



Mapping the “good mother” – Meanings and experiences in economically and socially disadvantaged contexts

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ABSTRACT

Scientific research has stressed the negative impact of economic and social adversity on parenting, which compromises children's adaptive trajectories throughout the life cycle. By means of a grounded theory approach, this study aims to explore and understand how mothers within socially and economically disadvantaged contexts conceptualize the “good mother”, and how they experience their own parenting. The sample consisted of 24 economically and socially disadvantaged mothers and a contrasting group of 8 mothers with no economic or social disadvantages. Educating children and ensuring their well-being emerged as the core purposes of a “good mother”, reported to be fulfilled through six main functions – affection, education, basic care, protection, dialogue and family relational care. The results also suggested the influence of beliefs on the parenting role performance, namely on parental strengths and shortcomings. Additionally, almost all the mothers revealed a positive parental self-image, although justifying this image posed difficulties for some, thus suggesting low parenting-related reflexivity. A hypothetical theory on mothers' positive parental self-image emerged through the data analysis. These results provide direction for future research and may potentially inform clinical practice with families in settings characterized by economic and social adversity.

1. Introduction

The challenges linked to the performance of parenting arise from the interactive complexity of factors at multiple systemic levels (e.g., Belsky and Jaffee, 2006; Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Kochanska et al., 2012). Scientific research has particularly underlined the negative impact of ecological adversity, namely risk factors associated with economic and social disadvantage, as it contributes towards increasing and cumulating stressors and demands, and to diminishing individual and family strengths, thus compromising children's adaptive trajectories throughout the life cycle (e.g. Kochanska et al., 2012; Nurius et al., 2015). In this vein, to our knowledge, empirical research, mostly sustained by a risk perspective and the use of quantitative methodologies, has placed priority on the study of parenting variables (with particular emphasis on parenting styles and attachment) and individual variables related to parental psychopathology. However, as far as we have been able to ascertain, research on cognitive variables such as parents' beliefs

and reasoning with regard to parenting, particularly in economically and socially disadvantaged contexts, is scarce. We have found no research specifically geared towards understanding parenting reflexivity, which we conceptualize, in the present study, as parents' capacity to critically reflect on their own parenting. Although there are several studies that focus on reflective functioning, defined as parents' ability to recognize internal mental states in their children and themselves, and to understand their impact on behavior (Caimorano, 2017; Katznelson, 2014), this construct is not equivalent to reflexivity (which corresponds to the broader and more abstract concept of class). Reflective functioning may be regarded as a component of reflexivity on parenting, thus corresponding to an element of class. Hence, the present study aims to gain a deeper and contextualized understanding of mothers' experiences and critical thoughts on parenting in economically and socially disadvantaged contexts, through mothers' own voices, and to highlight not only parenting hindrances but also parenting strengths, i.e., key processes and factors which favor both individual and family

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growth (Walsh, 2006).

1.1. Theoretical Background

Positive parenting is less likely within families seriously distressed by economic and social disadvantage (Jeon and Nepl, 2016). Empirical research has consistently found less parental warmth and involvement with children of such families (e.g., Conger et al., 2010; Jeon and Nepl, 2016), higher levels of parenting stress (Anderson, 2015), harsher discipline practices (Friedson, 2016; Pinderhughes et al., 2000), lower quality of the parent-child relationship (Anderson, 2015; Macfie et al., 2015; Santiago et al., 2011), lower quality and stability of marital and co-parenting relationships (Conger et al., 2010; D'Andrade and Sorkhabi, 2016) and also poor social support (Geens and Vandenbroeck, 2014; Lietz et al., 2011). The cumulative risk, inherent to families in economically and socially disadvantaged contexts, has proven to be a strong predictor of child abuse – i.e., physical, psychological, sexual, and neglect (e.g., Patwardhan et al., 2017; Veenema et al., 2015), with noxious effects on children's behavioral, emotional, cognitive and social development (Maguire et al., 2015). Notwithstanding, the deleterious impact of economic and social disadvantage on children's outcomes appears to be strongly buffered by parents' personal positive attributes (e.g., positive orientation, self-efficacy, self-esteem, life satisfaction), which foster positive parenting (Jeon and Nepl, 2016). As far as parents' perception of self-efficacy is concerned, namely self-perceived competence in the parental role, research is consensual as to its impact on positive parenting and parents' and children's adjustment (e.g., Albarran and Reich, 2014; Jones and Prinz, 2005; Meunier and Roskam, 2009; Renner et al., 2015). Additionally, several authors have found that variables linked to economic and social disadvantage (e.g., low-income, financial strain, less-educated, unmarried or unpartnered parents, abuse history in infancy) are associated with lower levels of parental self-esteem (Mayhew and Lempers, 1998) and self-efficacy (e.g., Albarran and Reich, 2014; Renner et al., 2015).

Parenting is also markedly influenced by parental cognitions, namely parents' beliefs (including meanings and perspectives on parenting and children's behavior and development) which, acting as a filter, appear to guide perceptions, expectancies, goals and interpretations regarding children, and generate, organize, explain and change parenting behaviors, regulating their relationship with children (Bond and Burns, 2006; Burchinal et al., 2010; Senese et al., 2012). Parents' beliefs, namely regarding what they should do to care for their children and foster their development, are grounded on parents' personal background and prior experiences as children, and further associated with social and cultural factors and contexts (Burchinal et al., 2010; Sperling and Mowder, 2006; van Mourik et al., 2016). Sperling and Mowder (2006) highlight that parents' ideas and perspectives on parenting are also shaped by family dynamics, the parent-child relationship and children's characteristics.

Additionally, Bond and Burns (2006) posit that parenting beliefs reflect the parent's cognitive complexity (complex levels of parent reasoning), stating that mothers' epistemological perspectives (ways of knowing the self and the world) provide a general framework for understanding and shaping parenting beliefs and behaviors. The authors highlight the five epistemological perspectives of women proposed by Belenky et al. (1986), that emerged from a qualitative study on women's life experiences and problems as learners and knowers: *silence* (conveying self-perception as mindless and voiceless, and being unable to reflect on the experience of self and others); *received knowledge* (corresponding to self-perception as a passive reservoir of the knowledge of others without proactivity); *subjective knowledge* (typical of self-perception, characterized by having private or intuitive knowledge but deemed too irrelevant to be developed, appreciated or shared with others); *procedural knowledge* (characterized by a personal reasoning on self and reality and admitting that knowledge can be identified,

evaluated and developed); *constructed knowledge* (believing in the social construction of knowledge and in its contextual and evolving nature). The research of Belenky et al. (1986) found that women's self-concept was strongly related to their epistemological perspectives. For instance, “silent” women were unable to provide a self-description. Belenky et al. (1986) also observed that narratives of positive parenting were more related to more complex epistemological perspectives which, according to Bond and Burns (2006), guided subsequent studies on the relationship between mothers' epistemological complexity and their beliefs regarding children and parenting strategies.

In the field of parental cognitions, several authors have also conducted research on parental reflective functioning, defined as parents' capacity to understand and interpret their children's mental states as well as their own (e.g., Caimorano, 2017; Katznelson, 2014; Stacks et al., 2014). The reflective capacity on parenting issues is a powerful cognitive tool to successfully manage children's behavior (Roskam, 2015). According to Stacks et al. (2014), parents in economically and socially disadvantaged contexts reveal low levels of reflective functioning, which is likely to be due to poor levels of schooling and environmental adversities.

Research has found positive associations of reflective functioning with parenting sensitivity (e.g., Stacks et al., 2014), frequent and open communication with children, high levels of satisfaction with the parent-child relationship (e.g., Benbassat and Priel, 2012), quality of parent-child interactions, empathy and emotional support (e.g., Katznelson, 2014), secure attachment (e.g., Katznelson, 2014; Shai and Belsky, 2011; Stacks et al., 2014) and children's social competence (e.g., Benbassat and Priel, 2012). On the other hand, parents' insufficient reflective functioning appears to be related to a limited understanding of their own and children's emotions and motivations, and difficulties in affect self-regulation (Stern, 2014), children's anxiety attachment (Burkhart et al., 2017) and behavioral problems (Smaling et al., 2016), symbiotic relationship with children (Burkhart et al., 2017; Stern, 2014), negative attributions for children's behavior (Burkhart et al., 2017; Stern, 2014), difficulties in the regulation of children's behavior (Stern, 2014), inconsistent parenting strategies, and a diminished perception of self-efficacy (Roskam, 2015).

1.2. Purpose

Despite the relevance of parental cognitions, namely reflective functioning and parenting beliefs, for preventive and therapeutic interventions with families in economically and socially disadvantaged contexts, the literature on this subject and with this specific population is insufficient (e.g., Burchinal et al., 2010; Stacks et al., 2014; van Mourik et al., 2016). Framed by a grounded theory, in this study we aimed to conduct an in-depth analysis and to gain further understanding of how mothers in economically and socially disadvantaged contexts conceptualize the “good mother”, and how they experience their parenting. We specifically set out to answer three research questions: How do mothers conceptualize the “good mother”? How do they experience their parenting? How do they self-evaluate and reflect critically on their parenting? As research reporting directly on the voices of mothers in economically and socially disadvantaged contexts, regarding their parenting experiences and thoughts is, to our knowledge, somewhat scarce, further knowledge on this subject may inform preventive and therapeutic practices that foster positive parenting.

2. Method

The present study followed a qualitative research methodology, as it has been considered particularly suitable for a more in-depth understanding of family processes, experiences and meanings through the family members' voices (Daly, 2007; Levitt et al., 2017; van Mourik et al., 2016). Grounded theory methodology (GTM) was used to guide data collection and data analysis with the purpose of generating

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