

## **Ideas about Parenting in Argentina, France, and the United States**

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Central to a concept of culture is the expectation that different peoples possess different ideas and behave in different ways with respect to child rearing. In this study, we investigated ideas that Argentine, French, and US American mothers hold about their own and their husbands' actual child rearing, as well as what they consider to be ideal child rearing, in three parenting domains: social, didactic, and limit setting. For each domain, we analysed mothers' reports of their actual behaviours and of their husbands' actual behaviours; mothers' ideal expectations of their own and their husbands' behaviours; and mothers' dissonance with respect to parenting (i.e. the extent to which mothers' actual and their husbands' actual behaviours each agrees with mothers' ideal expectations for themselves and for their

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husbands). The results showed consistent parent, country, as well as parent-by-country effects, interpretable in terms of overarching cultural beliefs. The study of parents' ideas contributes to understanding why and how parents behave the way they do toward children, and provides insights into the broader social context of child development.

In the study of parent-child relationships, parents' ideas (i.e. their understandings, beliefs, and attitudes) have held a consistently popular place (Goodnow & Collins, 1990). Many classic investigations of parenting have proceeded on the assumption that such ideas articulate with or even guide parental actions with children and that they therefore constitute a key aspect of the child's world (e.g. Baldwin, Kalhorn, & Breece, 1945; Baumrind, 1971; Sears, Maccoby, & Levin, 1957). Indeed, parents' ideas are conceived to serve many functions: They may generate parenting behaviours or mediate their effectiveness; they may help to organise the world of parenting because ideas affect parents' sense of self and competence; and, in a larger sense, they may contribute to the "continuity of culture" by defining culture and the transmission of cultural information across generations (Benedict, 1938; Bornstein & Lamb, 1992; Darling & Steinberg, 1993; Holden, 1995; Palacios, 1990). As Super and Harkness (1986) asserted in developing the concept of the *developmental niche*, three dimensions organise the child's developmental context: One embraces the physical and social settings in which the child lives, a second, the customs of child care and child rearing, and the third—most germane to this study—the psychology of the child's caregivers. In this study, we evaluated mothers' ideas about their own behaviours and those of their husbands in three domains of interaction with young children, and we examined the discrepancy between mothers' ratings of their own and their husbands' actual parenting behaviours as well as their views of ideal behaviour. We compared these measures in mothers in three cultures. Cross-cultural investigation is requisite to a comprehensive understanding of variation in parenting ideas (Bornstein, 1991, 1994; LeVine, Miller, & West, 1988).

Research on child rearing has focused attention on conceptually diverse domains of parenting, including at least social, didactic, and limit setting (see Belsky, 1984; Bornstein, 1989a; Maccoby & Martin, 1983). *Social* interactions encompass interpersonal exchanges within the parent-child dyad and involve expressions of sensitivity, reciprocity, and affect. Parental warmth, affection, sensitivity, and responsiveness are thought to exert positive influences on children's developing social adjustment and cognitive competencies (e.g. Belsky, Rovine, & Taylor, 1984; Bornstein, 1989b; Clarke-Stewart, 1973; Stevenson-Hinde, Hinde, & Simpson, 1986; Yarrow, Rubenstein, & Pedersen, 1975). *Didactic* interactions on the part of parents

stimulate children's awareness of properties, objects, and events in the environment outside the dyad, providing children with opportunities to observe, imitate, and learn. Research shows positive associations between didactic interactions and diverse aspects of children's development (e.g. Belsky, Goode, & Most, 1980; Bornstein, 1985, 1989a; Tamis-LeMonda & Bornstein, 1989). *Limit setting* involves inculcation of conventions and rules as well as respect for authority. A common view (especially in the United States) is that "too much or too little" parental discipline may exert negative effects on children's development (e.g. Applegate, Burleson, & Delia, 1992; Baumrind, 1989; Chamberlain & Patterson, 1995; Hess & McDevitt, 1984; Le Vine, 1970; Portes, Dunham, & Williams, 1986; Rollins & Thomas, 1979).

How do parents believe they behave in these specific domains of parenting? How would they ideally like to behave? How similar are mothers' and fathers' behaviours? How do mothers' ideas about their own and their husbands' parenting vary across cultures?

We examined cultural ideas about these three domains of parenting among Argentine, French, and US American mothers. We selected these locales for comparison for several reasons. The samples and societies were matched on many sociodemographic variables so that effects of culture could be isolated. All samples are Western and lived in comparable urban and semi-urban modern settings; participants came from a wide variety of socioeconomic classes. The mothers in the three groups are equivalent with respect to family size, in each society the mother is also normally the primary caregiver, and the family organisation is typically nuclear.

However, the three samples differ in terms of cultural backgrounds which form a powerful basis for conceiving of parenting norms differently, and for implementing different practices in rearing children. Evidence from past comparative research suggests that these three societies vary subtly but meaningfully in how they conceive of and act toward children. Generally speaking, in Argentine culture, to adopt an authoritarian orientation and to direct the child is to behave positively toward the child and to express care for the child's development; Argentine child-rearing value orientations tend to stress dependency and obedience (e.g. Aguinis, 1988; Bornstein et al., 1992a; Eichelbaum de Babini, 1965; Fillol, 1961). Child rearing in French culture is believed to place more emphasis on emotional support and psycho-affective security and needs relative to cognitive stimulation (e.g. Bornstein, Tal, & Tamis-LeMonda, 1991; Pêcheux & Labrell, 1994; Sabatier, 1994). Anglo-American US culture stresses values related to individual achievement, self-confidence, and autonomy in children, and gives great weight to innate ability (e.g. Bornstein, 1994; Harwood & Miller, 1991; Stevenson, 1992). On these grounds, Argentina, France, and the United States constitute a provocative comparative set in which to investigate common as well as culture-specific aspects of parents' ideas about parenting.

In this study, we collected reports from mothers. A key quality of ideas is their “accessibility”, for those ideas that are more accessible may relate to, influence, or rationalise behaviour more quickly and effectively. For this reason, we studied mothers’ ideas about actual parenting in common everyday child-rearing domains. We also asked questions about mothers’ ideal parenting in each domain. Views about “ideal” parenting might reveal standards that help guide behaviour. These standards represent goals that parents would ideally like to reach in specific domains. Additionally, comparing actual with ideal yields information about dissonance in parenting. The degree of match between ideal and actual presumably has psychological significance in terms of success versus failure in meeting one’s positive potential.

Research on parenting ideas (and practices) has concentrated almost exclusively on the mother in recognition of the fact that mothers have traditionally assumed primary—if not exclusive—responsibility for child care (Barnard & Martell, 1995). However, increasing attention has been paid to fathers, reflecting contemporary social changes in industrialised and modern family organisation in which fathers are believed to take more active roles in child rearing and to engage in different amounts and types of interaction with their children (e.g. Bronstein & Cowan, 1988; Parke, 1995). Both parents contribute directly to their children’s genetic make-up, and they directly shape their children’s experiences by virtue of interactions with them. Both parents also indirectly influence child development by virtue of each parent’s relationship to the other; that is, maternal influences on child development may be stimulated or moderated by the father’s impact on his wife (Bornstein, 1995; Minuchin, 1974). Therefore, mothers’ perceptions of their husbands’ as well as their own roles in child rearing are of especial consequence.

In summary, in this study we investigated ideas that Argentine, French, and US American mothers hold about three central domains of parenting: social, didactic, and limit setting. Mothers of toddlers reported their ideas of their own and their husbands’ actual parenting behaviours and their ideas of ideal maternal and paternal behaviours. Agreement between mothers’ perceptions of actual and idealised expectations of both maternal and paternal behaviour was evaluated. We hypothesised that mothers would rate their own behaviours in different domains, both actual and ideal, more favourably than those of their husbands. We also hypothesised that ideal behaviours would be rated higher than actual behaviours. We further hypothesised that differences would emerge across countries: for example, that Argentines would stress limit setting, the French social exchange, and US Americans didactic interactions. Because historically and across cultures women have been the primary caregivers of young children, we hypothesised interactions by parent with country: We expected that specific

cultural emphases in parenting would more likely appear in mothers' perceptions of themselves than in their perceptions of their husbands.

## METHOD

### Participants

Participants in this study were 102 primiparous mothers of 20-month-old children: 36 Argentine, 25 French, and 41 US American. Mothers were recruited from hospital birth notifications, patient lists of medical groups, via mass mailing, and from advertising in newspapers. Mothers were selected to be homogeneous for the following criteria: primiparous, at least 20 years of age, Caucasian, and living with their husband in the same household. The three samples represented a wide range from low to upper-middle SES families measured by the Hollingshead (1975) *Four-factor index of social status* (see also Gottfried, 1985; Pascual, Galperín, & Bornstein, 1993), and there was no difference in SES across the three groups,  $M$ : Argentina = 47.4,  $SD$  = 11.0;  $M$ : France = 53.0,  $SD$  = 11.6; and  $M$ : US = 51.0,  $SD$  = 8.8;  $F(2,99)$  = 2.31, *n.s.* The average age of the mothers in Argentina was  $M$  = 30 years,  $SD$  = 4.2; in France,  $M$  = 32,  $SD$  = 5.2; and in the United States,  $M$  = 32,  $SD$  = 4.0;  $F(2,99)$  = 3.46,  $P$  < 0.05, and the average educational level (measured from the 7-point Hollingshead scale) was  $M$  = 5.2,  $SD$  = 1.0 in Argentina;  $M$  = 5.4,  $SD$  = 1.5 in France; and in the United States,  $M$  = 5.8;  $SD$  = 0.9;  $F(2,99)$  = 3.38,  $P$  < 0.05.

All children had been term at birth and were healthy at the time of the study. The samples were balanced for sex of child; and children in the Argentine, French, and US samples were all approximately 20 months of age at the time of the study,  $M$ s = 20.8 ( $SD$  = 0.3), 20.5 ( $SD$  = 0.3), and 20.4 ( $SD$  = 0.2) months, respectively,  $F(2,98)$  = 34.81,  $P$  < 0.001. The second-year child is sensitive and responsive to maternal expressions of emotions and feelings, and by this time children demonstrate the cognitive capacity not only to interpret the physical and psychological states of others but also to experience, affectively, those states (Bronson, 1974; Clarke-Stewart & Hevey, 1981; Eisenberg & Murphy, 1995; Zahn-Waxler & Radke-Yarrow, 1990; Zahn-Waxler, Radke-Yarrow, Wagner, & Chapman, 1992). As a consequence, two years appeared to constitute a formative time to investigate the child-rearing ideas of primiparous mothers in different cultures. Although the three samples differed in terms of mothers' age, mothers' education, and children's age, these statistical differences were not practicably meaningful (see also the preliminary analyses discussed later).

## Procedure

All mothers completed two instruments, the *Parental Style Questionnaire* and the *Social Desirability Scale*, in their homes. To ensure their equivalence across countries, these instruments, originally constructed and written in English, were translated into Spanish and French and then backtranslated by bilingual Argentine and French natives.

*Parental Style Questionnaire.* The PSQ was constructed by the first and second authors to index differences in domains of parenting behaviour with infants and toddlers (see Bornstein, 1989a). Factor analysis of responses of an independent sample of 222 US mothers to questions about how they actually interact with their 20-month-olds suggested that, at this age, the 16 items in the PSQ formed three scales: (1) social interaction; (2) didactic/material stimulation; and (3) limit setting. In a test of internal consistency in this independent sample, alpha coefficients for the social, didactic/material, and limit setting scales were 0.64, 0.62 and 0.66, respectively. (Alpha coefficients for the three scales in the present multicultural sample of 102 Argentine, French, and US mothers pooled were 0.68, 0.60, and 0.72, respectively; these results confirm the reliability of the scales across cultures.) In a test of the construct validity of the PSQ, relations of the three scales to family SES (Hollingshead, 1975) and to maternal education and to personality from the *Jackson Personality Inventory* (JPI; Jackson, 1976) were analysed in the independent sample of the 222 US mothers. It was predicted that the social scale would bear no systematic relation to SES or maternal education, which turned out to be the case, but would relate positively to Interpersonal Affect and Self-esteem in maternal personality,  $r_s = 0.20$  and  $0.16$ , respectively,  $P_s < 0.01$ . It was predicted that the didactic/material scale would relate positively to SES and maternal education, which it did,  $r_s = 0.26$  and  $0.23$ , respectively,  $P_s < 0.001$ , as well as to Energy Level, Self-esteem, Innovation, and Breadth of Interest in maternal personality,  $r_s = 0.19$  and  $-0.28$ ,  $P_s < 0.006$ . Finally, it was predicted that limit setting would relate negatively to SES and maternal education, which it did,  $r_s = -0.29$  and  $-0.26$   $P_s < 0.001$ , but positively to Organisation, Responsibility, and Value Orthodoxy in maternal personality,  $r_s = 0.15$  and  $-0.33$ ,  $P_s < 0.01$ .

Mothers in the present cross-cultural study completed four versions of the PSQ. Two versions obtained information about mothers' perceptions of their own and their husbands' actual interactions with their child, and two obtained information about ideal interactions, one asking the mother how she would ideally like to behave, and the other asking how she would ideally like her husband to behave. Each version had the same 16 items randomly ordered. Mothers rated each item on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging

from 1 (“Hardly at all”) to 5 (“All the time”). Scores on the social interaction scale were the unweighted mean of responses to five items related to maternal sensitivity, expressions of affection, and positive responsiveness to the child. An example question is: “I provide my child with positive affectionate displays of warmth and attention.” Scores on the didactic/material stimulation scale were the unweighted mean of responses to nine items related to learning opportunities, environmental experience, and material stimulation. An example question is: “I provide my child with a variety of toys and objects for play and exploration”. Scores on the limit setting scale were the unweighted mean of two items in which mothers assessed the importance of rule-keeping and respect for authority in the behaviour of their children. An example question is: “I emphasise the importance of abiding by rules and being well mannered to my child”. (Copies of the PSQ are available from the authors.)

*Social Desirability Scale.* Because self-serving biases could account in part for self-reports in the PSQ, all mothers also completed the *Social Desirability Scale* (SDS; Crowne & Marlowe, 1960). The SDS uses 33 items to assess a person’s tendency to respond to questions in a socially desirable fashion. For example, one of the items states: “I never hesitate to go out of my way to help someone in trouble”. Once the mother decides whether each statement item describes her, she checks True or False. Crowne and Marlowe reported that test-retest reliability for the SDS is 0.89, and the Kuder–Richardson 20 coefficient alpha is 0.88. The tendency of mothers in this sample to answer in a socially desirable fashion ( $M = 16.1$ ,  $SD = 4.4$ ) was similar to that generally reported for adult females by other researchers (O’Grady, 1988:  $M = 15.2$ ,  $SD = 4.8$ ,  $N = 189$ ), and there were no differences across countries in mean level of social desirability:  $M$  Argentina = 16.0,  $SD = 4.9$ ;  $M$  France = 16.8,  $SD = 3.9$ ; and  $M$  US = 15.8,  $SD = 4.3$ ;  $F(2,98)$ , *n.s.*

## Data Analysis

Univariate and bivariate distributions were examined for normalcy, homogeneity of variance, and outliers (Tukey, 1977). In order to achieve homogeneity of variance in the actual social and ideal limit setting domains, cubic transformation of scores was necessary (Hoaglin, Mosteller, & Tukey, 1983); for clarity, untransformed means are presented.

MANOVA’s for doubly multivariate repeated-measures designs (Bock, 1975) were conducted to analyse variance in the three dependent variables: social, didactic, and limit setting. If assumptions about equal variance-covariance matrices were violated in the mixed design, Pillai’s Trace was used as the multivariate criterion, and the significance of the  $F$ -ratio for the univariate results was evaluated after an adjustment of the degrees of

freedom by the Huynh–Feldt epsilon. Pairwise comparisons of countries for significant main effects were explored by examining the values of each contrast. Because there were three countries, three pairwise comparisons were possible. To adjust for the number of comparisons made, a modified Bonferroni test was used (Keppel, 1982), yielding the requirement that differences be considered significant only when  $P \leq 0.03$ . If a significant interaction of parent and country was detected, simple effects analyses were undertaken for *post-hoc* examination of significant main effects. Paired *t*-tests were used to examine differences between parents in each country, and one-way ANOVAs to explore differences among countries for mothers and fathers separately.

Because significant differences emerged in mothers' age, mothers' education, and children's age across countries, these variables were evaluated as covariates; preliminary analyses showed that none was significantly associated with the dependent measures. Two other independent variables, child gender and maternal employment at the time of the visit, were also examined in preliminary analyses, but they too were excluded from the final models because neither made a significant contribution. Finally, the role of social desirability in mothers' responding to PSQ scales was evaluated by entering SDS scores as covariates; in no analyses did SDS alter the pattern of results.

## RESULTS

We first compared mothers' reports of actual maternal and paternal styles in each parenting domain; next, mothers' reports of ideal styles; and finally, measures of dissonance between actual and ideal maternal and paternal styles.

### Actual Maternal and Paternal Styles

Figure 1 displays the means for the three dependent variables by parent and country. MANOVA yielded a significant parent  $\times$  country interaction [ $F(6,196) = 3.44, P < 0.01$ ], as well as significant main effects for parent and country [ $F(3,97) = 27.94, P < 0.001$ , and  $F(6,196) = 2.58, P < 0.05$ , respectively].

*Social.* Univariate ANOVA revealed a significant parent  $\times$  country interaction [ $F(2,99) = 5.70, P < 0.005$ ]. In consideration of this interaction, the main effect for parent [ $F(1,99) = 41.17, P < 0.001$ ], was interpreted by exploring the simple effects for parent in each country. Argentine, French, and US mothers all rated themselves as more sensitive and affectionate with their children than they did their husbands (see Fig. 1A). Examination of the interaction effect of parent across countries revealed significant differences

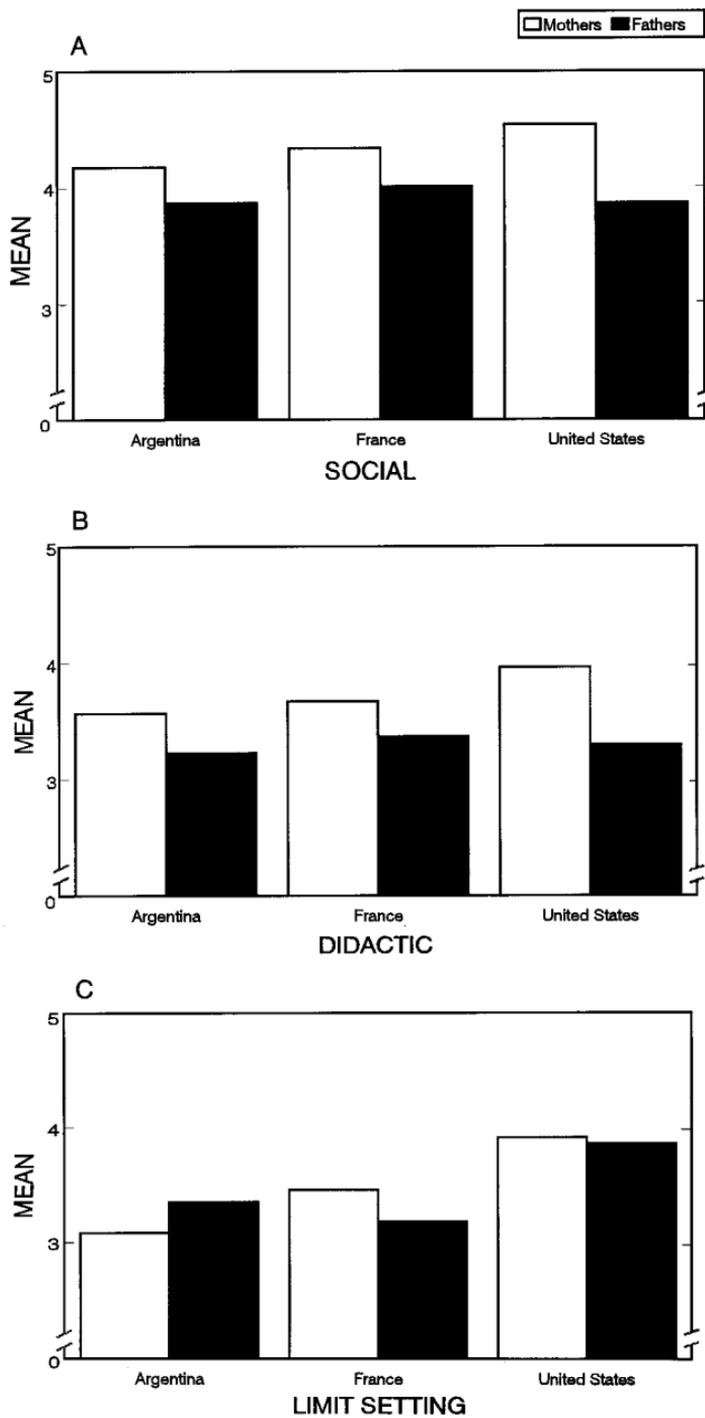


FIG. 1. Parenting style: Actual.

only for pairwise comparisons involving mothers; as can be seen in Fig. 1A, US mothers ranked themselves as more sensitive and affectionate than did Argentine and French mothers. No differences emerged when mothers' ratings of fathers were compared.

*Didactic.* Univariate analysis showed a significant parent  $\times$  country interaction  $\{F(2,99) = 6.06, P < 0.005\}$ . Exploration of the main effect for parent  $\{F(1,99) = 80.54, P < 0.001\}$ , revealed that mothers in each of the three countries rated themselves as more cognitively stimulating than they rated their husbands (see Fig. 1B). Pairwise comparisons between countries for each parent explored the significant country main effect  $\{F(2,99) = 3.04, P = 0.05\}$ , and showed that US mothers perceived themselves to be more stimulating than their counterparts in Argentina and France. No country pairwise comparisons involving fathers were significant (see Fig. 1B).

*Limit Setting.* Univariate analysis indicated only a significant main effect for country  $\{F(2,99) = 6.77, P < 0.005\}$ . *Post-hoc* examination for country differences yielded significant results for two pairwise comparisons involving US parents: US mothers report that both they and their husbands emphasise the importance of rules and respect for authority more than do Argentine and French parents (see Fig. 1C).

### Ideal Maternal and Paternal Styles

Figure 2 shows means for the three dependent variables by parent and country. MANOVA yielded significant effects for the parent  $\times$  country interaction as well as parent and country main effects  $\{F(6,196) = 10.67, F(3,97) = 32.92, \text{ and } F(6,196) = 5.39; P_s < 0.001, \text{ respectively}\}$ .

*Social.* Univariate analysis revealed a significant parent  $\times$  country interaction  $\{F(2,99) = 26.78, P < 0.001 \text{ (adjusted } df \text{ by Huynh-Feldt epsilon)}\}$ . Examination of simple effects in each country for the main effect for parent  $\{F(1,99) = 65.73, P < 0.001 \text{ (adjusted } df \text{ by Huynh-Feldt epsilon)}\}$ , showed that French and US mothers rated themselves higher than their husbands on how they would ideally like to interact socially with their children (see Fig. 2A). Exploration of the country main effect  $\{F(2,99) = 12.31, P < 0.001\}$ , in terms of simple effects showed that mothers' ratings of ideal levels of social behaviour did not differ across the three countries, but that Argentine and US mothers wanted their husbands to be more sensitive and affectionate with their children than their counterparts in France (see Fig. 2A).

*Didactic.* Univariate analysis showed only a significant main effect for parent  $\{F(1,99) = 44.28, P < 0.001 \text{ (adjusted } df \text{ by Huynh-Feldt epsilon)}\}$ . Mothers in all three countries would ideally like to be more cognitively

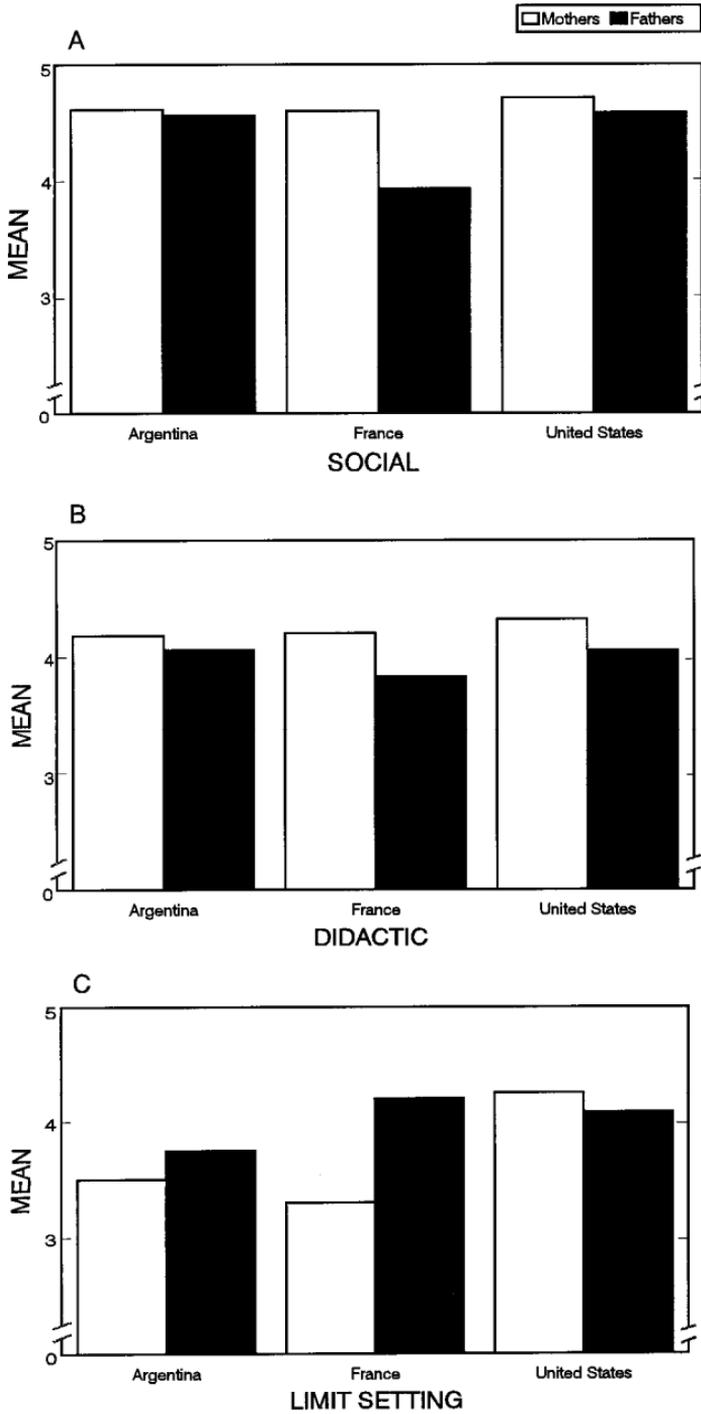


FIG. 2. Parenting style: Ideal.

stimulating with their children than they would like their husbands to be (see Fig. 2B).

*Limit Setting.* Univariate analysis revealed a significant parent  $\times$  country interaction  $\{F(2,99) = 15.91, P < 0.001$  (adjusted  $df$  by Huynh–Feldt epsilon)}. Exploration of the main effect for parent  $\{F(1,99) = 15.10, P < 0.001$  (adjusted  $df$  by Huynh–Feldt epsilon)}, in terms of simple effects showed that Argentine and French mothers would ideally like their husbands to take a greater role than they themselves do in disciplining children, but the opposite is true of US mothers (see Fig. 2C). Examination of the country main effect  $\{F(2,99) = 4.60, P = 0.01\}$ , in terms of simple main effects for country revealed that US mothers rated themselves higher than Argentine and French mothers in terms of how much disciplining they would engage in ideally. No differences emerged for mothers' ratings of fathers across the three countries (see Fig. 2C).

### Dissonance between Actual and ideal Parental Styles

Figure 3 presents means for the dissonance between mothers' scores of their own and their husbands' actual and ideal parenting for each of the three domains by parent and country. Dissonance scores were defined as ideal minus actual; scores closer to zero indicate less discrepancy. MANOVA yielded a significant parent  $\times$  country interaction  $\{F(6,196) = 5.62\}$ , as well as significant main effects for parent  $\{F(3,97) = 7.93$ , and country,  $F(6,196) = 3.70, P_s < 0.002\}$ .

*Social.* Univariate analysis revealed a significant parent  $\times$  country interaction effect  $\{F(2,99) = 10.60, P < 0.001$  (adjusted  $df$  by Huynh–Feldt epsilon)}. Examination of simple effects in each country for the main effect for parent  $\{F(1,99) = 4.04, P < 0.05$  (adjusted  $df$  by Huynh–Feldt epsilon)}, showed that Argentine and US mothers see their actual behaviours as more in agreement with the ideal than they see their husbands' actual behaviours in agreement with the ideal, but the opposite is true in the French sample (see Fig. 3A). Examination of the simple effects for the main effect for country  $\{F(2,99) = 9.60, P < 0.001\}$ , showed that US mothers report their actual sensitive and affectionate behaviours as closer to their ideals than is true of Argentine mothers, and that among husbands Frenchmen were perceived by their wives as behaving most in agreement with the wives' ideals (see Fig. 3A).

*Didactic.* Univariate analysis showed a significant parent  $\times$  country interaction  $\{F(2,99) = 7.25, P = 0.001$  (adjusted  $df$  by Huynh–Feldt epsilon)}. Examination of the parent main effect  $\{F(1,99) = 14.80$ ,

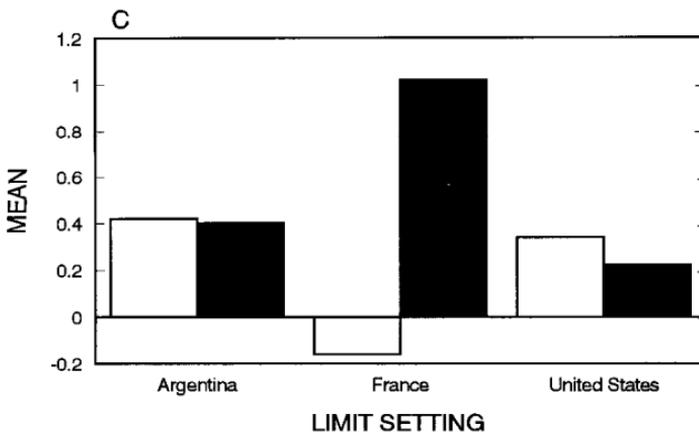
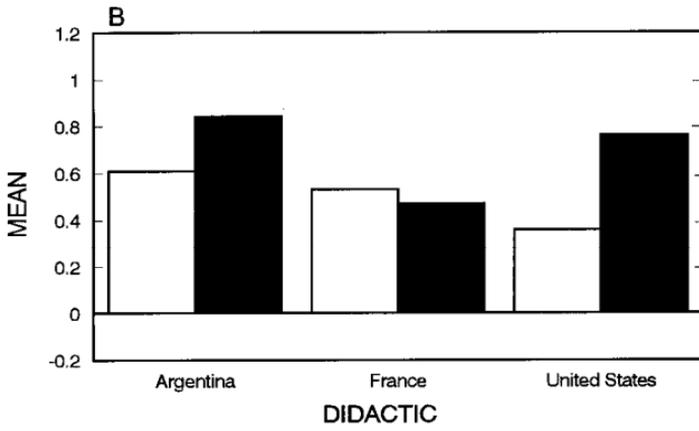
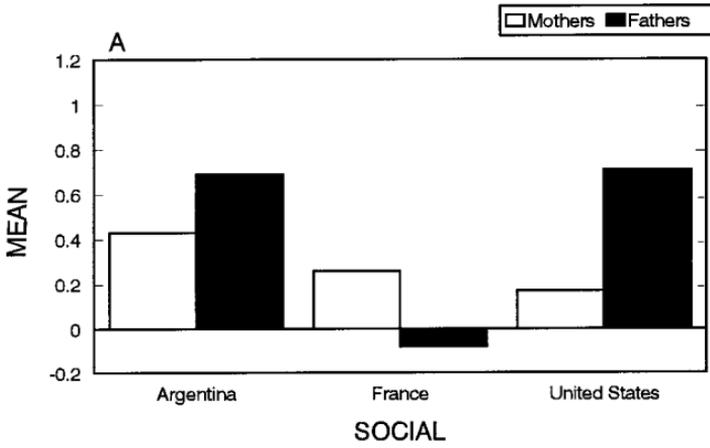


FIG. 3. Dissonance in parenting (Ideal minus Actual).

$P < 0.001$  (adjusted  $df$  by Huynh–Feldt epsilon)}, in terms of simple effects revealed that mothers in Argentina and the United States report greater discrepancies between ideal and actual behaviour with toddlers for their husbands than for themselves (see Fig. 3B). Examination of the simple effect for the main effect of country  $\{F(2,99) = 3.84, P < 0.05\}$ , revealed that US mothers rated their own actual didactic behaviours as most in agreement with their ideals, and that French mothers rated their husbands' actual behaviours as most in agreement with French mothers' idealisations of them (see Fig. 3B).

*Limit Setting.* Univariate analysis yielded a significant parent  $\times$  country interaction  $\{F(2,99) = 10.95, P < 0.001$  (adjusted  $df$  by Huynh–Feldt epsilon)}. Examination of simple effects for the main effect for parent  $\{F(1,99) = 8.70, P < 0.005$  (adjusted  $df$  by Huynh–Feldt epsilon)}, revealed that French mothers' perceptions of their husbands' behaviour reflect the greatest discrepancy between actual and ideal levels of limit setting (see Fig. 3C). *Post-hoc* examination of the interaction effect for parent across countries revealed two separate results: French mothers rated their own actual limit setting in most agreement with their ideal, but, by contrast French mothers see French fathers' actual limit setting as differing most from mothers' ideal expectations (see Fig. 3C). French mothers may discipline their children more than they think they ought to, but they perceive their husbands as doing considerably less disciplining than they think husbands should.

## DISCUSSION

This study constituted a cross-cultural investigation of mothers' ideas about their own and their husbands' actual and ideal social, didactic, and limit setting styles of parenting. We also assessed degrees of dissonance between the way mothers perceived their own and their husbands' actual behaviours and the way they ideally would like to behave, and ideally would like their husbands to behave. We sought to examine mothers' ideas believing that ideas contribute to understanding parenting and mediate child development.

The present study contributes to cross-cultural research on parenting in documenting that cultural background is associated with mothers' perceptions and expectations of their own and their husbands' child rearing. We found both similarities as well as systematic differences across countries.

### Cultural Similarities in Parenting Ideas

In general, mothers idealise their role similarly across Western cultures, and they perceive that they are actually more sensitive to and stimulating of their children than are their husbands. Argentine, French, and US mothers hold

similar expectations with respect to their ideal social and didactic interactions with their children, and both French and US mothers have higher expectations for themselves than for their husbands in these domains. With respect to limit setting, in these three countries mothers perceive similarities in their own and their husbands' behaviours. This finding is consistent with previous research in the United States that showed little difference between mothers' and fathers' limit setting strategies (e.g. Bently & Fox, 1991). Also, as expected, mothers perceive the way their husbands actually relate to children in terms of sensitivity and stimulation as about the same in different countries in spite of other cultural differences (see later), and disparities among mothers in these countries in expectations for fathers.

Common patterns in mothers' perceptions of parenting could reflect an inherent truism of caregiving in intact nuclear families or among citizens of industrialised and developed societies, an historical convergence in parenting, or the increasing prevalence of homogeneous child-rearing ideas that result from migration or dissemination via mass media (see Bornstein, 1994; Papoušek & Papoušek, 1995; Ryback, Sanders, Lorentz, & Koestenblatt, 1980).

### Cultural Differences in Parenting Ideas

Many culture-specific patterns in maternal ideas also emerged. This is not surprising because child-rearing beliefs and behaviours can be expected to be adapted to each society's setting and needs (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1989; Lerner, 1989; Valsiner, 1987). Specifically, some variation in ideas about different parenting domains coincided with acknowledged cultural beliefs and values. Others did not.

*Social.* Observational studies comparing mothers' behavioural interactions with their children have shown that US mothers tend to engage their infants in social interactions more than French mothers (Bornstein, 1994; Bornstein, Tamis-LeMonda, Pêcheux, & Rahn, 1991). In accordance with observed behaviour, US mothers rated themselves as more sensitive and affectionate than French and Argentine mothers rated themselves. Also, US mothers rated their actual behaviour as closer to their ideal behaviour than Argentine mothers in how sensitive and affectionate they are with their children. What French mothers consider to be ideal social behaviour for their husbands is less than what Argentine and US mothers consider ideal. French mothers consider their husbands' social parenting to be closer to ideal than is their own, whereas the opposite was true in Argentina and the United States. In French culture, children are usually seen more as mothers' responsibility, and fulfilling children's needs for affection is not a father's prime responsibility (Sabatier, 1994; Zeldin, 1983).

In Argentina and the United States, shared nurturing appears to be closer to the expected norm.

*Didactic.* Observational studies comparing mothers' interactions with their infants in the United States versus other countries indicate that American mothers stimulate their infants to engage the environment more than do French mothers (Bornstein, 1994; Bornstein et al., 1991). In the same vein, American mothers emphasise information components in speech when talking to infants more than do French or Argentine mothers (Bornstein et al., 1992a). Here, US mothers rated themselves as (marginally but significantly) more didactic, and they considered the way they stimulate their children as closer to their ideal than mothers in France or Argentina. Related research shows that US mothers tend, generally, to be optimistic and positive when evaluating their parenting behaviours as well as their children's academic performance (Stevenson & Lee, 1990). In Argentina and the United States, mothers reported that the cognitive stimulation they provide for their children is closer to what they consider ideal than that provided by their husbands; French mothers consider the cognitive stimulation their husbands provide closer to their ideal than Argentine and US mothers. Again, French mothers might not normally expect their husbands to involve themselves in teaching children, especially during the first years of life (Aubry, 1956; Pêcheux & Labrell, 1994; Zeldin, 1983).

*Limit Setting.* In Argentina, relationships often have an authoritarian cast, and parents at home, teachers at school, and supervisors at work frequently appeal to autocratic and arbitrary modes in the context of interpersonal situations (Aguinis, 1988; Fillol, 1961; Pascual, 1991). Setting limits on children has a negative connotation, however, among the educated middle class, where parents tend to be permissive and "afraid" to restrict their children's freedom (Barylko, 1993). In French culture, parents tend to agree that limit setting is requisite to resolving problematic situations, and authoritarianism is a major complaint of children about family and school life (Zeldin, 1983). In a study comparing two other Francophone groups—French and Québécoise—French mothers were observed to be generally authoritarian and reluctant to use reason and persuasion as ways to communicate with children about how to behave (Sabatier, 1994). Contrary to expectations that Argentine and French mothers would emphasise limit setting, US mothers rated the importance of rules and respect for authority higher than Argentine and French mothers did. Also, US mothers reported that they would ideally discipline their children more; no differences were found in mothers' ratings of their husbands' ideal limit setting. These findings may, of course, differ from actual levels of limit setting parents impose on their children; observational data are needed to clarify this issue.

Perhaps these data reflect how rules and authority are differentially valued in each culture.

French mothers reported their own involvement in limit setting as closer to their ideal than their husbands' involvement in limit setting. Also, French mothers rated their actual behaviour as closer to their ideal than did Argentine and US mothers, but they indicated that their husbands' actual involvement in limit setting was further from their ideal than Argentine and US mothers rated their husbands. Perhaps in French culture, limit setting is an activity mothers want reserved for fathers especially after the child's first year (Aubry, 1956; Sabatier, 1994; Zeldin, 1983).

Before reaching a conclusion, it should be recalled that all these findings are based on self-reports of mothers of their own and their husbands' actual and ideal behaviours. It is not straightforward that judgements of oneself and another, whether about actual or idealised behaviours, involve the same ratiocination. Not all domains of parenting were assessed; respondents were mothers of children of a specific age; and participating families came from delimited samples in countries known for pluralistic populations. The findings might therefore apply uniquely to the parenting domains we evaluated; studies of mothers with children of different ages might yield different patterns of results; and variation in ideas could be expected among subcultural groups in any country. These factors limit the generalisability of the results by parenting domain, setting, and population. This said, the data from this study did not show significant contributions of sociodemographic factors or social desirability to mothers' ratings; rather, parent identity and culture proved most important. Our samples were each equivalently distributed in terms of socioeconomic status and educational level, and these as well as other restrictions (e.g. parity, ecology, and so forth) actually aid the cross-cultural comparisons undertaken because of the similarity of the samples on these variables. Several additional points lend credence to the psychological reality of the findings. For example, items in the PSQ were translated and backtranslated by native speakers; ideal ratings virtually always outstripped actual ratings; and the results have demonstrable validity in that, for instance, stimulation, which was rated high by US mothers, accords with extant comparative behavioural data on parenting activities (Bornstein, 1994).

## CONCLUSIONS

The home environment is traditionally thought by social theorists to reflect the larger culture in terms of values, beliefs, and customs (e.g. Benedict, 1938; Mead, 1935). It is reasonable to assume that components of culture manifest themselves in parental ideas about child rearing. Parents' ideas are one factor thought to mediate parenting behaviour and adjustment and to

exert both direct and indirect effects on children's development. We found universals as well as culture-specific patterns in maternal reports of their own and their husbands' actual and ideal behaviours in diverse domains of parenting. Some central tasks that face multicultural research in the future will be to document behavioural variation and mutual influences between children and their parents in relation to these parental ideas, to examine how and why parents in different societies possess similar and different ideas, and to explicate more precisely the processes by which parents in different societies utilise ideas about parenting to inculcate their respective cultural agenda.

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