Supplemental Material present the sociodemographic

characteristics of fathers and mothers in each country.

The data were collected during the period from January 2018 to November 2019 through

the International Investigation of Parental Burnout (IIPB) Consortium. The IIPB Consortium

was set up by two Belgian principal investigators (PIs) in 2017. They aimed to include in the

consortium as many countries as possible that differed from each other in terms of their

geographical position and socioeconomic level. They started by contacting several

researchers they personally knew and inviting them to participate in the project. Next, they

contacted well-known experts in parenting psychology to supplement this initial pool of

participating countries. Lastly, to further extend the number of countries included in the

consortium, when researchers from non-participating countries wrote to the two IIPB PIs to

inquire about parental burnout, they invited them to join the consortium.

The study was presented as a study designed to improve understanding of parental

fulfilment and exhaustion around the world. All the countries utilized a standardized protocol

provided by the IIPB PIs (the full protocol is available on Open Science Framework (OSF) at

https://osf.io/94w7u/?view_only=a6cf12803887476cb5e7f17cfb8b5ca2). However, the

recruitment procedure (e.g., newspaper advertisements, word of mouth, social networks,

door-to-door) and the presentation of the survey (i.e., paper and pencil, or online) varied from

country to country according to local practices. A summary of the recruitment procedure in

each country as well as the ethics approvals are available in Roskam et al. (2021). In the end,

37 countries from the initial pool of 42 countries participating in the IIPB data collection

provided the data for the current study. The sample size corresponds to the number of

mothers and fathers who fully answered the questions relating to the variables of interest.

Measures

Beyond demographic measures, the IIPB common protocol included measures designed

to address different research goals (e.g., comparing the prevalence of parental burnout across

countries; investigating the relations between parental burnout and gender roles). Because

those questions are too diverse to be addressed in the same article, we describe below only

the measures used in the current paper.

Demographic Questions

The participants were asked about: their gender; their age; their educational level

(number of successfully completed school years from the age of 6); their total number of

biological children and the number of those living in the household; the age of the youngest

and the oldest child; the number of hours spent with children per day (without taking the

night into account); the number of women (e.g. co-wife, grandmother, etc.) living in the

household/immediate area and caring for the children on a daily basis (including the

respondent when applicable); the number of men (e.g. grandfathers, uncles etc.) living in the

household/immediate area and caring for the children on a daily basis (including the

respondent when applicable); their working status (paid professional activity); their ethnicity;

their family type (two mixed-gender parents, two same-gender parents, single parent, step-

family, multigenerational family, or polygamous family); and the neighborhood profile

(whether parents perceived their home resided in a relatively disadvantaged, prosperous, or

average neighborhood). Note that for the item about family types, countries which so

requested were allowed to remove the types that did not fit the culture (e.g., two same-gender

parents or polygamous family).

Ideal-Parent Beliefs

The participants were invited to state freely five features that they personally considered

a good parent should ideally possess. For the mothers, the exact item was: "Indicate five

features (each in one word) that an ideal mother should have in your opinion (e.g., caring)"

(i.e., ideal-mother beliefs). For the fathers, the exact item was: "Indicate five features (each in

one word) that an ideal father should have in your opinion (e.g., caring)" (i.e., ideal-father

beliefs). The respondents were asked to answer in their mother tongue. In order to limit

translation and interpretation bias in the data analyses, the instruction given to participating

parents in the IIPB protocol was to produce single words (rather than phrases or sentences).

Except for English- and French-speaking countries, the dataset provided by each

country, i.e., the collection of features reported by local participants, was translated into

English by the IIPB local researchers for analysis purposes. The IIPB local researchers were

both experts in psychological science and native speakers of the original language of the

parents' raw responses. In the translation process, they were also asked to secure equivalence

of meaning. In particular, the translated features were not restricted to single words in

English. The researchers were rather encouraged to look for approximations (e.g., a phrase or

a sentence) to best convey the meaning of the raw responses. When the dataset was in French,

the translation and meaning equivalence were handled by the two Belgian PIs. Finally, the

first author, who was not involved in the translation process, conducted the data analysis

using automated content analysis in order to reduce interpretation bias.

Analysis Strategy

Inductive research like the present study affords the researcher some room for creativity,

and subjective decisions and interpretations need to be made throughout the analysis process

(Wagenmakers et al., 2018). To make the current study replicable, we will describe our

decisions in detail and have made our dataset available in a public research repository

(https://osf.io/y9e2u/?view_only=c94f6d223365442e9167605384b873ac). In order to analyze

mothers' and fathers' ideal-parent beliefs around the globe, we performed Semantic Network

Analyses (SNAs) with Leximancer (see Smith & Humphreys, 2006 for the validity of the

tool). This software performs quantitative content analysis using an unsupervised machine

learning technique (https://info.leximancer.com/). As in exploratory factorial analysis of

quantitative data, the SNA proceeds according to a principle of increasing abstraction, in

which the responses provided by the respondents (i.e., the ideal-parent features provided by

the parents in the current study) are organized into concepts that in turn are organized into

themes (i.e., clusters of concepts).

Before running the SNAs, we removed typical stop words in English (i.e., frequent

words that are rather arbitrarily designated as having little semantic meaning) including

articles, pronouns, prepositions, and conjunctions (e.g., "the", "I", "about", "and") as well as

low semantic-content transitive verbs (e.g., "add"). Also, variants of words, including

different parts of speech (e.g., "child" and "children", or "love" and "loving"), were merged

into the form appearing most frequently in the texts.

In the following analyses, we ran SNAs separately on mothers' and fathers' ideal-parent

beliefs. Two stages of analysis were implemented in a Leximancer SNA. In the first stage,

concepts were extracted from the features. In Leximancer, concepts are defined as latent

constructs indicated by collections of features that generally go together throughout the

responses. In practice, the SNA first extracted from the raw responses provided by the parents

a set of relevant features (as well as synonyms) that frequently co-occurred in the same

responses and rarely occurred independently in separate responses. Learning the meaning of

features by examining their occurrences and co-occurrences, Leximancer automatically

extracted key messages that these features expressed and designated names for concepts

accordingly. The features belonging to a specific concept were also weighted to indicate the

"evidence" of the concept's existence according to how frequently these features co-occurred

in raw responses, compared to how frequently they occurred separately elsewhere. Finally,

the SNA tested whether a parent's ideal-parent beliefs contained the concepts or not, based on

whether the "evidence" was above the user-defined threshold (i.e., the summed weight of the

features connected to a concept; in this study, we used the default threshold, 0.7).

In the second stage, Leximancer produced a co-occurrence network matrix, allowing us

to examine all concepts extracted from the first stage and their co-occurrences. Based on their

co-occurrences, the SNA also produced a semantic network map, in which a concept was

denoted as a node; the size of the nodes imaged concept connectivity and their closeness

imaged both the strength of the association (or co-occurrence) between concepts (direct

association) and connections of similar frequency to other nodes (indirect association). Two

concepts were connected by edges only when they had a strong association, taking account of

both direct and indirect association between nodes and the degree of specificity in the concept

hierarchy (i.e., whether two concepts had similar occurrences). Themes were represented as

overlapping circles encompassing concepts that were close together on the map, and the

number of themes was determined by users (in the current study, it was determined to be

three for ease of interpretation). Each theme took its name directly from the most connected

(i.e., most important) of the concepts it encompassed; thus, the themes enabled users to

investigate the most connected concepts in a semantic network map. The frequency counts of

themes denoted the number of responses associated with the theme (cluster of the concepts).

We were aware of a wide variation in sample sizes across countries in our dataset, so we

did not directly examine the content of ideal-parent beliefs across the world (as the content of

ideal-parent beliefs would then be represented more by parents from countries with larger

sample sizes). Instead, a sophisticated 2-step procedure was used to avoid over-representing

any country's data in the results. First, because countries may have similar parenting cultures

and thus ideal-parent beliefs, we used the country as a unit and examined the similarity

between the ideal-parent beliefs reported by the parents in the countries. Leximancer SNA

clustered countries that shared similar ideal-parent beliefs into culture zones. In our dataset,

mothers and fathers were nested in a country so that Leximancer could organize the results

according to this between-factor and reveal the countries as nodes on the map. The closeness

between the country nodes reflected their similarity with regard to the ideal-parent beliefs

shared by the parents in these countries. This step enabled us to delineate culture zones

holding the same ideal-parent beliefs.

Second, we pooled the datasets from the countries belonging to the same parenting

culture zone and then clustered all parents into three educational groups according to the

number of successfully completed school years: (1) low-educated parents (with less than 9

years of education from the age of 6), (2) middle-educated parents (9-15 years), (3) high-

educated parents (at least 16 years). We ran new SNAs, i.e., one SNA in each parenting

culture zone, considering the educational group as a between-factor. To demonstrate ideal-

parent beliefs taking into account the intersection of education levels and parenting culture

zones, we customized Leximancer to organize SNA results according to the educational

groups in each culture zone. In such SNA results, educational level groups were displayed as

nodes together with ideal-parent belief nodes. And the more characteristic concepts of the

groups were those closer to the node of the group in proximity or even connected by edges.

Results

We identified five parenting culture zones across the 37 countries. Figure 1 shows the

semantic network map on which we have circled these five zones. Official language and/or

geographical proximity were found to organize the boundaries of the zones. We labeled them

(1) Asian, (2) African, (3) Hispanic-Italian, (4) Western I (mainly consisting of English-

speaking and EU countries) and Russian, (5) Western II (mainly consisting of French-

speaking countries). Their composition in terms of countries is presented in Figure 1a for

mothers and in Figure 1b for fathers. The number of parents in each zone is given in Table 1.

Table 2 shows the three most frequent concepts and the three major themes (i.e., the

most connected concepts for the theme) of the ideal-mother/-father beliefs across the five

parenting culture zones together with their frequency counts. In addition, the semantic

network maps delineating the ideal-parent beliefs and their association with the educational

level groups in the five parenting culture zones are shown in Figure 2. These maps were

customized to show the educational groups as well as the concepts, edges, and three

overlapping themes of the ideal-parent beliefs. In the following sections, we analyzed the

frequency counts (i.e., the total number of occurrences) of both the most frequent concepts

and the most frequent themes of ideal-parent beliefs across parenting culture zones. Then we

examined and compared[2] the ideal-parent beliefs according to educational levels within each

parenting culture zone.

Ideal-Parent Beliefs Around the Globe

The Three Most Frequent Ideal-Parent Belief Concepts Across Parenting Culture Zones

The results revealed both commonalities and differences between the predominant ideal-

parent beliefs in the five parenting culture zones. With regard to the commonalities of beliefs,

we found that the extracted concepts were highly similar across gender within each parenting

culture zone (see Table 2). In addition, a similar set of extracted concepts (e.g., "loving,"

"responsible," and "patient") were also found across the five culture zones (see Figure 2).

However, the importance (i.e., frequency count; see Table 2) of each concept was different

between culture zones, and this was what constituted the specificity of each culture. In

particular, "responsible" ranked at the top of the list in both the Asian and African parenting

culture zones. In the Asian parenting culture zone, the concepts of "family" and "children"

were also found at the top of the list, whereas we found concepts such as "patient/patience"

and "respected" at the top of the list in the African culture zone. In contrast to these two

culture zones, "loving" consistently ranked at the top of the list of the other three culture

zones. "Responsible" was the second most frequent concept in the Hispanic-Italian parenting

culture zone; "patient" in both Western I and Russian (ranked second for mothers and third

for fathers) and Western II culture zones. [3]

The Three Major Themes Across Parenting Culture Zones

The thematic analysis further uncovered the most connected (i.e., central) concepts that

attracted a community of concepts around them and were therefore considered to be themes.

As for the concepts, commonalities and differences appeared for the themes across parenting

cultures. In terms of commonalities, the extracted major themes and community of concepts

around them, were highly similar between ideal-mother and ideal-father beliefs (see Table 2

and Figure 2).

The commonalities across parenting cultures did not end at gender issues, as we also

found a similar number of themes across the five parenting culture zones. In particular,

compared with the first theme ("family" for Asian parents; "responsible" for African parents;

"loving" for Hispanic-Italian, Western I and Russian, and Western II parents; see below), the

frequency count of the two subsequent themes (these themes differed across zones; see Table

2) decreased drastically, suggesting that ideal-parent beliefs are organized around *one* main

theme around the globe. However, the topics of the themes reflected cultural characteristics.

The theme organized around "loving" (with concepts such as "happy," "caring,"

"supportive," and "funny" close to the concept "loving"; see Figure 2.c-e.) was found to be

the most important in the Hispanic-Italian, Western I and Russian, and Western II parenting

culture zones. In other words, "loving" was identified as the core of the ideal-parent beliefs in

these three parenting culture zones. The two remaining parenting culture zones were

characterized by very different ideal-parent beliefs. The most central theme was organized

around "family" (with concepts such as "housework," "children," and "model" close to the

concept "family"; see Figure 2.a.) in the Asian parenting culture zone and "responsible" (with

concepts such as "sacrifice," "power," and "moral" close to the concept "responsible"; see

Figure 2.b.) in the African parenting culture zone.

Taking the two levels of analysis together, we directly referred to the most important

theme and two most frequently used concepts to characterize each culture for the sake of

parsimony. Two parenting culture zones, the Asian and the African, mainly emphasized

responsibility. In addition, Asian parents emphasized child/family, while African parents

valued being respectful, respected, and patient (together, these reflected the emphasis on

"proper demeanor"). The three other parenting culture zones focused on being loving. In

addition, Hispanic-Italian emphasized being responsible, and Western I and Russian as well

as Western II parents cherished being patient. To further differentiate the Western I and

Russian as well as Western II cultures, we took the third most frequent concept into

consideration: English-speaking, EU, and Russian parents further emphasized "being caring",

while French-speaking parents valued "listening" or being "present." In sum, specific types

of ideal-parent beliefs ("responsible and children/family-focused", "responsible and proper

demeanor-focused", "loving and responsible and caring", and "loving and patient and

listening/present") were identified across five parenting culture zones.

Ideal-Parent Belief Subtypes by Educational Level Within the Parenting Culture Zones

For highly educated parents in the Hispanic-Italian and Western I and Russian culture

zones, ideal-parent beliefs were characterized by concepts like "patient" and "calm", or

empathic concerns like "empathic", "available" and "affectionate." In contrast, for less

educated (low- and middle-educated) parents, ideal-parent beliefs were characterized by

concepts like "loving/love," "honest," and "caring" (see Figure 2.c and Figure 2.d).

The pattern displayed in Asian (see Figure 2.a) and African (see Figure 2.b) parenting

culture zones was different from the above two culture zones. In the Asian culture zone,

concepts like "family" and "housework" featured among parents with low levels of education

(the nodes of these concepts were closer to the low-educated node; see Figure 2.a), while

"money" and "income" characterized highly educated parents (the nodes of these concepts

were closer to the high-educated node; see Figure 2.a). In the African culture zone, mothers

from different educational levels emphasized distinct concepts of ideal-mother beliefs. The

concepts of "family" and "children" were typical of the highly educated mothers (the nodes

of these concepts were closer to the high-educated node; see Figure 2.b), whereas the

concepts of "respected," "responsible," and "courage" were more characteristic of mothers

with less education (the nodes of these concepts were closer to the low-educated node; see

Figure 2.b). In contrast to the mothers' results, the fathers' results suggest that the ideal-father

beliefs do not vary with education level: almost all extracted concepts were at a similar

distance from the education level groups.

Finally, in the Western II parenting culture zone (see Figure 2.e), the pattern of ideal-

parent beliefs was very similar across educational levels for both mothers and fathers.

Discussion

Even though recent globalization and modernization have started to blur the boundaries

(Greenfield, 2009; Greenfield et al., 2003), cultural differences remain salient (Inglehart,

2018; Santos et al., 2017). Parenting culture and thus ideal-parent beliefs are no exception

(Harkness & Super, 2021; Keller, 2020). Unlike much empirical research examining

parenting culture in terms of differences in parenting behaviors or socialization goals, the

current research breaks new ground in exploring another crux of parenting culture: ideal-

parent beliefs. Ideal-parent beliefs are a set of beliefs that parents can refer to and follow in

rearing their children (Super & Harkness, 2020b). These beliefs are a higher-level

construct—the meaning system and lens through which parents perceive, understand, and

engage in their parenting practices (George & Solomon, 2008; Harkness & Super, 1996).

Different parenting cultures were evident in our data, reflected in different types of ideal-

parent beliefs across social classes and countries.

More specifically, in the reports of parents from 37 countries across the five main

continents, we found five distinct parenting culture zones. These were a "responsible and

children/family-focused" type for Asian parents, a "responsible and proper demeanor-

focused" type for African parents, a "loving and responsible" type for Hispanic-Italian

parents, a "loving and patient and caring" type for Western I (consisting mainly of English-

speaking and EU countries) and Russian parents, and a "loving and patient and

listening/present" type for Western II (consisting mainly of French-speaking countries)

parents[4]. In addition, we found commonalities between ideal-mother and ideal-father beliefs,

which may suggest the existence of "parenting" cultures around the world, rather than distinct

"mothering" and "fathering" cultures. Finally, we found that ideal-parent beliefs differed by

education level, but no general pattern could be drawn across cultures. As shown below, these

results contribute to the current understanding of cultures and parenting as well as having

implications for future research.

Examining the countries that constituted the five parenting culture zones identified by

our bottom-up research approach, we found that the country composition of culture zones

largely aligned with the latest finding of the World Value Survey (2020). In this cross-

nationally representative survey, Inglehart and colleagues examined cultural differences in

two general value dimensions (i.e., traditional versus secular-rational value and survival

versus self-expression; see Inglehart, 2018; Inglehart & Welzel, 2005) in almost 100

countries. They found that with these two dimensions, countries sharing similar value

combinations could be divided into culture clusters (eight clusters in the seventh wave, which

was conducted in 2017-2021). Although they did not situate culture in a specific context as

we did by contextualizing culture in the parental sphere, the way countries formed clusters in

the World Value Survey and the parenting zones highlighted in our research are comparable.

Specifically, when countries are geographically close or share the same language, their

cultures seem to form a homogeneous pattern. This similarity suggests that cultures, whether

examined in a specific context (e.g., parenting) or not, are organized by geographic

proximity[5] and language.

The ideal-parent beliefs in each culture zone found in the current study echo previous literature on smaller samples of countries and facilitate a more comprehensive understanding of parenting. For example, we found that parents in the Western I and Russian, as well as the Western II culture zones, emphasized "loving," "caring," "patient," and "calm" as characteristics of ideal parents. This combination of concepts matched the parenting strategies encompassed in "*positive parenting*" ideologies prevailing in current Western cultures—the philosophy that parents should take care of their children with warmth and support (Larzelere et al., 2017; Lin et al., 2021). In contrast, Asian and African parents deemed "*responsible parenting*" (e.g., assuming responsibility; Gillies, 2008; being responsible for children's cues; Schuhmacher et al., 2017) as most important. Asian parents' ideal-parent beliefs were further based around family and children (i.e., doing things for their children and family; e.g., loving/teaching/guiding their children or family), reflecting the child/family focus nature of the culture (Keller et al., 2007; Ng et al., 2014). African parents found it crucial to be "patient" and emphasized the concept "respected." This specific combination of concepts echoes the literature highlighting the proper demeanor of obedience and respect that is common in African cultures (LeVine et al., 1994; Miller & Harwood, 2002).

Like Keller (e.g., 2018, 2020), we found that the country as a unit cannot fully explain differences in parenting culture (i.e., the cultural differences of ideal-parent beliefs in this

case). Social class, which was organized here according to parental education levels, showed

the existence of parenting subcultures. Our results indicated that ideal-parent beliefs differ by

educational levels and that no general pattern of such differences could be drawn across

culture zones. For example, in zones where a positive parenting ideology prevails (i.e., the

Western I and Russian as well as the Western II zones), ideal-parent beliefs are rather

homogeneous among parents with higher and lower levels of education. In contrast, Western I

and Russian parents with a high level of education place special emphasis on concepts like

being "patient" and "calm", whereas parents with lower or middle levels of education place

emphasis on being "loving/love" and "honest".

Limitations and Future Directions

Despite its contributions, the limitations of this study should be acknowledged. First, the

fact that the raw responses were collected in the parents' native language is both a strength

and a weakness. It allowed us to begin with the participants' beliefs in a bottom-up approach.

However, it also possibly biased the interpretation of the results, because the material had to

be translated into a common language, English, sometimes using approximations to secure

the initial meaning given by the participants. Despite the precautions implemented in the

present study (i.e. production of single words by the participants, involvement of native

researchers in the process of translation and securing the meaning, automated content

analysis by the first author) to limit the biases due to the language in which the raw data were

collected, we have to acknowledge that the meaning of the features (e.g., loving) may differ

from one parent to another and from one culture to another. Our study was unable to

determine the exact meaning of features for each participant. And given the large-scale,

bottom-up research design of the current study, it would be an unrealistic goal to conduct a

comprehensive comparison of meaning invariance across participants, as top-down studies

typically do (e.g., imposing the existing framework) (Lansford et al., 2016). Therefore, future

studies using a small-scale in-depth interview (e.g., Cheah et al., 2013) or a large-scale cross-

country comparative study with a quantitative measure of "ideal-parent belief" (inspired by

the result of our study) would be useful to supplement the current study.

Second, there was some subjectivity in the way we delineated parenting culture zones,

an inherent feature of inductive research (Wagenmakers et al., 2018). In an effort to validate

the relevance of our approach, we wanted to test the extent to which we might also have

found interpretable results by grouping parents completely arbitrarily into five groups. After

randomly assigning each participant to one of the five groups, we replicated exactly the same

SNA analysis strategy as described in the method of the current research. The results across

these random groups showed not only the same concepts across all "zones" (i.e., no "zone"

specificity) but also a similar association between concepts (e.g., one predominant theme, i.e.,

loving; see Table S3) and a similar relation of educational groups to ideal-parent beliefs (e.g.,

the concepts of "patient" and "calm" were typical of the high-educated groups whereas

"family" and "children" were typical of the lower-educated; see Figure S1). The fact that this

analysis based on random groups yielded no interpretable difference between groups strongly

supports the validity of our research.

Conclusion and Implication

Gathering parents from 37 countries across the five main continents, this study

delineated specific types of ideal-parent beliefs. The generalization of any research finding

from one culture to another should therefore be practiced with caution. These results

highlight a need for more attention to cultural similarities and differences in parental beliefs.

Further work should consider how these differences influence the validity of measurements

and how they can be incorporated into parenting intervention research within and across

cultures.

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Table 1

The Frequency Counts of Educational Groups Across the Parenting Culture Zones

1. Asian				2. African				3. Hispanic-Italian			
Mothers (N = 980)		Fathers (N = 697)		Mother (N = 477)		Father (N = 512)		Mother (N = 1814)		Father (N = 1016)	
Educational Group	N	Educational Group	N	Educational Group	N	Educational Group	N	Educational Group	N	Educational Group	N
Low	188	Low	130	Low	76	Low	80	Low	98	Low	80
Middle	559	Middle	349	Middle	252	Middle	226	Middle	588	Middle	479
High	226	High	212	High	149	High	205	High	1073	High	446

4. Western I and Russian				5. Western II			
Mother (N = 2921)		Father (N = 835)		Mother (N = 2165)		Father (N = 457)	
Educational Group	N	Educational Group	N	Educational Group	N	Educational Group	N
Low	71	Low	26	Low	10	Low	4
Middle	859	Middle	350	Middle	883	Middle	198
High	1972	High	453	High	1271	High	253

Note. Parents were categorized into three educational group including low-educated (having less than 9 years from the age of 6), middle-educated (having 9-15 years), and high-educated (having at least 16 years) on the basis of number of successfully completed school years.

Table 2

The Themes and the Three Most Frequently-Occurring Concepts of Ideal-Mother/Father Beliefs Across the Parenting Culture Zones

1. Asian				**2. African**				**3. Hispanic-Italian**			
Ideal-Mother		Ideal-Father		Ideal-Mother		Ideal-Father		Ideal-Mother		Ideal-Father	
Themes	*N*	Themes	*N*	Themes	*N*	Themes	*N*	Themes	*N*	Themes	*N*
family	776	family	525	responsible	417	responsible	410	loving	1648	loving	884
tolerant	339	strong	240	affection	169	affection	153	affectionate	1055	affectionate	600
faithful	221	active	51	worker	90	worker	152	nice	49	worker	28
Concepts	*N*	Concepts	*N*	Concepts	*N*	Concepts	*N*	Concepts	*N*	Concepts	*N*
responsible	272	family	214	responsible	221	responsible [a]	210	loving	897	loving	476
family	257	responsible	155	respected	148	patience	85	responsible	625	responsible	274
children	198	children	121	affection	95	responsibility	82	affectionate	551	affectionate	213

4. Western I and Russian				**5. Western II**			
Ideal-Mother		Ideal-Father		Ideal-Mother		Ideal-Father	
Themes	*N*	Themes	*N*	Themes	*N*	Themes	*N*
loving	2363	loving	721	loving	2117	loving	434
patient	1903	patience	399	caring	874	empathy	55
empathic	1495	strength	95	understanding	71	reliable	14
Concepts	*N*	Concepts	*N*	Concepts	*N*	Concepts	*N*
loving	1,411	loving	436	loving	916	loving	219
patient	975	caring	309	patient	648	patient	141

| caring | 742 | patience | 185 | present | 496 | listen | 83 |

Note. *N* represents the frequency count (i.e., the total number of occurrences) of the themes and concepts. In Leximancer, each theme took its

name directly from the most connected (i.e., most important) of the concepts it encompassed; thus, the names for the most connected concepts

(usually, are the most frequently mentioned concepts) encompassed in a theme and the names of themes are identical. Besides, we requested

Leximancer to merge all parts of speech for a word/word variants into a single word, and Leximancer automatically identified the potential stem

words for variants, but we did not further transform all descriptors into a single consistent form (e.g., adjective form), in order to reduce

subjective human interventions.

[a] Although we asked Leximancer to merge parts of speech for a word, "responsibility" and "responsible" were still separated because of the need

to construct the network map.

Figure 1

The Global Semantic Network Map: The Five Parenting Culture Zones and Their Country Composition
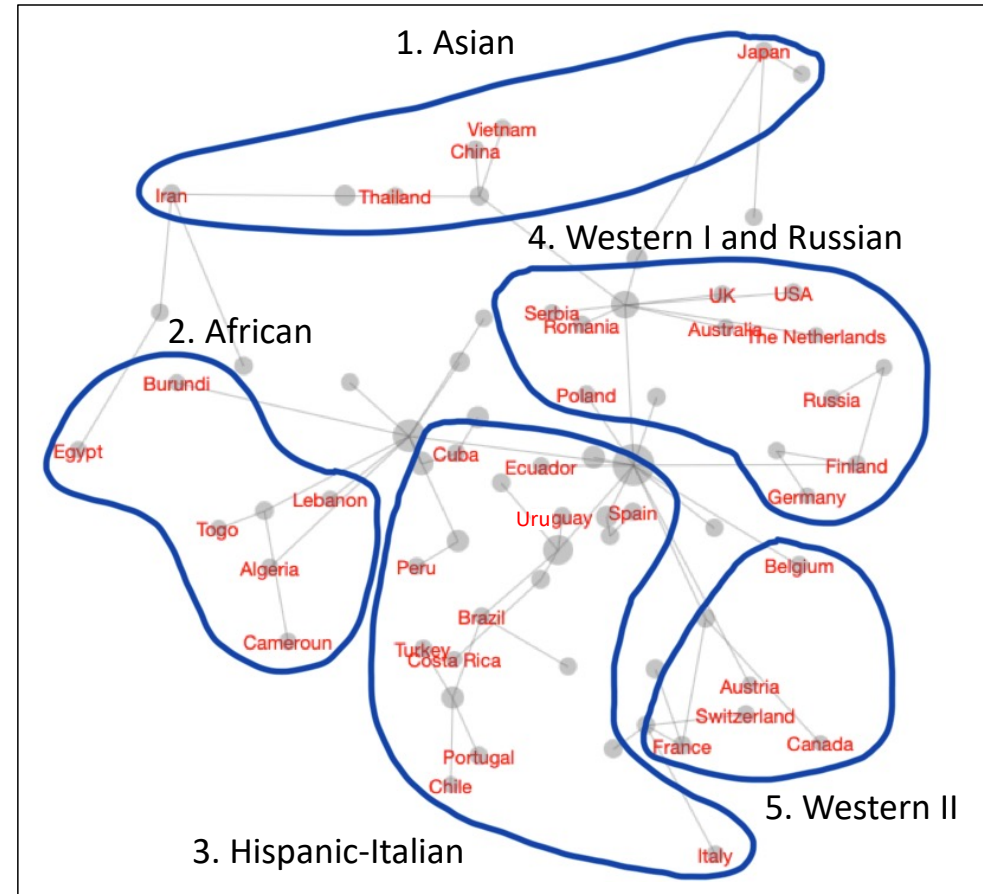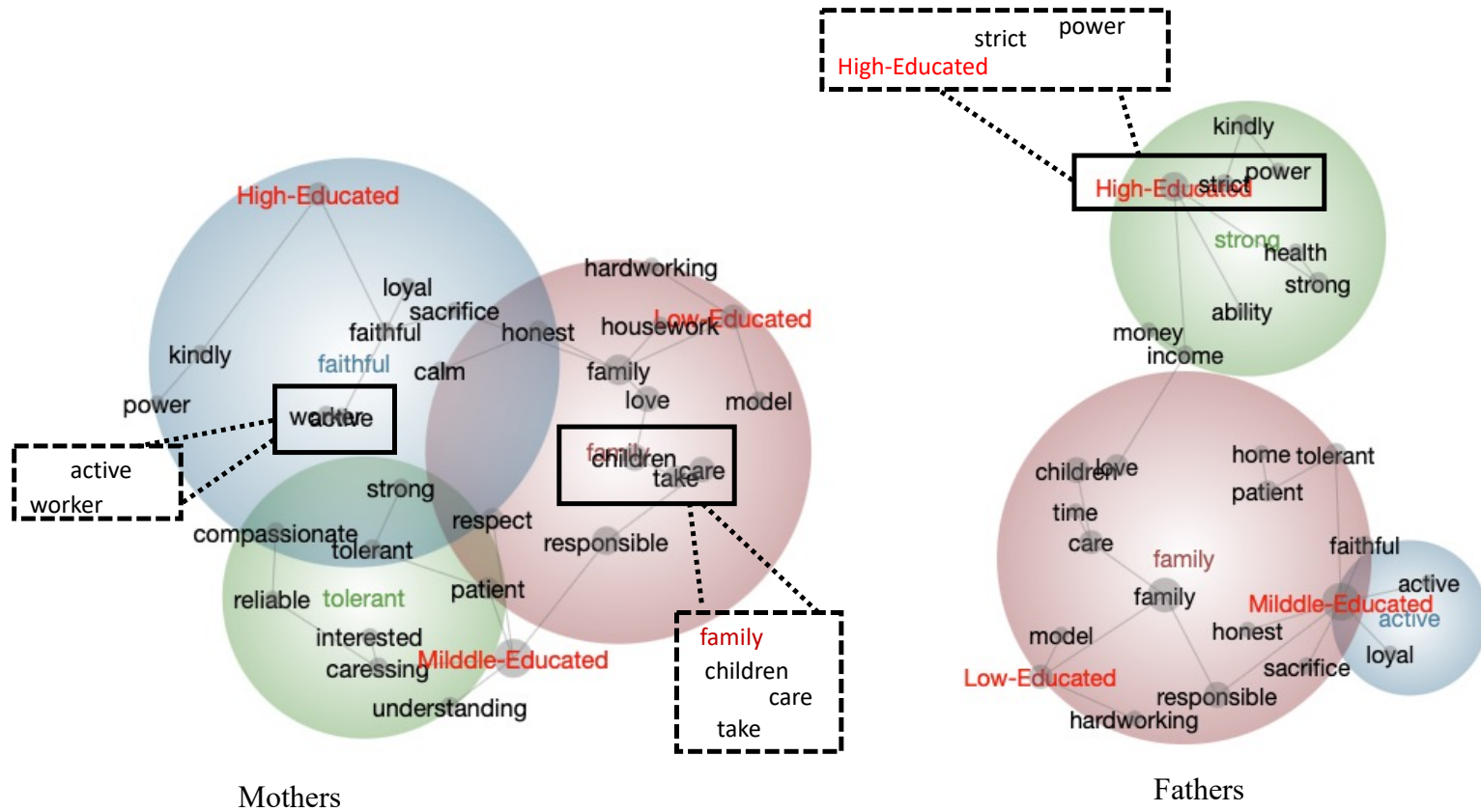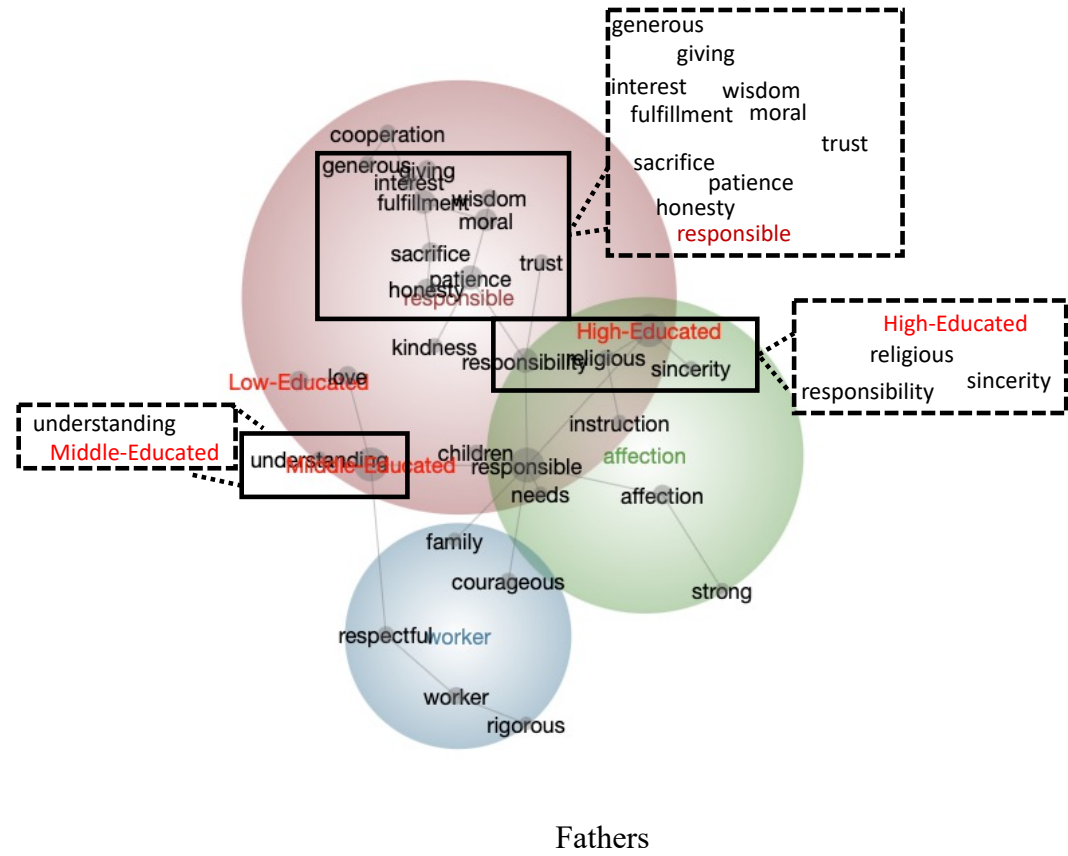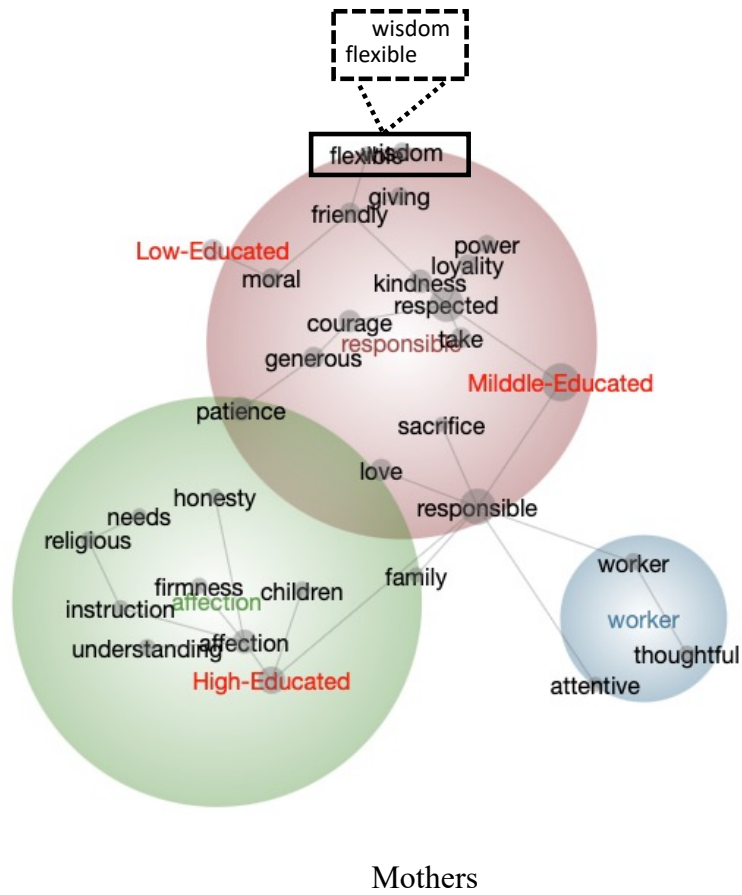
a. Mothers
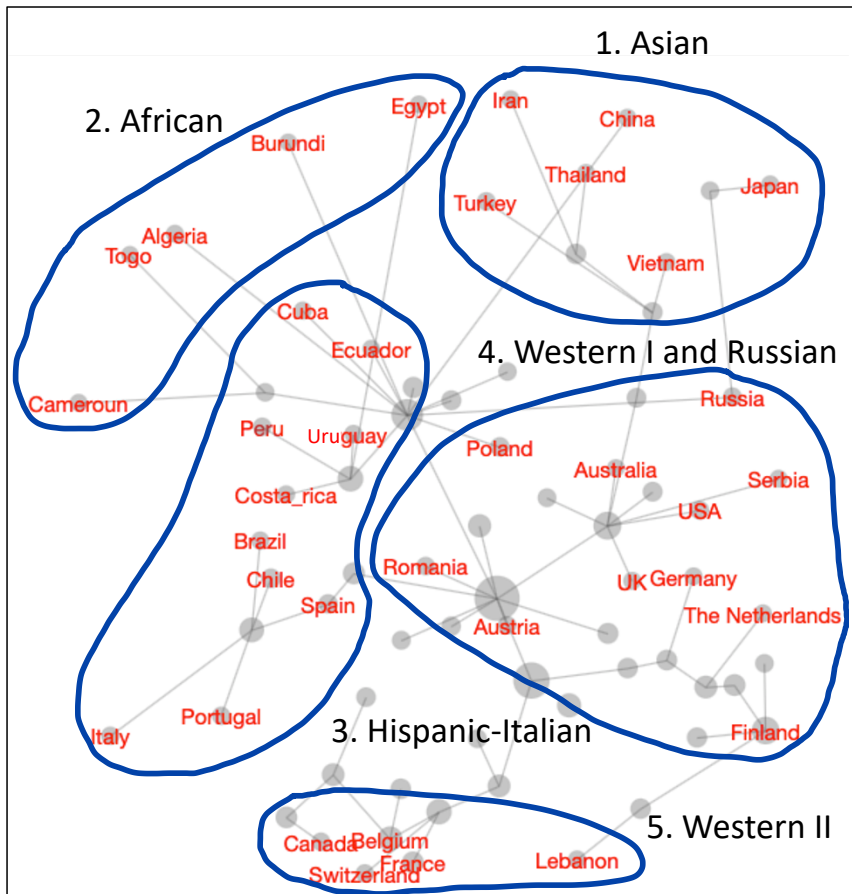
b. Fathers

Figure 2

The Semantic Network Maps of the Ideal-Parent Beliefs and the Educational Groups in the Five Parenting Culture Zones

a. Asian

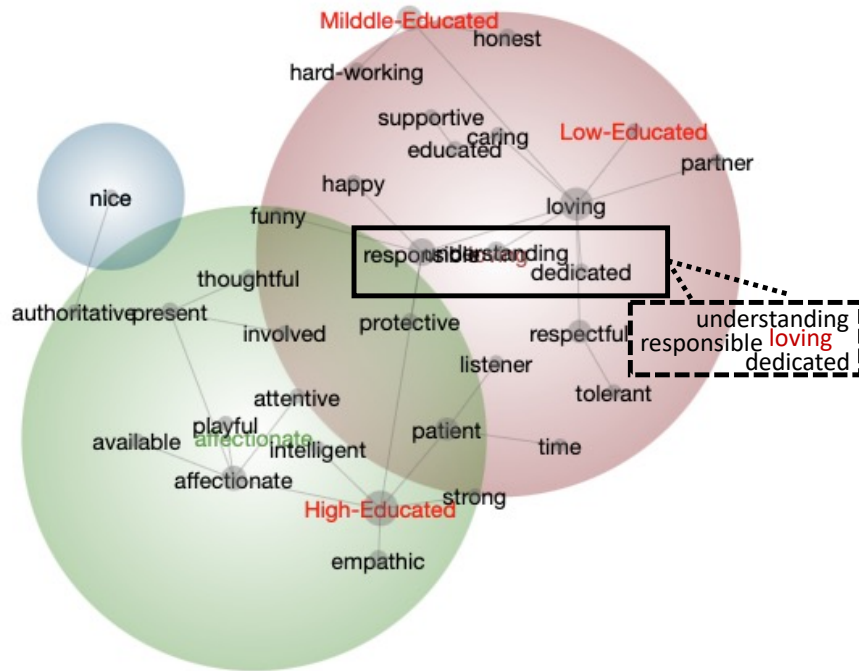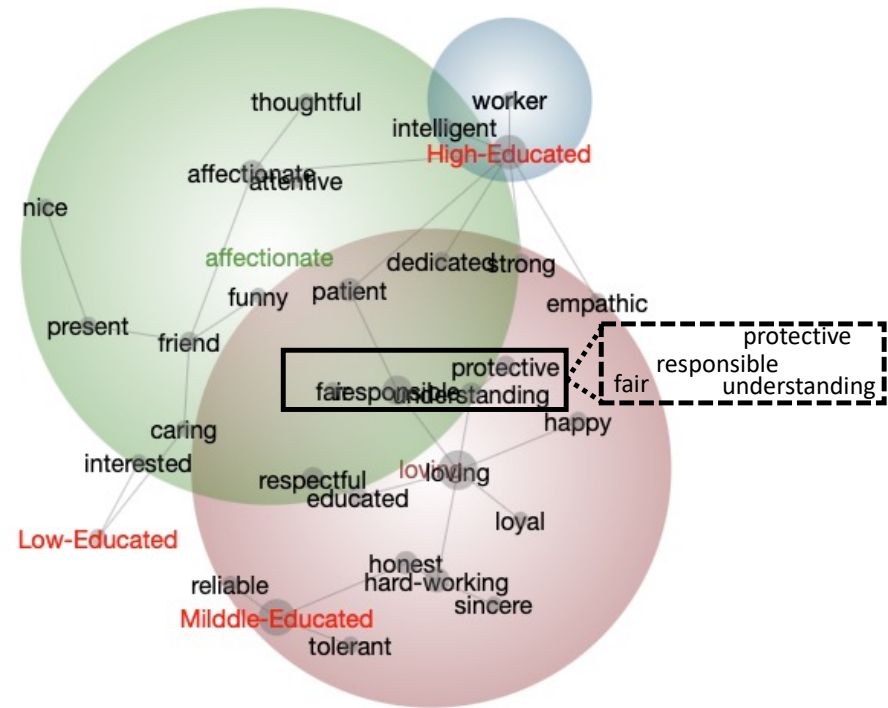Mothers   Fathers

b. African

Mothers

Fathers

c. Hispanic-Italian

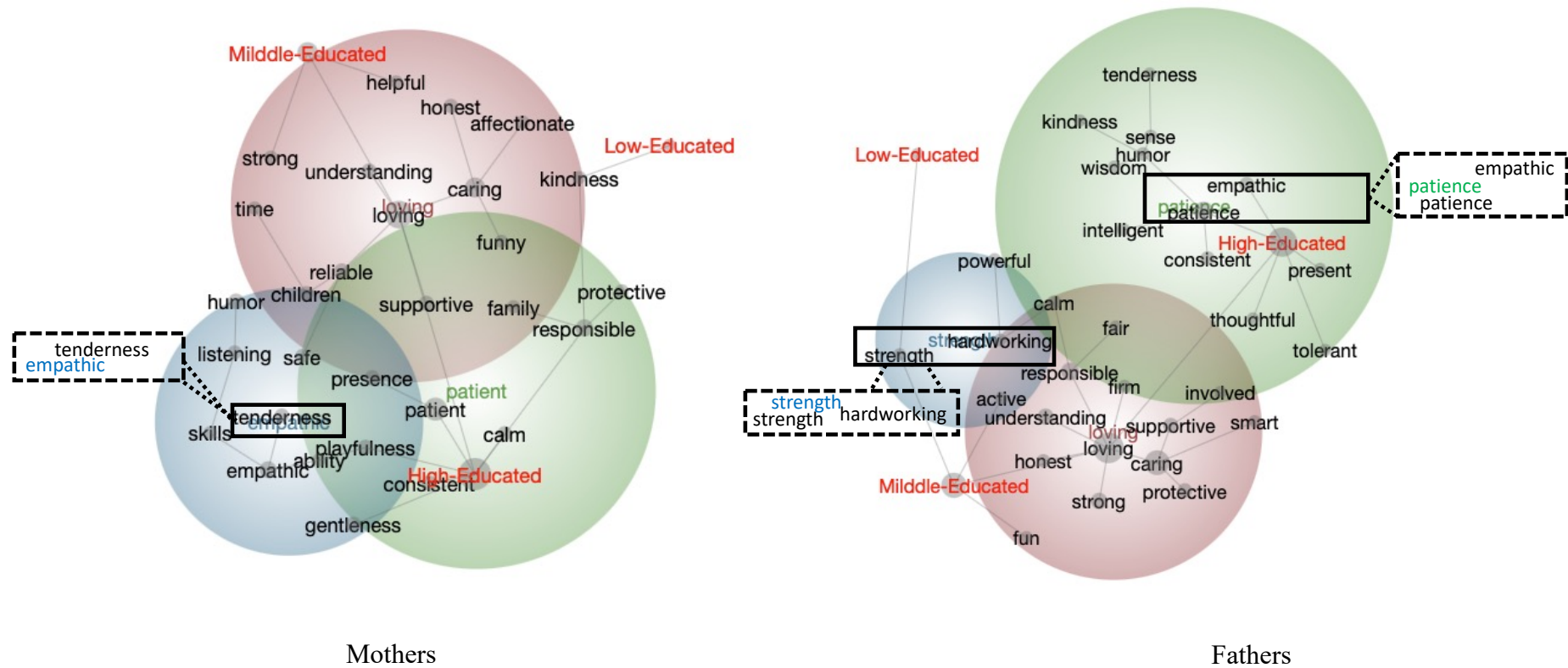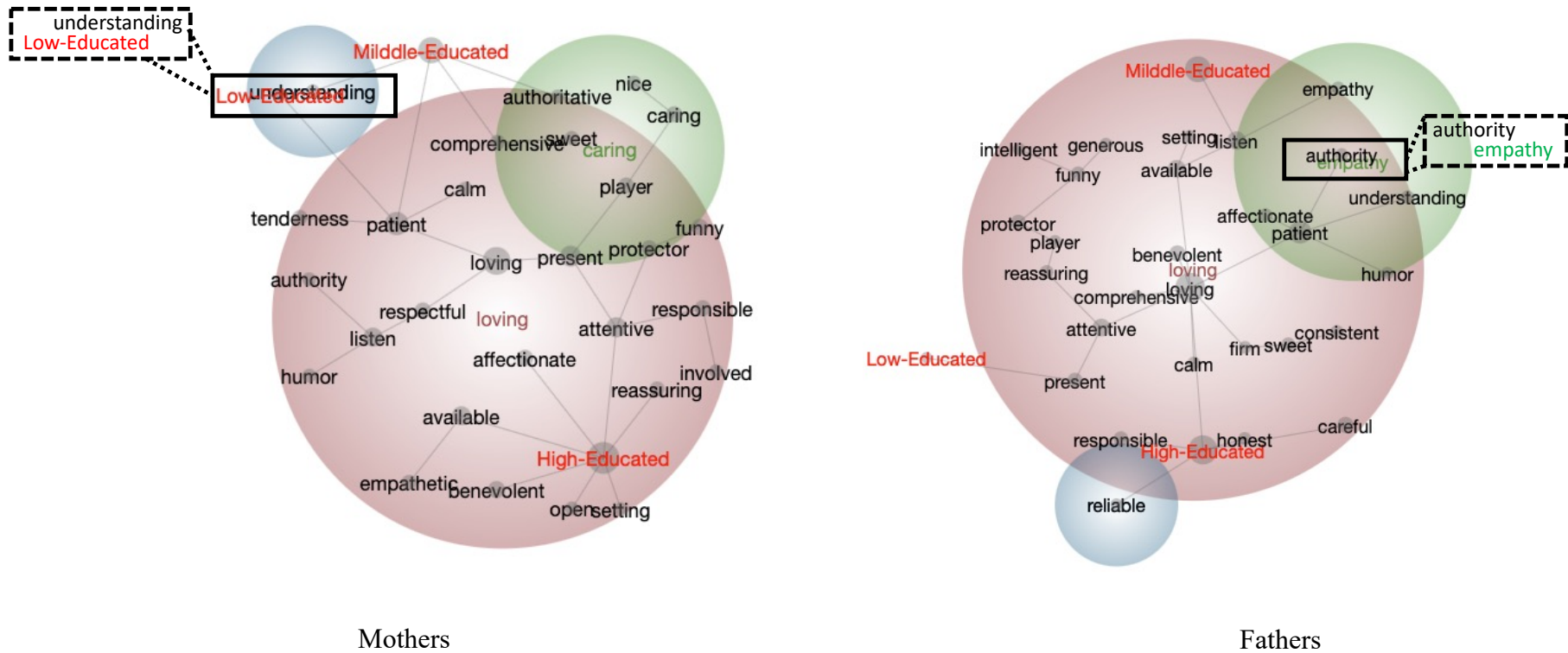Mothers   Fathers

d. Western I (mainly consisting of English-Speaking and EU countries) and Russian

Mothers

Fathers

e. Western II (mainly consisting of French-Speaking countries)

Mothers

Fathers

Note. The colors of bubbles are denoted by heat-mapping, with a hotter color (red, orange)

representing the most important themes (mentioned more frequently by parents), and a cooler

color (blue, green), representing those less important. Black bordered and dashed blocks are

added manually to show the overlapping words.

Notes

1. A characteristic of a parent that is considered good or even ideal in one cultural setting may be considered inappropriate in another. For instance, it may be deemed inappropriate behavior for Chinese parents to praise their children as smart or clever, whereas such behavior is common and valued in Euro-American parenting (see Li, 2012).

2. It should be noted that we use wording that implies comparisons (e.g., "more important than") throughout this article. However, no formal statistical analysis was carried out in this study to demonstrate statistically significant differences with regard to these features.

3. We requested Leximancer to merge all parts of speech for a word/word variants into a single word, and Leximancer automatically identified the potential stem words for variants, but we did not further transform all descriptors into a single consistent form (e.g., adjective form), in order to reduce subjective human interventions. In any case, descriptors like "family" and "children," which were especially frequent in the Asian parenting culture zone, are nouns without a corresponding adjective form. These specific nouns, rather than being mere "noise", may reflect the specificity of the culture concerned (i.e., Asian culture). Previous research has found that some Asian parenting cultures are child-oriented and family-oriented: parents' parental self/identity largely relies on their thoughts about children and family, including having responsibility or needing to do something for their children and

family. In other words, for these parents, their ideal parenting, instead of focusing on

characteristics of themselves as parents, is based on thoughts about children and family: e.g.,

how they interact with their children and family, what responsibility they have for their

family and children, and so on. In support of this, Ng et al. (2014) recently found that some

Chinese (Asian) parents' feelings of self-worth are more contingent on children's

performance.

This proposal aligns with our analysis result. In this culture, the features relating to "children"

and "family" were mentioned often enough to be extracted and listed in the three most

frequently-occurring concepts list. Given that we utilized the exact same analysis procedure

on the datasets of each culture zone, the fact that the emphasis on children and family only

emerged in Asian parenting cultures may reveal a cultural difference. As described in the

discussion, after randomly assigning each participant to one of the five groups and replicating

exactly the same SNA analysis strategy, we did not find this difference. Therefore, instead of

seeing nouns such as "family" or "children" as mere noise, we eventually decided not to

make a subjective human intervention on the result.

The semantic association of concepts, indicating how they were interrelated in the raw

responses, can be further examined in the semantic network map (in Figure 2). This map

demonstrates how concepts were related (whether some concepts were used together in

parents' responses) in raw responses. As explained in our Analysis Strategy, two concepts

were connected by edges only when they had a strong association, which considered both

direct and indirect association between nodes and the degree of specificity in the concept

hierarchy (i.e., whether two concepts had similar occurrences). It is thus possible to see from

these figures, for instance, what other concepts are often mentioned in parents' responses

when "family" or "children" are mentioned. In Figure 2a, "children" is attached to "love,"

"take," and "care," which suggests that Asian mothers' responses may often involve the idea

of "loving children" or "taking care of children" since these concepts have strong

associations. As regards "family," in Figure 2a "family" is attached to "love," "housework,"

"sacrifice," and "honest" for Asian mothers. This suggests that "loving family," "doing

housework for the family," or "sacrificing for the family" are the main ideas of Asian mothers

regarding the ideal parent.

4. As the first study examining what ideal parents look like across a wide variety of cultural

settings, our findings also supplement the current understanding of culture areas (as distinct

from the culture zones defined for the specific purpose of this study). Culture areas are

defined as continuous geographical regions in which people have long been observed to have

similarities across a wide variety of life domains (see Harkness et al., 2015). Referring to the

description of culture areas (see the Human Relations Area Files,

https://hraf.yale.edu/about/history-and-development/), we found that parents from the Asia

culture area mainly endorsed a "responsible and children/family-focused" type of ideal

parents, parents from the Africa culture area mainly endorsed a "responsible and proper

demeanor-focused" type, parents from the Europe (Southern Europe), Middle America and

the Caribbean, and South America culture areas mainly endorsed a "loving and responsible"

type, and finally, parents from North America, Europe (British Isles and Eastern Europe as

well as Scandinavia), and Oceania (Australia) endorsed a "loving and patient" type.

5. To be more specific, China, Japan, Thailand, Vietnam, Turkey, and Iran were clustered

together in our findings (in the Asian zone) and the World Value Survey (2020; in the

Confucian and West and South Asia African-Islamic clusters). Egypt and Algeria were

clustered together in our African zone and the World Value Survey's African-Islamic cluster.

Italy, Portugal, Spain, Brazil, Ecuador, and Peru were clustered together in our Hispanic-

Italian zone and the World Value Survey's African-Islamic, Catholic Europe, and Latin

America clusters. The Netherlands, Germany, Finland, Switzerland, Belgium, France,

Canada, France, Austria, the USA, Australia, and the UK were clustered together in our

Western I-Russian and Western II zones and the World Value Survey's Catholic and

Protestant Europe and English-Speaking clusters.