

# CHILDREN AND PARENTS

*Attributions, Attitudes and Agency*

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Doctoral Dissertation in Psychology  
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University of Gothenburg  
September 4, 2015

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Cover layout: Johan Gunnarsson, [www.jgunnarsson.se](http://www.jgunnarsson.se)

Printing: Ineko, Gothenburg, Sweden, 2015

ISBN 978-91-628-9495-5 (PDF)

ISBN 978-91-628-9496-2 (Print)

ISSN 1101-718X Avhandling/Göteborgs universitet, Psykologiska inst.

ISRN GU/PSYK/AVH--319—SE

ABSTRACT

Gurdal, Sevtap (2015). *Children and parents- attributions, attitudes, and agency*. Department of Psychology, University of Gothenburg, Sweden.

Children and parents are both part of children's development and research on children and on parenting are both areas that, in some way, have changed in recent decades. These changes are related to the new way of seeing children and that children are no longer seen as 'becomings' or adults in the making; rather, children are instead regarded – and seen – as more active in their development and as social agents. With a new way of viewing children and childhood there is also a new way of explaining or understanding parenthood. The general aim of this thesis is to learn more about how parents think about their parenting and how this can be related to children's agency. In addition, children's own beliefs about their agency are studied. The aim of **Study I** was to investigate mothers' and fathers' (77 participants from each group) attributions and attitudes in Sweden. The results revealed that Swedish parents are more polarized in their attitudes than in their attributions. Regarding attitudes, mothers and fathers reported more progressive than authoritarian attitudes. Fathers reported higher adult-controlled failure and child-controlled failure attributions than mothers. In **Study II** the aim was to assess whether mothers' and fathers' self-reports of acceptance-rejection, warmth, and hostility/rejection/neglect of their children differ in the nine countries. A total of 1996 parents (998 mothers and 998 fathers) participated in the study. Mothers and fathers reported high acceptance and warmth and low rejection and hostility/rejection/neglect (HRN) of their children in all nine countries. Despite the high levels of acceptance and low levels of rejection across all countries, some systematic differences between countries emerged. In **Study III** Swedish mothers' and fathers' warmth towards their children was examined in relation to their children's agency. It also studied the longitudinal relation between agency and children's externalizing, internalizing, and school achievement. Swedish children's parents ( $N = 93$ ) were interviewed at three time points (when children were 8, 9, and 10 years old) about their warmth towards their children, children's agency, children's externalizing and internalizing behaviors and school achievement. Results from this study indicate that Swedish parents' warmth is directly related to children's subsequent perceptions of their agency, which in turn are related to subsequently lower child externalizing and internalizing problems and higher academic achievement. Personal agency is studied in **Study IV** and the aim of this study was to examine how 10-year-old children perceive their agency in three different contexts, family, school and peer-situations. Interviews were conducted with 103 ten-year-old Swedish children. Vignettes concerning three different situations were presented to the children and their answers were written down for subsequent thematic analysis. The results showed that children perceive their agency differently depending upon which context they find themselves in. The difference is not in how they think adults or peers would react to their agency, but in how they themselves would act if their agency was suppressed. It is mainly with other children that they would show assertiveness and try to find a solution together, while they would be more emotional and powerless with adults.

In summary, parents in the studies report higher similarity about parenting in some cases, for example concerning acceptance and warmth and hostility/rejection/neglect, but lower in others, such as the Swedish parents' reports about attributions. It is also revealed that parents' warmth is related to children's agency, and that children's perceptions of their agency depend on whether they interact with adults or other children. A possible contribution of this thesis is to generate additional knowledge about parental cognitions and the implications that parenting can have on child agency, but also the shedding of light on the ways in which, depending on the context, children's beliefs of their agency differ.

*Key words:* Parenting Attributions, Parenting Attitudes, Parenting Behavior, Personal Agency, Child Agency, Child Adjustment, School Achievement

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ISBN 978-91-628-9495-5 (PDF)

ISSN 1101-718X

ISRN GU/PSYK/AVH--319—SE

ISBN 978-91-628-9496-2 (Print)

## LIST OF PUBLICATIOIOS

The thesis is based on a summary of the following papers, referred to in the text by their Roman numerals.

- I Sorbring, E. & Gurdal, S. (2011). Attributions and Attitudes of Mothers and Fathers in Sweden. *Parenting: Science and Practice*, 11, 1-13.
- II Putnick, D. L., Bornstein, M. H., Lansford, J. E., Chang, L., Deater-Deckard, K., Di Guenta, L., Gurdal, S., Dodge, K. A., Malone, P. S., Oburu, P. O., Pastorelli, C., Skinner, A. T., Sorbring, E., Tapanya, S., Uribe T., Liliana M., Al-Hassan, S. M., Bacchini, D. and Bombi, A. S. (2011). Agreement in Mother and Father Acceptance-Rejection; Warmth, and Hostility/Rejection/Neglect of Children Across Nine Countries. *Cross-Cultural Research*. 46 (3) 191-223.
- III Gurdal, S., Lansford, J. & Sorbring, E. (submitted). *Parental perceptions of children's agency: Parental warmth, school achievement and adjustment.*
- IV Gurdal, S. & Sorbring, E. (submitted). *Swedish children's beliefs about agency in family, school and peer situations.*

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Many people have in different ways been involved in this thesis. I will start with a big ‘thank you’ to all the participants who have shared their thoughts and time with me during the interviews. Although it was seven years since I met the children for the first time, I still refer to them as ‘my children’; I will always remember your patience and interest.

Other important people are, of course, my supervisors, Emma Sorbring and Philip Hwang. Emma, thank you for believing in me and giving me the opportunity to be part of the inspiring work taking place in the Parenting Across Cultures project. I also appreciate the guidance and support that you have given me in my work. The relationship between a student and the supervisor is a special one, and I will not only remember our work together, but also our shopping and sharing of book tips. And Philip, thank you for your great help in helping me find my way in the academic world, and the advice and guidance you gave when I needed it.

To my colleagues and friends at University West, thank you all for your support. Special thanks go to Jonas Hallberg, Margareta Bohlin, Linda Anneheden, Sabina Kapetanovic, Marie Hjalmarsson and Charlotta Isaksson. You have been there for me listening, supporting and cheering me on. Thanks for all the laughs and for your friendship. And to my two colleagues with language skills, Alastair Henry and Signild Risenfors, thank you not only for reviewing the manuscript and suggesting improvements, but also for being inspiring friends. A special ‘thank you’ too to Gunilla Andersson and Ann Backlund, both of whom have given me valuable help with all the practical routines in my PhD studies.

Last but not least, I also want to thank the most important people in my life. My parents who have believed in me since I started school many years ago. You have always helped out when I need you, ‘sizi seviyorum’! And my sister, Sevim, who always listens and gives me advice in difficult situations – and not always the advice I want – and that is why I love you. And finally, from the bottom of my heart, to Björn, Caspian and Dante, thank you for being there for me no matter what. You are the best! Love you all to the moon and back!

Sevtap Gurdal

Trollhättan, 2015

## SVENSK SAMMANFATTNING

Forskning om barn och om föräldraskap är två områden som har ändrat fokus de senaste decennierna. Från att ha haft ett vuxenperspektiv har forskningen alltmer kommit att intressera sig för barns tankar (James, 2009). Denna förändring, som kom under 70-talet, har en del kallat för ett paradigmskifte, då man började prata om barn i helt andra termer än tidigare. Barn var inte längre så kallade mini-vuxna eller åskådare i sin egen utveckling utan delaktiga eller sociala agenter (Skivenes & Stranbu, 2006). Agens, eller *personal agency*, kan definieras som en individs medvetenhet och intention i handlandet för att nå ett visst resultat eller gensvar (Bandura, 2001). Det handlar också om att individen känner sig delaktig i sin egen utveckling, genom att känna att man kan påverka händelser i en önskad riktning så ger det också personen en motivation att ta större ansvar för sitt liv och att också sätta upp mål (Ford, 1992). Genom att tillskriva barnet ett agentskap så har forskningen om bland annat föräldraskap förändrats. Den forskning som har gjorts inom föräldraskap och barns agens visar till exempel att både barn och föräldrar tar makten i familjesituationer och där makten växlar mellan barnet och föräldern. Växlingen mellan vem som tar makten påverkar föräldraskapet, men också hur barn väljer att agera (Kuczynski & De Mol, 2015; Sorbing, 2005). Huruvida barnet tillskrivs agens eller inte har olika förklaringar där bland annat kulturella kontexten är en viktig del. Kultur är således en av faktorerna som påverkar hur föräldrar uppfostrar och ser på sina barn. Det har dock visat sig att de undersökningar som görs inom psykologi främst kommer från västvärlden. Arnetts (2008) forskningsöversikt visar att under 2003-2007 var 95 % av deltagarna i undersökningarna från västvärlden och mer än hälften av dessa var från USA. Att utifrån dessa resultat generalisera till världens befolkning kan ge en felaktig bild av uppfostran. Det är därför angeläget att forskning om föräldraskap utförs i flera kulturella kontexter. I ett försök att bredda kunskapen om föräldraskap i olika länder startade projektet *Parenting Across Cultures* år 2008. Projektet innefattar nio länder världen över (Colombia, Filippinerna, Italien, Jordanien, Kenya, Kina, Sverige, Thailand och USA) och har som övergripande syfte att undersöka föräldraskap

i olika länder. Studierna i denna avhandling bygger på intervjuer från detta projekt, Studie II innefattar alla länderna medan de andra tre studierna har de svenska familjerna i fokus.

Eftersom föräldraskapet påverkas av många olika faktorer är det svårt att hävda att ett visst handlingsmönster hos föräldrarna leder till en specifik egenskap eller sätt att vara hos barnet. Däremot visar studier att det finns faktorer som samvarierar, som personlighet hos både barn och förälder, sociala normer och strukturer och de kognitioner som föräldrar och barn har. Denna avhandling har fokus på föräldrars kognitioner, hur dessa kan påverka barns agency och barns egen perception av sin agency. Föräldrars kognitioner innefattar till exempel föräldrars attributioner, föräldrars attityder samt hur accepterande eller avvisande föräldrar är i sin uppfostran.

I **Studie I** har syftet varit att undersöka svenska mammors och pappors attributioner och attityder i förhållande till sina åttaåringar. Sjuttiosju föräldrapar har svarat på frågor om sina attributioner och attityder. Föräldrars attributioner är de omdömen som de gör i interaktionen med barn och när de tolkar och förklarar barnets agerande (Miller, 1995). Attributioner kan också beskrivas som ett tolkningsfilter som föräldern ser genom då den försöker förstå ett beteende hos barnet. Det innebär att föräldern inte bara agerar per automatik utan att tidigare erfarenheter bidrar till förälderns handling. Heider (1958) har fördelat attributionerna i två delar, inre attributioner (*internal attribution*) och yttre attributioner (*external attribution*). Inre attributioner syftar till exempel på att en person förklarar ett framsteg på personliga egenskaper medan yttre attributioner lägger förklaringen på omständigheter utanför personen, till exempel miljö och situation. Beroende på hur föräldern tolkar barnets handlande, det vill säga som ett led i en personlig egenskap eller yttre omständighet, kan förälderns svar på barnets handlande se olika ut. När det gäller föräldrars attityder kan de förstås bland annat utifrån hur tillåtande eller restriktiva de är mot sina barn (Grusec, 2006) eller som Bornstein med kollegor (2011) valt att benämna det, hur progressiva eller traditionella föräldrar är i sin uppfostran. Progressiva attityder innefattar att föräldrar tycker att barn ska uppmuntras att tänka självständigt och att förhållandet mellan barn och vuxen bör vara demokratiskt. En förälder med den traditionella stilen förväntar sig att barnet ska vara lydigt och lägger skulden på sig själv om barnet missköter sig.

Resultatet i Studie I visar att när mammor och pappor uttalar sig om attityder har de i högre grad angett en progressiv attityd i sin uppfostran. Det kan tolkas som om både mammor och pappor upplever förhållandet till barn som jämlikt och uppmuntrar barn att tänka självständigt.

När det gäller svenska föräldrars attributioner visar resultaten att både mammor och pappor i ungefär samma utsträckning anser att det är externa faktorer som är en förklaring till en lyckad situation med barn. Däremot relateras pappornas svar till inre attributioner i högre grad än mammorna när det gäller förklaring till en misslyckad situation med barnet. Det vill säga att misslyckandet beror på föräldern eller barnet självt och inte på yttre kontext.

Syftet med **Studie II** var att undersöka mammors och pappors rapportering om värme, fientlighet/avvisande/försummelse (acceptance-rejection), till sitt barn. De 1996 deltagarna var från nio olika länder (lika många mammor som pappor). I denna studie används "acceptance-rejection-teorin" som en beskrivning till hur föräldraskap kan se ut. Föräldraacceptans karaktäriseras av att föräldern är varm, trygg, bryr sig om och stödjer barnet, medan en avvisande förälder är frånvarande, kall, fientlig och aggressiv (Rohner, Khaleque & Cournoyer, 2003). Teorin som bygger på detta synsätt benämns PARTheory och utvecklades av Rohner under 1970-talet. Flera studier om föräldraskap har utgått ifrån teorin. Ett av målen med att använda PARTheory i denna studie har varit att fastställa hur föräldrar beskriver sitt sätt att vara gentemot sitt barn och om detta är beroende av kultur eller inte.

Resultaten i alla medverkande länderna visade att både mammor och pappor hade en hög acceptans och värme och låg fientlighet/avvisande/försummelse till sina barn. Skillnaderna mellan mammor och pappor inom landet, för de nio länderna, var inte signifikanta förutom att svenska mödrar rapporterade lägre fientlighet/avvisande/försummelse till sina barn än vad papporna gjorde. Barnets kön visade sig inte ha någon större betydelse för föräldrarnas rapportering utom för italienska föräldrars och thailändska föräldrars svar. Italienska pappor såg sig som mindre "varma" än mammorna, och pojkpapporna i Thailand rapporterade mindre värme än flickpappor och mammor överlag i landet.

Länderna jämfördes inte sinsemellan utan ett generellt medelvärde skapades för alla nio länderna, vilket sedan användes som referens att jämföra varje land mot. Resultaten visade bland annat att mammor och pappor i Jordanien, Kenya och Kina rapporterade lägre acceptans till barn i jämförelse med det generella medelvärdet, medan Colombia, Italien, Sverige och USA hade högre acceptans än medelvärdet. Länderna med högre acceptans visade också högre rapporterad värme än medelvärdet samt lägre rapporterad fientlighet/avvisande/försummelse.

**Studie III** var en longitudinell studie där två frågor ställdes. Första frågan undersökte om föräldrars acceptans och värme kunde förutsäga barns agens. Tidigare studier har visat att föräldrars värme leder till att ungdomar upplever mer agens, har mer social kompetens (Kim,



Han, & McCubbin, 2007), och mer självkänsla (Haque, 1988; Litovsky & Dusek, 1985). Med dessa studier som utgångspunkt ville vi undersöka om utfallet blev detsamma för yngre barn. Andra frågan som undersöktes var om barns agens kunde förutsäga deras utåtagerande eller inåtvända beteende och även deras skolresultat. I undersökningen deltog 93 familjer. Första året, då barnen var åtta år, svarade föräldrarna på frågor om bland annat föräldrars värme/acceptans och kall/avvisande utifrån skalan Parental Acceptance-Rejection/Control Questionnaire; PARQ/Control-SF (Rohner, 2005). Andra året svarade föräldrarna på frågor om barnets agens uppdelad på fyra områden; Självkänsla (self-esteem), mening i livet (purpose of life), känsla av kontroll (internal locus of control) och självkompetens (self-efficacy). Sista och tredje året, då barnen var tio år, ställdes frågor om barnet och frågor om skolprestationer.

Resultaten visade att föräldrars rapporterade värme från år 1 korrelerade med barns agens år 2, vilket i sin tur korrelerade med utåtagerande och inåtvänt beteende samt skolprestationer i år 3. Det fanns däremot ingen korrelation direkt mellan föräldrars värme och utåtagerande eller inåtvänt beteende samt skolprestationer.

Den sista undersökningen, **Studie IV**, har haft som mål att undersöka barns antagande om sin agens i relation till vuxna och barn. Tre olika kontexter, familj, skola och kompisar, har undersökts via vinjetter. 103 barn i tioårsåldern fick svara på frågor kopplade till vardera kontext. Resultaten visar att barnen tror att de skulle ha handlingsutrymme eller agens i alla tre kontexterna, men att det skulle komma till uttryck på olika sätt beroende på om de interagerar med föräldrar, lärare eller kompisar. Barnen tror att i kontexten med vuxna, både förälder och lärare, så finns det ett större motstånd om barnet visar agens, till exempel att de till viss del ignoreras. Kontexten med kompisar anses vara mer demokratisk. Det finns dock en del barn som uttrycker hur de tror sig att de skulle ta ansvar över en problematisk situation och försöka lösa den även om det är i interaktionen med en vuxen, då främst med en förälder och delvis med kompisar.

Förklaringar till att barns upplevda agens varierar kan delvis bero på maktförhållanden till den de interagerar med. Ojämlighet i upplevd makt finns oftast mellan vuxna och barn, och visar sig bland annat i att barn ibland uttrycker rädsla för att göra något annat än vad de blir tillsagda av en vuxen. Trots detta beskrivs Sverige ofta som ett land där barns rättigheter och åsikter tas i beaktande. Kanske kan det vara så att oavsett de lagar och förordningar som skrivits till barns fördel och för att skydda barn inte riktigt hunnit genomsyra de normer och värderingar som finns kring hur vuxna i verkligheten kan bete sig mot barn. Det kan också vara så att det inte är

möjligt att ett helt jämlikt förhållande mellan barn och vuxen inte går att få. Den vuxne är trots allt den som bär ansvaret för att ett barn ska få en trygg uppväxt, och i och med att ansvaret ligger på den vuxne så kanske inte barnet alltid upplever en total jämlikhet i förhållandet.

Sammanfattningsvis visar studierna att det finns både likheter och skillnader i hur mammor och pappor rapporterar och förklarar sitt föräldraskap i Sverige. En likhet är till exempel att både mammor och pappor rapporterar progressiva attityder. Dessa resultat överensstämmer med tidigare studier då svenska föräldrar visar att man vill att barn ska uppmuntras till egna åsikter och vara med och påverka (Carlson & Earls, 2001). Den progressiva attityden är förknippad med en tro på barnet som aktör, vilket studerades i de två sista studierna. Resultaten visar på att föräldraskapet påverkar barnets agens och att barns tro på sin egen agens påverkas av vilken kontext de befinner sig i. Ingen av studierna visade några skillnader i hur föräldrar rapporterat sitt föräldraskap vad gäller om de har döttrar eller söner. Det fanns inte heller några könsskillnader i barnens egna upplevda agency. En anledning till resultatet kan vara att Sverige är ett land som uppmärksammar jämställdhet, till exempel genom att uppmuntra till att både mammor och pappor tar föräldraledighet.

Avhandlingen bidrar till forskning inom föräldraskap genom att ge mer kunskap om föräldrars tankar om sitt föräldraskap och hur detta kan påverka barns agens, vilket i sin tur påverkar barnens välmående och skolprestationer. För framtida forskning kan det därför vara intressant att undersöka mer om barns upplevda agens, både utifrån ett föräldraperspektiv och utifrån hur barn berättar om sitt aktörskap. Ett resultat visar trots allt att barn inte upplever agens i den grad som vi vuxna kanske tror. Det vill säga det finns en större maktobalans mellan barn och vuxna än mellan barn sinsemellan.

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## INTRODUCTION

Research on children and on parenting are both areas that, in some way, have changed in recent decades. In earlier research children's opinions were not the primary focus of interest; instead this area of research was about explaining how childhood could be related to adulthood (James, 2009). There was a gradual shift in the 1970s when a new paradigm was set for children and childhood. Children were no longer seen as a project for parents or as adults in the making; rather, children became instead regarded – and seen – as more active in their development and as social agents (James, 2009). That is to say, they were active participants in their lives, and not just a by-standing audience (Skivenes and Stranbu, 2006). With a new way of viewing children and childhood there is also a new way of explaining or understanding parenthood. When the shift came about, and children began to be seen as social actors, researchers become more interested in children's perceptions; that is the children were seen as individuals who could make a difference (Mayall, 2002) and, for example, being able to have an impact on parenting. Being a parent involves different aspects. One central finding in parenting research is the cognitions that parents have concerning child development (Goodnow, 1992; Goodnow & Collins, 1990) and the influences these have on child outcomes (Grusec, Rudy & Martini, 1997; Bornstein & Lansford, 2009). Parents' cognitions, in turn, have an impact on parenting behaviors, and such behaviors are culturally influenced (McGillicuddy-DeLisi, 1992). In addition to research on the unidirectional perspective of describing how parenting influences child outcomes, there are also studies on the bidirectional approach. The bidirectional approach takes both parents and children's behaviour to explain the interaction between them and involves individual development, cognitions, cultural norms and power (Kuczynski and DeMol, 2015).

Research on children's agency and on parenting are both areas that have been investigated from different perspectives. In this thesis there are three sections dealing with various aspects of previous research in this area. The first is about childhood, a child perspective and a number of specific factors and characteristics related to being a child in Sweden. Because Sweden is known for being a country that encourages children's participation, the second section provides an understanding of the position of children in Swedish society by introducing the concept of personal agency. The third and final section is about parenting and factors that can have implications on how to be a parent; that is parental attributions, attitudes, acceptance-rejection and the impact on parenting from a cultural perspective. It also presents parenting as a predictor for child-related outcomes. Following this overview, there is a presentation of the aims of the thesis followed by a short summary of each of the four studies. Finally, the thesis ends with a general discussion, a discussion of various methodological and ethical issues relating to the topic of the thesis, and, at the end, some concluding remarks. All the four studies are to be found in the Appendices. A possible contribution of this thesis is to generate additional knowledge about parental cognitions and the implications that parenting can have on child agency, but also the shedding of light on the ways in which, depending on the context, children differently perceive their agency.

## CHILDHOOD

Today, when we talk about childhood in everyday life, we often mean the group of people in our society under the age of 18 (UNICEF, “Convention on the Rights of the Child,” 2008). Childhood can also be divided into early childhood, middle childhood and adolescence. Ariés (1982) and Cunningham (2006) have both written about childhood and its history. History reveals that children have been viewed in several different aspects. For example, while on the one hand children have been seen as ‘mini-adults’ and something innocent to protect, on the other they have been viewed as a workforce to be put to labor in the factories of the industrialized world. Talking about childhood also involves defining children as a collective group (James & James, 2004). Further, childhood is not seldom something that is described in contrast to being in adulthood (Saar, Hägglund & Löfdahl, 2009), and, consequently, being seen as ‘others’ by the adult world. Hence, children become something other than adults. Fundamentally, in this view, children are ascribed other characteristics, needs, or rights than adults. Children tend to become something adults construct from an adult perspective. This is clearly evidenced in the sense that research is generally made *about* children and not *with* children (Näsman, 2012). That is, while researchers have been interested in children’s lives, they have tended to ask parents about it, rather than the child itself.

In recent decades, childhood has been described as a social and cultural construction (Högberg, 2010), although not only constructed by adults or parents, but also children themselves. Generally, children’s voices and perceptions have been of interest since the late 1970s and in research the view of the child has changed from a passive onlooker to an active social agent (James & James, 2004). This is influenced by the new sociology of childhood which is characterized by the perspective of children as social agents with their own culture. This is a view that, in turn, has implications for adult society in the sense that, while for children

childhood is only a temporary stage in life, this is not so for society (Högberg, 2010). That is, children are members of 'childhood' as long as they are children, but then enter adulthood. Thus 'childhood' is something left and entered by children. In addition, children are viewed as 'human beings' and not only 'human becomings' or 'future adults' (ibid). Similarly, Clark and Kehily (2013) explain that childhood is "an active rather than passive state" (p 64). That children in many ways have equal rights as adults is a fundamental cornerstone of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC, 1989), where children are given a voice and legal rights. With these new perspectives on children and childhood, children's experiences in the adult world become important. Consequently, in research, children's perspectives and children's participation need to be taken into account.

### **Child perspectives and children's participation**

According to Sommer (2008) a child perspective is more in focus now than ever before and forms one of the basic ideas underpinning children's agency. Child agency requires both the adoption of a child perspective and, even more importantly, a perspective where the child is regarded as a participant. The nature of children's agency and ways in which the child can be conceived of as agentic are discussed further below.

A child perspective, child participation and children's rights, have been implemented in politics and research since 1990s (Skivenes & Strandbu, 2006). One important milestone was the United Nations Convention on the rights of the Child (CRC, 1989). Fifty-four articles on children's rights have been codified and ratified by 192 countries (that is all countries of the world with the exception of the United States and South Sudan). The purpose of the convention is not only to protect children, but also to give them the right to be part of their own lives, that their voices should be heard and that they should be given freedom of speech. However, there are also critiques of the CRC which make the point that it adopts an adult perspective on children, and that while the child is sometimes described as an independent person with the same rights as adults, children are also defined as dependent individuals who need to be protected by adults (Hägglund & Thelander, 2011). Nonetheless, the establishment of the United Nations Convention of the rights of the Child (CRC), as well as other national and international legislation, provides children with greater opportunities to participate in their lives, as well as establishing a wider child perspective in society as a whole.

A child perspective according to Lee (2001) and Sandin and Halldén (2003) is when we can see children as individuals that are capable of expressing their own opinions and interests.

To manage this, factors like developed language and communication skills are required (Skivenes & Strandbu, 2006), which, of course, are often related to the age of the child. Another definition of a child perspective is given by Skivenes and Strandbu (2006). They identify three different aspects of a child perspective, operating variously on structural and individual levels. The first aspect, operating on the structural level, concerns children's rights, position in society and how they are legal subjects. This aspect is related to how children should be helped to be a part of decisions and seen as persons who are competent to be participants – and not only onlookers – in their own lives (Skivenes and Stranbu, 2006). Secondly, on the individual level, children are considered as beings and not future becomings with their own interests, and that adults, for example parents and teachers, need to afford them that recognition. Finally, the third aspect, also on an individual level, acknowledges that children live in different contexts with different experiences, which results in different needs. Viewed in this way, it is important to have in mind that children's perspectives can be seen from different levels and, if we want to access their thoughts, we have to attune to *their* experiences and perceptions of things (Söderbäck et al, 2011).

Although children's own experiences and perceptions have become important in different aspects of society, there is nevertheless criticism about how children are actually listened to in real life. One main explanation is that even though nearly all countries have ratified the CRC, they do not all have the same possibilities to implement the different articles. For example, it can be more difficult to implement children's rights in nations that have political systems or laws that are not compatible with the CRC (Hägglund & Thelander, 2011). Another fact is that there are different ways of interpreting children's rights; often children's rights do not represent norms in everyday life. Rather, it is in certain places, contexts and situations – for example school – where rights can find expression (for example at school in a class council) (Hägglund & Thelander, 2011). Further, while children's rights are legally and politically in focus, when it comes to everyday practice, children's perspectives are often not taken into consideration. Professions that work with children and families may make decisions about family life without asking the children themselves. Instead, they often adopt adult perspectives and act in ways that are centered on taking responsibility for the child, but without actually asking the child or taking the child's perspective. One example, is a study of children who have been exposed to violence where, reflecting on discussions with professionals, they express that they are not generally seen as actors and that decisions are made without their input (Eriksson & Näsman, 2008). However, there are also studies that show that children themselves know



about their rights and how they are confident enough to communicate on issues of importance to themselves with others (Harcourt & Hägglund, 2013). Consequently it can become difficult both to give the child the right to participate and act when, at the same time, adults want to protect them (Eriksson & Näsman, 2008).

## **Children in Sweden**

Childhood and children are always understood in the context of the place or culture in which they are situated. The perception of childhood in Sweden has changed and children's development is no longer regarded as something that has to be formed or shaped. Instead, children are seen as autonomous individuals who, rather than direction, require support and encouragement (Carlson & Earls, 2001). Such perceptions are particularly prominent in Western countries such as Sweden where individuality is highly desired (Raeff et al, 2000). Further, it is common that parents think of their children as beings and not becomings (Halldén, 1991). For example, Swedish mothers and fathers report that the most important factor for the child is to feel secure. With a secure ground to stand on, children are seen as having a solid base from which to grow up and become good citizens. At the same time parents also point to the importance of the child's individuality and independence (Bäck-Wiklund & Bergsten, 1997). This can be exemplified in that, today, children in Western societies have increased possibilities to give their opinion and express knowledge about being a child (Matthews, 2007). Sommer (2008) talks of children in terms of 'negotiating individuals'. His argument is that, at an early stage in their lives, children are involved in family discussions and develop the capability to express opinions, provide arguments and to compromise. Such a 'democratic' approach implies not only that the child learns that rules can be changed and adapted, but also that it can gain a self confidence that enables him/her to place their own demands on adults.

Furthermore, in Sweden children are expected to be met with respect and should be taught about their rights (Harcourt & Hägglund, 2013). One common place to teach children more about their rights and how to practice them is in school. Sweden is also described as a country where children are seen as equal individuals both in the family (Carlson & Earls, 2001), and in school (Lgr 2011). Some of the UNCRC declarations can even be found in the Swedish curriculum, for example the democratic values and the requirement of putting the child's best interests first. In Sweden schools are also tasked with encouraging children to take responsibility and to be involved in decisions about their lives. They are supposed to learn more about how to become a citizen and about democratic values in the society (Harcourt & Hägglund, 2013). The majority of schools have class or student councils as part of the

institutional organization (Skolverket, 2001), where children can make their voices heard. There have however been criticisms about how such student councils work. It has been revealed that student councils function more as an area for discussion between students, since many of the questions are targeted at adults in school who are not present at such meetings (Rönnlund 2011).

When it comes to children's rights in Sweden, there are interesting age limits set in the law. For example, the first time that a child has to provide any kind of consent is at the age of twelve. For example the child can decide whether or not to agree to a change of surname, or whether he/she wishes to be adopted. At the age of 15 the child has responsibility for any criminal acts. And at the age of 18 parents are no longer responsible for a child's financial maintenance unless the child continues to study in secondary education, in which case the parents are obliged to take care of the child until the age of 21. In this context it is noteworthy to point out that children in Sweden generally believe that they are capable of being part of discussions about democracy (Harcourt & Hägglund, 2013). To be aware of one's self-capability to affect things in a desired direction is related to an individual's personal agency.

## PERSONAL AGENCY

Personal or individual agency is about doing things intentionally and in the hope of a specific outcome (Bandura, 2001). While Bandura describes the person as an agent in the sense of more or less knowing the consequences of an action, he also stresses that although the act can have consequences, it does not always have the same outcome. The main issue with perceived agency is not only to obtain the things that the individual desires, but also a sense of experiencing being a part of one's own development (ibid). When an individual thinks that she/he can affect things in a way that is desired, it generates motivation for the individual to take a larger role in her life and promotes the setting of goals (Ford, 1992).

While personal agency can be conceptualized in different ways, four general components can be identified: self-esteem, purpose in life, internal locus of control and self-efficacy. First, self-esteem can be defined as the individual's description of themselves (Lecompte, Moss, Cyr, & Pacsuzzo, 2014) and the belief of being worthy or competent. Second, purpose in life is a construct that describes individuals' goal-setting and striving to achieve their goals (Floyd, Mailick, Seltzer, Greenberg, & Song, 2013). Third, internal locus of control refers to individual's belief that she/he can control outcomes, and can be contrasted with an external locus of control, which is the belief that things happen because of external factors, such as luck (April, Dharani, & Peters, 2012). Finally, self-efficacy involves individuals' belief in their capacity to achieve the goals they set for themselves (Bandura, 1991).

### **Personal agency and children**

Personal agency in relation to children has been described as a conglomerate of cognition, actions and perception (Kuczynski et al, 1999). The cognitive and active part of agency are described as social constructions where the child is active in creating meaning in and for its life. That is, children are not only recipients, but also creators and 'agents'. The perception of agency

is related to the child as having an idea about the efficacy of their actions. This means that previous experiences that the child has had affect the way it chooses to act in a new situation (Kuczynski & DeMol, 2015). For example, children learn from outcomes in the past and make use of these experiences when acting in the future. One example of this is that, when children play, they reproduce things they have experienced with their parents (Corsaro, 2005). Often these are gender stereotypes and can be seen when children play make-believe games about families; when a child, for example, plays the role of a mother she/he tends to do things that they have seen the mother do, for example doing the dishes or cooking.

Over the years there have been many studies on personal agency. Studies with adolescents have, for example, shown that individuals who describe themselves as more agentic are also less likely to experience problems in school, and experience a more stable family setting (Vallacher & Wegner, 1989). Likewise, studies of personal agency have shown how agency seems to be positively linked to school achievement. For example, among adolescents the belief of having the capacity to perform well in school is a good predictor of later school achievement (Juang & Silbereisen, 2002; Little, Oettingen, Stetsenko, & Balteset, 1995). Further, elementary school children with strong beliefs in their agency tend to have lower levels of anxiety and more positive attitudes and self-esteem (Grob, Little, Wanner, Wearing, & EURONET, 1996; Lopez & Little, 1996).

Studies made with younger children have also investigated agency and power in relation to their caregivers (Goh & Kuczynski, 2009). In Goh and Kuczynski's study of children in China, results show that children without siblings are more agentic, and that there are clear parallels with Western children. The results are good examples of how agency is related to cultural norms. In China there have been changes in the family context, in the context of the state's 'one child' policy, and this in turn has had implications for how parents raise their children and how children express their agency. In this study it was also shown that fathers no longer only see themselves as role models, but also wanted their children's opinion in everyday situations, such an approach being in line with the new sociology of childhood where children are regarded as beings and not becomings (Matthews, 2007).

In a study carried out in a Swedish context, the agency of preschool children was studied. The results revealed that Swedish preschool children demonstrate strategies that are both deliberate and agentic (Markström & Halldén, 2008). For example, the children in the study used a variety of strategies to try to influence teachers using a number of different

approaches such as negotiating and trying to take control over different situations. They also sometimes chose to be silent and avoidant if they did not agree with their teachers. A similar result was found when Sorbring (2005) interviewed children about conflict situations with parents. In this study children actively were found to use three strategies: confronting the parent, being goal-oriented, or choosing not to confront the parent. All three strategies are in some way deliberate and reveal how the child chooses to act in order to obtain a certain reaction or outcome.

The degree to which agency is developed and exercised can have different explanations. Kuczynski and DeMol (2015) identify three reasons that can be taken into account. The first concerns individual development; the maturity of the child can impact on how it can intentionally influence situations or individuals. In order to convince someone about something, communicative skills are required, which in turn require cognitive skills. Thus, as a child develops cognitively, it becomes better at argumentation and is able to think and reason more strategically. The second reason is the parent-child relationship; depending on the power balance in the relationship, the child learns to identify opportunities for agency. A parent that allows the child to be part of discussions or decisions also encourages the child to be more agentic generally. The third reason concerns cultural norms and what is right or wrong, legitimate or illegitimate, according to the cultural norms about autonomy and independency in the parent-child relation. The study from China previously referred to provides a good example of this. If the cultural norms enable the child to be agentic, the child also develops in this direction.

### **Child agency and parenting**

Previous research has shown that components of personal agency can be predicted by several factors, including parenting. For example, parental affection is positively related to adolescents' sense of agency (Hoeltje et al., 1996; Juang & Silbereisen, 2002). Likewise, for adolescents, parental rejection is related to reduced self-esteem (Ansari & Qureshi, 2013). Adolescents' involvement in family communication appears, in particular, to increase their sense of personal agency (Jutengren, 2004). Interestingly, family socioeconomic status is unrelated to agency; agency beliefs can be high whether the family is a low-income or high-income family (Côté, 1997).

Family members have, of course, a long history of relations together, and experiences growing up in the family naturally have effects on how children choose to act and interact with their parents as a means of gaining a particular outcome. Parents too, of course, also have

experiences with their children that impact not only on their behaviour, but also the perception of the child either as passive or as an active agent. A child as an active agent who exerts an impact on her/his parents – and vice versa – has been defined by Kuczynski and his colleagues as bidirectional (Kuczynski et al. 1997; Kuczynski et al. 1999; Kuczynski & DeMol, 2015). That is, children are seen as autonomous persons, just like adults (Harach & Kuczynski, 2005). Studies that indicate this, are for example, studies of families in a Swedish context which show how parents want to achieve a democratic relationship with their children. Indeed, parents generally expect the child not only to obey them, but also to participate actively in the family life (Persson, 1994). Similar results were revealed in another study from Sweden where parents did not have an obvious authority in their parenting. Instead, parents' ideal pictures of a family context was one where parents and children jointly made decisions in consultation with each other (Björnberg 1992). More recent research shows that Swedish adolescents themselves describe similarly patterns in their experiences of parenting, where 72 % described their families as democratic, and that, when conflicts with parents arose, it was possible to exert an influence (Persson, Stattin & Kerr, 2004).

The close relationship that children and their parents usually have also has implications in terms of power in the relationship. If the child perceives a high degree of agency it might also attempt to be part of decision-making processes or, when situations demand, be able to refuse to comply with a parent's demand and to choose instead to initiate a conflict. In addition to this, if children have made some kind of transgression, they may prefer that their parents talk with them, explaining why what they did was wrong, and how to do things properly next time, in a calm and reasoned manner (Sorbring, 2005).

Beliefs that children have about their agency appear to be affected by parenting. For example, while parental warmth has a positive effect on adolescents' agency beliefs, parental rejection has the opposite effect, that is, it is negatively correlated with agency beliefs (Hoeltje et al., 1996). Children with higher agency beliefs also seem to find it easier to deal with things that arise in their everyday lives.

## PARENTING

Irrespective of the cultural context, one of the main goals of parenting is that the child should become an autonomous individual able to function in the culture in which it lives (Maccoby, 2000). Hastings and Grusec (1998) define parenting goals as the “outcomes that parents hope to achieve during interactions with children” (p 465). Previous research has revealed that parental goals and parenting practices are influenced by a number of factors, including, not only the personalities of the parents and the child (Belsky, 1984), but also cultural structures, such as social norms (Kagitcibasi, 1970). Hence, simple explanations for parenting practices have begun to be questioned, and in the last two decades the understanding of parenting has substantially changed (Hinde, 1995). Theories that equate a particular parenting style with particular child outcomes are no longer taken seriously and, instead, attention has focused on the complexity of parenting. Since parenting is influenced by several factors (Darling & Steinberg, 1993), it is difficult to state that one particular parenting style will result in a specific child outcome. One theory frequently criticized for offering an oversimplified explanation of parenting style and child outcomes is Baumrind’s theory. This theory includes three parenting styles; the authoritative, the authoritarian and the permissive style. The theory holds that parenting styles predict child outcomes. For example, a parent that practices an authoritarian style, who is strict in her/his child-rearing and does not have any significant dialogue with the child could result in a shy and withdrawn child (Baumrind, 1972).

Over the last couple of decades, there has been greater focus on parents’ cognitions and the behaviors that these cognitions result in (e.g., Sigel, McGillicuddy-DeLisi, & Goodnow, 1992). In particular, emphasis has been placed on the importance of cognitions and the need to discover more about why parents behave in particular ways and how parent-child interactions impact on children. Cognitions are a central part of how, later on, we react and behave and are

particularly relevant in childrearing situations. Cognitions include a number of aspects and, in parenting research, important examples include parental attributions, parental attitudes and acceptance-rejections, and culture.

### **Parental attributions and childrearing**

An attribution is a type of cognition and, in the context of parenting, is sometimes explained as an *interpretative filter* through which parents generate explanations for children's behaviors and characteristics (Miller, 1995), as well as referring to the interaction between the child and the parent (Bugental et al, 1998). As explained by Bugental and Johnston (2000), attributions are analytic cognitions centering on causality; why do things happen in a certain way and who makes them happen? Processes of interaction are thus not simply automatic but, rather, actions that are based on parents' previous experiences with their child(ren). That is, parents' explanations of the child's behavior have implications for how they respond to the child (Bugental et al, 1998). For example, if a parent explains a child's misbehavior as a response to the parent's own behavior, the situation, or something that is part of the child itself, the parenting response can differ.

In the late 1950s Heider (1958) developed a theory of attributions, stating that attributions can be made in two different ways; internal attributions and external attributions. While an internal attribution refers to the person herself, and explains why a person behaves in a certain way depending on character or personality, an external attribution roots explanations for behavior in the situation and context surrounding the person. One example is a study performed with Korean and Scottish mothers that indicates differences in explaining an unsuccessful situation with the child. While the Korean mothers blamed themselves for their child's problem, i.e. internal attribution, the Scottish mothers tended to blame others or the social setting, i.e. external attribution (Park & Dimigen, 1997). An internal attribution could, for example, be that the mother blames herself if her child is injured in an accident or if the child does not do well in school. An external attribution has to do with others or the setting, for example it is thanks to other people that the child has developed a good personality or circumstances around the child that made him/her become aggressive. In contrast to Heider, Weiner (1985) divided attributions into three parts, 1) internal versus external, 2) stable versus unstable, and 3) controllable versus uncontrollable. With this division a parent who attributes a successful time with a child to luck would say it was due to an external attribution, which is unstable and uncontrollable. That is to say that the parent did not have so much to do with the



outcome. On the other hand, if the parent interprets the outcome in relation to her/his own efforts, it is an internal, stable and controllable attribution.

In past years, beside the parent's experiences, the importance of children's interpretations have been focused on and studied. Children's cognitions and interpretations of both the situation and the parent's behavior have proven to influence parenting (Heider, 1958 or Snarr, Smith Slep & Grande, 2009). Thus, if for example the child interprets the mother's control and demands as positive, this can affect the child positively instead of negatively (Rodrigo, Janssens & Ceballo, 1999). Nevertheless, attributions are far from the only factors influencing parent-child-interaction; parental attitudes also have a significant impact on parenting practices.

### **Parental attitudes as predictors for child outcome**

Parenting attitudes have been studied since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and in excess of 80 parent attitude questionnaires have been developed since then (Holden & Edwards, 1989). Definitions of parenting attitudes differ. For example Grusec (2006) describes parenting attitudes in terms of how permissive or restrictive parents are, while Bornstein, Putnick and Lansford (2011) talk in terms of 'progressive' as opposed to 'authoritarian' or 'traditional' attitudes towards childrearing. Characteristics for progressive attitudes are that parents believe that children should be encouraged to think independently. It is also common that the parent-child relationship is more democratic than in relationships where the parent(s) hold authoritarian/traditional parenting attitudes (Okagaki & Frensch, 1998). Parents with authoritarian/traditional attitudes expect children to be obedient and respectful (Chen et al. 2002), but hold themselves responsible when children misbehave. Studies focusing on traditional attitudes indicate a negative influence on children's behaviors in ways such as, for example, being more insensitive and offensive to friends online (Dilmac & Aydogan, 2010). On the other hand a study on the relationship between traditional attitudes and school achievement in Malaysia revealed that traditional parenting attitudes tend to indicate higher levels of school achievement, although, interestingly, this result was not invariant across different cultures (Kordi & Baharudin, 2010).

Although studies on parental attitudes have had different areas of focus, such as parental attributions, attitudes are commonly studied as predictors for different outcomes (Holden & Edwards, 1989) such as, for example, predictors of aggressive behavior (Chen et al, 2002), or predictors of the quality of the childrearing environment (Daggett et al, 2000). In this latter

study it was found that mothers with negative attitudes towards their child's behavior provided a childrearing environment of a lower quality. However, it is important not to forget that parental attitudes are only one of several parental cognitions that influence childrearing. A parental attitude questionnaire often measures factors other than just attitudes, such as for example parental practices, beliefs and values (Holden & Edwards, 1989). Results from questionnaire-based studies thus lack the precision needed to ascertain which kind of parental attitude results in a certain type of child behavioral outcome. Although research has shown that attitudes do influence the ways in which parents interact with their children, (Chen et al, 2002), parental attitudes alone are insufficient as predictors of parental behavior (Holden, 1995).

### **Parental acceptance-rejection**

Parental acceptance is characterized by the warmth, affection, comfort, concern and support that parents express towards their children, while parental rejection expresses the opposite; absence, withdrawal, coldness, hostility, aggression and neglect (Rohner, Khaleque & Cournoyer, 2003). Rohner started his work with parental acceptance-rejection theory (also called PARTheory) in the mid-1970s and since then findings of numerous of cross-cultural studies using PARTheory reveal that "parental rejection can be experienced by any combination of four principal expressions: (1) cold and unaffectionate, the opposite of being warm and affectionate, (2) hostile and aggressive, (3) indifferent and neglecting, and (4) undifferentiated rejecting. Undifferentiated rejection refers to individual's beliefs that their parents do not really care about them or love them, even though there might not be clear behavioral indicators that the parents are neglecting, unaffectionate, or aggressive toward them" (cited in Rohner & Khaleque, 2012; Rohner, Khaleque & Cournoyer, 2003 p 2).

Many studies have used PARTheory to explain parent-child relationships and their outcomes, and it is also used in different countries and cultures for measuring and explaining parental warmth and hostility, with results revealing that a majority of the world's parents are considered to be loving toward their children (Rohner et al. 2003). Dwairy (2010) used PARTheory in nine countries to discover whether there are any cultural differences in parental rejection, and whether this depends on the gender of the parent and/or the gender of the adolescent child. Results from the adolescents' reports showed that fathers from Western cultures were less rejecting and more accepting than the fathers from Eastern cultures. Even though there were no major differences between Western and Eastern cultures, in some specific countries West-East differences could be identified (ibid). Further, the same study indicates that rejection and acceptance is related to parent and adolescent gender and socio-economic factors.

Another study revealing the connection between parental acceptance and rejection and socio-economic status is that carried out in Turkey by Erkan & Toran (2010). Here rejection was found to be higher in lower socioeconomic status mothers than those with higher socioeconomic status. This study also revealed that the age of the mothers affected the rejection level; the older mother, the higher rejection level. Acceptance-rejection has also been found to relate to the psychological adjustment of children, where it has been found that parental rejection has a negative effect on children's health and adjustment (Dwairy, 2009; Khaleque & Rohner, 2002; Demetriou, & Christodoulides, 2011). One important goal of PARTheory research has been to determine whether, irrespective of culture, children respond alike to the same parental behavior, i.e. whether they experience acceptance or rejection.

### **Parenting and culture**

Parents and children are always actors within a particular cultural context and their relationship is consequently influenced by this context (Bornstein, 1995). A common definition of culture is the values and beliefs of a group of people and the ways in which these are reflected in our acting and thinking (Broomé et al, 2001). A cultural group can, on a local level, be for example an organization or a family. It can also be global groups, such as a nation state. In both cases there is the sense of a common experience of togetherness and fellowship (Rogoff & Lave, 1984). Culture is more or less everything around us and is thus difficult to define. Describing a culture is often done by pointing to the differences that occur, and the most usual way of explaining culture is probably by dividing it into two different pathways, namely individualistic and collectivistic cultures (Triandis, 1988). One of the characteristics for individualistic cultures is the emphasis of personal goals, autonomy and self-fulfillment (Hofstede, 1980). The family, friends or other groups are thus disregarded in favor of the individual's interest. In collectivistic cultures, on the other hand, the individual's goals are usually subordinated and consistent with the collective, e.g. the family. Another difference that is mentioned is that a collectivistic individual acts much more in accordance with norms and obligations, whereas an individualist acts primarily in accordance with own attitudes and personal needs (Triandis, 1999). Furthermore, the collectivist wants to fit into the group while the individualist searches for self-satisfaction.

Dividing cultures into two different orientations – individual and collective – and transferring this to parenting, might have a bearing on the ways parents prefer to raise their children. When describing developmental pathways Greenfield et al. (2003) define cultural differences in two ways. While one pathway is characterized by individuation and

independence and is more common in individualistic cultures, the other, which emphasises group membership and interdependence is common in collectivistic cultures. In an independent developmental pathway, a child who is able to negotiate, make personal choices and act freely is aware of its individual rights and pursues individual preferences (Raeff et al, 2000). In a collectivistic and interdependent culture, on the other hand, children would be expected to follow social norms and obligations rather than make own decisions (Nsamenang & Lamb 1994; Kitayama 2002).

Although it is common to use these two distinctions of culture, it should not be forgotten that there are always individual differences in all cultures that are not generalizable to entire populations just because they live in a particular country (Schwartz, 1994). Culture can be described as a process of social interaction where shared cultural practices and interpretations grow between and within generations and change over time (Greenfield et al, 2002). Thus culture is not something static and unchangeable. Nor is it a box into which people can be neatly categorized (Goodnow, 2004). This can sometimes be forgotten, not least when it comes to studies of parenting.

Studies reveal that, as a consequence of cultural normativity about childrearing, parents are likely to do what others expect of them (Lansford et al, 2005; Grusec & Goodnow, 1994). That is, parents act in ways that they perceive to be accepted in a specific cultural context and, as Bornstein (1995) points out, one and the same act or cognition could be normative and accepted in one culture but deviant in another. Beside unwritten social norms and cognitions there are also social structures characteristic of particular cultures. These are important since not only do they influence approaches to parenting, but also allow parents to raise their children in different ways. One example, for instance, concerns gender differences and the social structures surrounding them. Depending on how gender is explained or interpreted, different explanations for behavior could be given. If, for example, a boy were to hit another child, this could be explained either as an inborn characteristic of being a boy, and thus difficult to change, or, alternatively, as learnt behavior which could be re-learnt (McGillicuddy-DeLisi, 1992). Thus, depending on how a parent interprets such a situation, different ways of handling it might be chosen.

Different cultural standards for parenting (Bornstein & Lansford, 2009) lead to varying types of parental behavior. Cultural norms could, for example, lead to different thoughts about the things included in the parenting, such as for example whether it is necessary to play with one's children. As for example Bornstein (2007) has shown, some parents think that it is

important to interact with the child by playing with it, while others believe that it is not their job as a parent.

Several studies on parenting have attempted to explain and/or compare cultural differences in parenting practices. For example Harkness and colleagues (2011) used a mixed-methods approach to compare how parents from six different western middle-class cultures (Italy, Netherlands, Poland, Spain, Sweden and the US) described children's activities. The results revealed that, as an activity, mealtimes seemed to be a context for development mostly for Spanish, Italian and Polish parents. In contrast, Swedish and American parents pointed to school-related activities as important for children's development, in that children spend most of their time in this kind of activity. Another study, focusing on sub-cultures in a single country, was carried out with four ethnic groups in the US (Asian Americans, African Americans, Latinos and European Americans) by Suizzo et al, (2008). They measured parental beliefs about children's socialization. Although it might be assumed that families in the same community and with similar resources would have similar beliefs about socialization, the results showed that European American parents do not place as much importance on conformity as the other ethnic groups, and that Asian Americans do not value the autonomy of the child as highly as the other parents. A common factor among all parents, regardless of ethnicity, was the importance of children being prosocial, i.e. having the ability to demonstrate empathy and to share with others.

In another study conducted by Bornstein and Cote (2004), US immigrant mothers from Japan and Argentina were compared with mothers from their home countries, with findings showing that although the parents' attributions did not differ significantly, self-perceptions did. The study demonstrates that types of acculturation in parenting can take place when families migrate. It is however difficult to predict the directions that this might take.

### **Parenting in Sweden**

In the Swedish setting in which this research takes place, recent statistics show that in 2011 26 % of children in Sweden under the age of 18 lived in separated families (Statistics Sweden, 2011). According to Prout and Hallet (2003), marital breakdown is increasing throughout Europe and North America. Other phenomena that influence family life are the declining birth rate in many Western countries (ibid) and delayed parenthood (Haas & Hwang, 2012). In Sweden the decision to have a child is often carefully planned. Becoming a parent rarely comes as a surprise, meaning that for the most part, parenthood is a role adopted as the result of an active choice (Bäck-Wiklund & Bergsten, 1997).

At least three culturally-specific factors need to be taken into consideration in parenting research. These are, 1) political decisions concerning equality in parental leave, 2) the provision of institutional child care and, finally 3) parental beliefs on the rights and equality of children. Looking at Sweden, it is internationally recognized as a country where there are equal possibilities for women and men, both in work and in family life (Allard, 2007) and the United Nations Human Development Reports reveals that, in 2013, Sweden was ranked as fourth in the Gender Inequality Index Rank (<http://hdr.undp.org/en/content/table-4-gender-inequality-index>). The acquisition of this status has not been without political struggle. As an example of the gender equality currently characteristic of Swedish social life, it was the first nation in the world to introduce reforms making it possible for fathers to take paternity leave (Haas & Hwang, 2012). Since the 1960s the government has encouraged the dual-earner/dual-carer family norm in a series of legislation and policy decisions (Björnberg, 2002). Here the purpose has been to give men an increased opportunity to be a part of their children's upbringing and to encourage men and women to take an equal share of home responsibilities and family finances (Hwang, 1987). Today fathers and mothers each have the right to stay at home with their child, with pay, for 240 days (Faktablad: Föräldrapenning 2011-11-30). However, despite this possibility, fathers and mothers do not share parental leave equally, and in 2007 79 % of all parental leave was taken by mothers (Haas & Hwang, 2009). Nevertheless, studies reveal parents' possibilities to share parental leave in Sweden might have affected fathers' parental leave in that it increased from 21 % to 24 % between 2007 and 2011 (SCB, 2012).

However there is, at the same time, also research showing that there are still gender differences and a Swedish study from the late 90s showed that although mothers and fathers have almost the same aim with their parenting, the means of achieving these goals vary along gender lines. For example, fathers tend to view their role as a parent rather like that of a supervisor or leader, whose main goal is to teach the child to do things. Mothers, on the other hand, see their role more as caring, taking responsibility for upbringing and developing pedagogical relationships with their children (Bäck-Wiklund & Bergsten, 1997).

The second factor which can influence parenting in Sweden is the provision of institutional childcare. With a well-developed system of childcare, both women and men can work fulltime and start a family. In Sweden it is common that children begin childcare in their second year of life and the fact that children attend preschool at early age reflects the degree of responsibility that the state – in the form of the education system – has for the child's development and adjustment (Hundeide, 2006). Björnberg (1992) describes this phenomenon

in the sense that, relative to other cultural contexts, parenthood is performed less in the confines of the home and has an increased role in educational and other institutional settings. The result of this has been that, compared to previous times, individuals have a greater dependency on societal institutions (Björnberg, 1992), and this can have effects on parenthood.

## GENERAL AND SPECIFIC AIMS

The general aim of this thesis was to learn more about parents' perceptions about their parenting and how this can be related to children's agency. In addition, children's own beliefs of their agency was studied. Four studies are included in this thesis, data deriving from parents and children in the age range 8-10.

The first aim is to investigate how Swedish parents, both mothers and fathers, report about parenting attitudes and attributions in their parenting. This is in focus in **Study I** where the gender similarities and differences in parents' attributions and attitudes are investigated. Previous research has shown that parents in Sweden are progressive in their attitudes (Carlson & Earls, 2001), and that there are differences in mothers' and fathers' concerns about childrearing (Lamb, Hwang & Broberg, 1989). The aim of Study I was to provide more up-to-date knowledge about parenting in Sweden.

The second aim was to find out more about another dimension in parenting, namely acceptance-rejection, by adopting an intercultural approach. **Study II** also has a mother and father perspective and draws on data from nine countries. Earlier studies reveal that both culture and gender have an impact on parenting (e.g. Russell & Russell, 1989; Shek, 1998; Bornstein & Lansford, 2010), but few have an intercultural approach. The aim of Study II is thus to assess agreement between mothers' and fathers' self-reported acceptance and rejection of daughters and sons in nine countries. Further, because parental warmth and acceptance have been shown to have an impact on children's agency (Hoeltje, Zubrick, Silburn, & Garton, 1996; Juang & Silbereisen, 2002), in **Study III** it was hypothesized that parental warmth and acceptance would be related to children's agency and to externalizing behavior, internalizing behavior and school achievement. This was a longitudinal study and aimed to investigate the long-term effects of acceptance and warmth. The final study, **Study IV**, has a child perspective and the aim was to



find out if children's beliefs about their agency differ depending on the context. Three contexts were investigated; family, school and with peers.

## **SUMMARY OF THE STUDIES**

This thesis includes four studies, all of which are in some way part of the international project 'Parenting Across Cultures'. The Parenting Across Cultures project is an attempt to make research in parenting and childrearing more diverse and multifaceted. While all of the data reported on in the studies in this thesis is derived from the project, it is only in Study II that data from participants from all the different countries involved is utilized. The other three studies report on data from the Swedish parents or children only. The same families have been interviewed three times during the period 2008 – 2010 and in study III longitudinal data is used.

### **STUDY I**

#### **Aims**

The purpose of Study I was to analyze Swedish parents' attributions and attitudes regarding childrearing. Two research questions were addressed, 1) Are there differences between mothers' and fathers' attributions and attitudes within families in Sweden? 2) If so, how highly are mothers' attributions and attitudes correlated with fathers' attributions and attitudes?

#### **Participants**

The participants were recruited from two cities in the Western part of Sweden. A total of 102 families participated in the project, although for the present study, analyses were limited to the 77 families in which data were available for both the mother and the father. The mean age of mothers was 38.97 (SD=4.82) and 40.45 (SD=5.68) for fathers. On average the parents had 13 years of education. Fifty-eight percent of the parents were married and the average family size was 2.23 children. Their child, whom they answered questions about, was born in 2000 (M=7.73 SD=0.45) and of the children in the sample, 45 % were of female.

## Procedure

After receiving approval from school principals, recruitment letters were sent to families in six different schools. The letter described the study and informed the parents that they would be contacted by phone. Five more families were contacted outside the six public schools. A total of 182 letters were mailed, and 173 families were contacted by phone. Nine families that received letters turned out not to fit in the demographic groups. Families with immigrant parents were not included. In all, 102 families participated, and 71 families declined participation. For the present study, analyses were limited to the 77 families in which data were available from both the mother and the father. Questionnaires were completed either orally or in writing by the parents and sent to the research group.

Procedures were approved by local IRBs (Institutional Review Boards) at universities in each participating country, and all parents signed statements of informed consent. The interviewers informed the participants that all the information they provided would be confidential. They were also informed that if it were to be revealed that either 1) the participant posed a danger to her/himself or others, 2) that the participant's child is abused or neglected, or 3) that a valid medical emergency arises, that such information would be reported to the appropriate authority. This information can of course have had an influence on participants' decisions as to whether or not to take part in the study, and the responses that were provided.

Additionally, participants were told that participation in the project was voluntary, and that they could decide to discontinue participation at any time. They were also given the e-mail addresses and phone numbers of the interviewers so that they could contact them in the event of any questions or if they required support.

## Measurements

The analyses in this study derive from three measures, the *Parent Attribution Test* (Bugental & Shennum, 1984), *Parental Modernity Inventory* (Schaefer & Edgerton, 1985) and *Social Desirability Scale* (SDS; Crowne & Marlowe, 1960). First, the short form of the Parent Attribution Test was completed, the purpose being to measure parents' perceptions of success or failure in hypothetical interaction scenarios with children (e.g., "Suppose you took care of a neighbor's child one afternoon and the two of you had a really good time together."). Then questions about the positive or negative interaction were asked and parents answered about the factors that determined the quality in the interaction. The amount of power or control attributed to oneself versus children is the key dimension of interest. Second, parents completed the

Parental Modernity Inventory, which assesses parents' attitudes about childrearing and education. 30 statements were asked and yielded three variables: (1) progressive attitudes, (2) authoritarian attitudes and (3) modernity of attitudes (the difference between the progressive attitudes score and the authoritarian attitudes). The third and final measurement, the 33-item *Social Desirability Scale* (SDS; Crowne & Marlowe, 1960) was used to assess parents' tendencies to respond to questions in a socially desirable fashion. Statements like, "I'm always willing to admit when I make a mistake," were rated as *True* or *False*.

## **Analysis**

The data from this study derives from one time point with both mothers and fathers from the same families. Analyses in the study were at first done by repeated-measures linear mixed models with gender of parent as the within-subjects fixed factor. Instead of two time points that is common in repeated measures linear mixed models, the measures were repeated with different people in the family rather than repeated over time. The assumption was that mothers' and fathers' attributions and attitudes would be correlated, but the covariance structure was modeled allowing mothers' and fathers' variances to differ. Analysis were also made with and without controls for mothers' and fathers' ages, education and social desirability.

To measure the similarities between mothers' attributions and attitudes and fathers' attributions and attitudes there were correlations made on the data. Age, education and social desirability were controlled for.

## **Main findings**

On average the Swedish mothers and fathers reported attributions near the scale midpoints. However, variability was greater for attributions regarding uncontrollable success than for attributions regarding adult- or child-controlled failure. Regarding attitudes, mothers and fathers reported more progressive than authoritarian attitudes. A closer look at the two deviation variables (i.e. perceived control over failure and modernity of attitudes) revealed that the attitude scales resulted in a much larger differential than the attribution scales (for mothers and fathers). Thus Swedish parents are more polarized in their attitudes than in their attributions; i.e. mothers and fathers think more alike when it comes to attitudes than they do in terms of attributions.

There were significant main effects of parent gender on two of the seven focal constructs. Fathers reported higher adult-controlled failure and child-controlled failure

attributions than did mothers. Both of these differences remained significant after controlling for parents' age, education, and any possible social desirability bias.

Correlations were computed between parents in the same family to assess similarities between mothers' and fathers' attributions and attitudes. Three of the seven analyses revealed significant concordance between parents within a family; all three remained significant after controlling for parents' age, education, and any possible social desirability bias. Significant positive correlations were found for mothers' and fathers' progressive attitudes, authoritarian attitudes, and modernity of attitudes (the difference between the progressive attitudes score and the authoritarian attitudes score).

## **STUDY II**

### **Aims**

The aim of Study II was to assess agreement between mothers and fathers on their self-reported acceptance and rejection of daughters and sons in 9 countries. Data on child gender was also collected and analyzed with respect to parent gender so that acceptance and rejection in mother–daughter, mother–son, father–daughter, and father–son dyads could be explored cross-nationally.

### **Participants**

Participants from 9 countries provided data for Study II. A total of 1996 parents (998 mothers and 998 fathers) participated in the study. Families were drawn from Shanghai, China (n = 119); Medellín, Colombia (n = 107); Naples and Rome, Italy (n = 176); Zarqa, Jordan (n = 111); Kisumu, Kenya (n = 97); Manila, Philippines (n = 94); Trollhättan/Vänersborg, Sweden (n = 76); Chiang Mai, Thailand (n = 82); and Durham, North Carolina, United States (n = 136).

The 9 participating countries were selected to obtain a cultural diversity. Criteria taken into account were that countries that generally are described as individualistic or collectivistic should be represented. Another dimension involves the extent of religious observance in a country, in that it has been demonstrated that religion has an impact on parenting attitudes. The last criteria was whether the countries had specific laws that could influence parenting, for example China has implemented a one-child policy and Sweden has outlawed the use of physical discipline.

Mothers averaged 36.75 (SD = 6.10) years, and fathers averaged 40.25 (SD = 6.54) years. On average mothers had completed 12.75 (SD = 4.20) years of education, and fathers had completed 12.94 (SD = 4.13) years of education. Maternal and paternal ages and educations, respectively, differed across countries. Most mothers were married (87.5%) or unmarried and cohabitating (8.6%). Children averaged 8.27 (SD = 0.65) years overall, and child age differed across countries. Parents of girls and boys were represented approximately equally overall (51% girls), and in each country subsample. Most children (74.8%) had one or more siblings living in the household.

This sample of countries is diverse across a number of socio-demographic dimensions, including predominant race/ethnicity, predominant religion, economic indicators, and indices of child well-being. For example, on the Human Development Index, a composite indicator of a country's status with respect to health, education, and income, participating countries ranged from a rank of 4 to 128 out of 169 countries with available data. To provide a sense of what this range entails, the infant mortality rate in Kenya, for example, is 40 times higher than the infant mortality rate in Sweden. In the Philippines, 23% of the population falls below the international poverty line of less than US\$1.25 per day, whereas none of the population falls below this poverty line in Italy, Sweden, or the United States. The participating countries varied widely not only on socio-demographic indicators, but also on psychological constructs such as individualism versus collectivism. Using Hofstede's (2001) rankings, the participating countries ranged from the United States, with the highest individualism score in the world to China, Colombia, and Thailand, countries that are among the least individualistic countries. The purpose of recruiting families from these countries was to create an international sample that would be diverse with respect to a number of socio-demographic and psychological characteristics. Ultimately, this diversity provided an opportunity to examine research questions in a sample that is more generalizable to a wider range of the world's populations than is typical in most research to date.

## **Procedure**

The interview protocols were translated from English into the respective national languages and back-translations were carried out in order to ensure the linguistic and conceptual equivalence of the measures across the languages. To make sure that the translators should be aware of the same thing when they started their translation four questions were put; 1) be aware of and make a note where the translation was not good, or inappropriate for the participating group or cultural

setting, 2) note words that can have different or many meanings; 3) suggest improvements on the instruments and 4) indicate changes that can be necessary due to discrepancies. All translations were then discussed by the different cultures' site coordinators to clarify and modify items. There was no tests or analyses made for measurement invariance or cultural equivalence. However, in all of the participating countries, pilot studies were carried out where participants were able to comment on and provide feedback on questions and words that were not experienced to be culturally appropriate, or were difficult to understand. Words or items that seemed to be difficult to understand or easy to misunderstand were discussed first with the participants in the pilot studies and then in the research group. Some words were removed and some were changed to be more suitable for the culture it was being put in. Later, at a cross-site meeting involving all of the researchers the items were discussed. The aim was to ensure that the measures would be valid in all sites by focusing not just on linguistic equivalence, but also on the cultural meanings that would be imparted by the measures (Peña, 2007). The measures were then administered in Mandarin Chinese (China), Spanish (Colombia and the United States), Italian (Italy), Arabic (Jordan), Dholuo (Kenya), Filipino (the Philippines), Swedish (Sweden), Thai (Thailand), and American English (the United States and the Philippines).

Interviews were conducted in participants' homes, schools, or at other locations chosen by the participants. Procedures were approved by local IRBs (Institutional Review Boards) at the universities in each participating country, and all parents signed statements of informed consent. Mothers and fathers were given the option of having the questionnaires administered orally (with rating scales provided as visual aids), or completing written questionnaires. Mothers and fathers completed the questionnaires independently from each other. Parents were either given modest financial compensation for their participation, or modest financial contributions were made to the children's schools.

Procedures were approved by the local IRBs (Institutional Review Boards) at the participating universities and all parents signed statements of informed consent in the same way as for Study I.

## **Measurements**

*The Parental Acceptance-Rejection/Control Questionnaire-Short Form* (PARQ/Control-SF; Rohner, 2005) was used to measure self-reported frequency of mother and father parenting behaviors. The five items about behavioral control were not used in this study. However, the total acceptance-rejection scale was used and computed as the sum of the items for warmth-

affection (reversed), hostility-aggression, rejection, and neglect-indifference (high score = more rejection). In addition, based on Rohner and Cournoyer's (1994) analysis of the factor structure of the PARQ scale in eight cultural groups, two subscales were derived, measuring parental warmth and HRN. Warmth was computed as the average of eight items from the warmth-affection subscale, such as "I make my child feel wanted and needed." HRN was computed as the average of 16 items from the hostility-aggression, rejection, and neglect indifference subscales such as, "I punish my child severely when I am angry," and "I pay no attention to my child when (s)he asks for help." The warmth and HRN subscales were computed as means instead of sums because there were different numbers of items in these scales and using means put them in the same metric, making them directly comparable. The 13-item *Social Desirability Scale-Short Form* (SDS-SF; Reynolds, 1982) was used to assess parents' social desirability bias.

## **Main findings**

In Study II, the individual countries were compared to an overall mean instead of being compared to each other. The results revealed that mothers and fathers in China, Jordan, and Kenya rated themselves as less accepting than the overall mean, while mothers and fathers in Colombia, Italy, Sweden, and the United States rated themselves as more accepting than the overall mean. The countries with parents self-reporting as more accepting, i.e. the Philippines, also revealed a higher report on warmth than the overall mean and lower reported HRN than the overall mean.

Within countries, there were several significant main effects of parent gender. For example, mothers in China, Italy, Sweden, and the United States rated themselves as more accepting than fathers rated themselves. Overall, mothers in China, Italy, the Philippines, Sweden, and Thailand rated themselves as warmer than fathers rated themselves, and fathers in Kenya rated themselves as warmer than mothers rated themselves. The data from the parental HRN revealed one significant main effect of parent gender for Sweden, indicating that overall mothers and fathers reported similar levels of HRN except in Sweden. The Swedish mothers reported lower HRN than the fathers did, although the fathers had a low reported HRN.

There were no main effects of child gender except in the case of parental warmth. In Italy and Thailand, there were significant differences in reported warmth depending on parent gender and child gender. In Italy, mothers rated being equally warm to both daughters and sons, while



fathers had a lower rating for both genders. In Thailand, fathers of boys reported themselves to be less warm than mothers of boys and fathers of girls rated themselves.

## **STUDY III**

### **Aims**

This study addressed two primary research questions using a sample of Swedish parents followed longitudinally for three years. The first question was whether parents' acceptance predicts children's agency. On the basis of previous work showing that parents higher in warmth have adolescents with higher perceived agency and children with higher social competence (Kim, Han, & McCubbin, 2007) and self-esteem (Haque, 1988; Litovsky & Dusek, 1985), it was hypothesized that parental acceptance would be related to children's agency. The second question was whether children's agency predicts their externalizing behavior, internalizing behavior, and academic achievement. On the basis of previous research demonstrating links between adolescents' perceived agency and better adjustment, it was hypothesized that these links would hold during childhood as well.

### **Participants**

Families were recruited through six schools serving a socioeconomically diverse population in the western part of Sweden. After receiving permission from the school principals, recruitment letters describing the study were sent to the families and were contacted by phone to follow up on the letters and assess interest in participation. In all, 103 families participated.

The participating families included children who were, on average, 8.76 years ( $SD = .043$ ) at the time of recruitment (50 girls and 53 boys). At Time 1, 72.9% of the parents were married (51.4%) or cohabiting (21.5%), 15% of the parents were divorced (4.7%) or separated (10.3%). The remaining children lived in a single parent family. At Time 1, the mean age of the mothers was 39.14 ( $SD = 4.83$ ) and for fathers 41.86 ( $SD = 0.60$ ). The average level of education was 13.92 years ( $SD = 2.48$ ) for mothers and 13.73 ( $SD = 2.98$ ) for fathers. The majority of the target children, 86%, had at least one sibling.

### **Procedure**

Data for the study was conducted by surveys with parents in person or by mail and each survey took about 1.5 hours when the parents were met in person. The surveys were filled in

at three time points, with the first one when children were on average 8 years old, and it past one year between each time point. Parents provided written informed consent for their participation. Children's schools were provided with modest gifts to thank the families for their participation. All procedures and measures received IRB approval.

## **Measurements**

### **Parents' Warmth and Acceptance**

At Time 1, mothers and fathers completed the short form of the Parental Acceptance-Rejection/Control Questionnaire (PARQ/Control-SF; Rohner, 2005). The analyses for the present study included mothers' and fathers' reports on eight items from the warmth and affection scale. The original 4-point scale ("almost always true" to "almost never true") was modified in this study to refer to concrete time periods: 1 = *almost never*, 2 = *once a month*, 3 = *once a week*, 4 = *every day*. Items were averaged to create a scale reflecting mothers' and fathers' warmth and acceptance ( $\alpha = .73$ ).

### **Children's Agency**

At Time 2, mothers and fathers completed a short form of the Multi-Measure Agentic Personality Scale (Côté, 1997), which includes a total of 20 questions. The original questions were modified to be more suitable for parents with younger children. Questions assessed four aspects of parents' perceptions of their children's agency including *self-esteem* (e.g., "My child thinks he/she is a lot of fun to be with"), *purpose of life* (e.g., "My child thinks his/her life is fun and exciting"), *internal locus of control* (e.g., "My child thinks that when he/she studies, he/she gets better grades"), and *self-efficacy* (e.g., "My child enjoys difficult and challenging situations"). The original scale was changed to a three-point scale: 0 = *I do not agree*, 1 = *I agree*, 2 = *I agree a lot*. Mothers' and fathers' items were averaged to create a scale ( $\alpha = .90$ ).

### **Children's Externalizing and Internalizing Behaviors**

At Time 3, mothers and fathers completed the Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL; Achenbach, 1991) regarding their children's externalizing and internalizing problems. The externalizing scale included 33 items (e.g., "My child gets in many fights"); the internalizing scale included 31 items (e.g., "My child is too fearful or anxious"). Items were rated as 0 = *not true*, 1 =

*somewhat true*, 2 = *sometimes true*. Items were averaged across mothers and fathers to create an externalizing scale ( $\alpha = .85$ ) and an internalizing scale ( $\alpha = .80$ ).

### **Academic Achievement**

At Time 3, mothers rated their children's achievements in reading, math, social studies, and science using a four-point scale with 1 = *failing*, 2 = *below average*, 3 = *average*, and 4 = *above average*. Ratings were averaged across the four school subjects to create a scale reflecting academic achievement ( $\alpha = .74$ ).

### **Main findings**

The present study examined Swedish parents' warmth towards their children in relation to their children's subsequent agency. It also examined the longitudinal relation between agency and children's externalizing, internalizing, and school achievement.

The results show that parental warmth at Time 1 was significantly correlated with perceived child agency at Time 2, which was significantly correlated with child externalizing and internalizing behaviors and academic achievement at Time 3. Earlier studies have revealed links between parental warmth and perceived agency among adolescents (Hoeltje et al., 1996; Juang & Silbereisen, 2002). This study extends previous research by demonstrating links between parenting and younger children's agency. That is, parental warmth has a positive effect on child agency.

The results also revealed that parental warmth was not directly related to fewer externalizing or internalizing problems or higher school achievement. Instead, parental warmth had indirect effects on children's adjustment through children's agency. These links between agency and subsequent adjustment are consistent with earlier studies that have shown, for example, that the belief in the capacity to perform well in school is a good predictor of later school achievement (Juang & Silbereisen, 2002; Stetsenko, Little, Oettingen, & Balteset, 1995).

Links between agency and subsequent adjustment can be understood in the context of previous theory and research regarding whether intelligence is regarded as something that one is born with or something that develops in the individual. Dweck (1999) describes the theory about developmental intelligence as an incremental theory, with intelligence as something that the individual can influence by putting more time and effort into school work, leading to better

results. A Swedish study by Korp (2011) reveals similar results in which social and cultural norms affect students' school achievement. If teachers have low expectations for students and respond to or treat them in that way, the students' beliefs in themselves decrease and they perform worse in school. These findings have important implications for teachers and parents: By helping children to believe in themselves and their own agency, children can develop the belief that they can affect how they behave and how they perform in school, which can result in improvements in behavior and academic achievement.

## **STUDY IV**

### **Aims**

Study IV assesses children's perceived agency in different contexts and compares differences in three social contexts: in the family and in school and peer situations. Three research questions were formulated; 1) How do children perceive that people in their surroundings react in situations where the child is agentic? 2) What degree of agency do children perceive they have when their agency is not respected? and 3) In what way do children perceive that their agency varies depending on whether they are interacting with children or adults? Does the perceived agency vary if the adult is a parent or a teacher?

Previous studies carried out with children as actors and individuals reveal that claims for power are common when it comes to democracy in school (Löfdahl & Hägglund, 2007) and in the context of the balance of power between parents and children in families (Kuczynski & De Mol, 2015; Sorbing, 2005). However most studies are conducted in particular cultural contexts and at particular points in time. Consequently, focus has been on family, peers, schools or other institutional settings. Little however is known about the contrasts between the way children in different cultural contexts perceive their agency, and whether any differences there might be depend upon the context in which they are situated.

### **Participants**

The participants were ten-year-old children ( $N= 103$ , 50 girls and 53 boys). They were recruited from six different schools in western Sweden and from a socioeconomically diverse population. The children were on average 9.84 years old ( $SD= .395$ ) and 55.1 % of the parents were married or cohabiting (17.8 %). 86 % of the children had at least one sibling. 14% of the parents were divorced (5.6 %) or separated (8.4 %). The remaining children lived in single-parent families. Mothers were on average 40.31 years old ( $SD = 4.86$ ) and fathers 42.91 ( $SD = 5.50$ ). The

average level of education was 13.34 years ( $SD = 4.17$ ) for mothers and 13.22 ( $SD = 3.92$ ) for fathers.

## **Procedure**

The principals of six schools were contacted. After obtaining their approval, 182 recruitment letters were sent to caregivers of children in grade three. Thereafter the children's parents were contacted by phone and given more information about the study. 102 parents gave permission for their child to be interviewed. Once parental consent had been obtained, the child was contacted in order to obtain her/his consent. Interviews with the children were conducted either during school time or after school. When the interviews were done after school they took place either at an after-school center or at the child's home. Every interview took place in private, but within earshot of others. Two interviewers collected all of the data. A modest gift was given both to the child and to the school.

Since the children were under 15, their parents gave formal written and informed consent. The children gave their consent to participate orally. Both parents and children were informed about confidentiality and the right to terminate the interviews at any time. All procedures and measures received IRB approval.

## **Measurements**

Three vignettes were presented to the children in the interviews. The vignettes represented one of the three contexts being researched: the family, the school and with peers. The vignettes were constructed in such way that, at first, the children were presented with a setting that they were asked to imagine themselves in. The child was then asked what would happen were she or he to act with agency in such a situation. Immediately thereafter the child was asked how he or she would react had agency been suppressed.

In the family context the child was asked the following: *'Imagine yourself and your mother or father in a hurry one morning. You have to leave home as soon as possible. You refuse to come along. What would happen if you told your parents that you think it is hard for you when things are stressful in the morning? What would you do if your mother/father lifted you up and carried you to the car?'* In the second context the child was asked the following: *'Imagine that it is pouring with rain outside and that you are supposed to have a break in school. In the break earlier that day you were outside so most of the children's clothes are*

*still wet. You do not want to go out, but your teacher says you have to. You refuse to go out. What would happen if you said that you want to vote about going out or not? What would you do if your teacher said that ‘you have to go out and that’s final’?*’ The third, and final, context is with peers and the children were asked the following: *‘You and one of your friends are about to play, but you want to play different games. Your friend will not accept your suggestion for a game and you refuse to give up. What would happen if you told your friend that it was a very long time since you played your game and that you really want to play it? What would you do if your friend said that he/she has played your game a lot and is tired of playing it?’*

The rationale underpinning the construction of these scenarios was, first, to give the child a sense of having agency, and then, subsequently, to ask them about their parents’, teachers’ or peers’ reaction. Later on, this imagined agency is suppressed and child’s perception of the situation is then asked for.

## **Main findings**

Children seem to perceive that they would have agency in all three contexts, but that it would be expressed in different ways. Resistance, through ignoring or refusing, is mostly found in the adult contexts with parents or teachers, while a more democratic, conciliatory approach is found with peers. However it is also the case that some children think they would take charge and attempt to find different ways of solving the problem. This is mainly seen in the parent situation and, partly, in the peer context, where the children describe that they would employ democratic strategies to get along and come to a conclusion, hopefully something that would work for both of the children. This shift in agency can be explained by the dynamics that exist between individuals. For example, when parents and children interact there can be equality as human beings, but there is still an inequality in power (Kuczynski and De Mol, 2015). Kuczynski (2003) suggests that the power relation between children and parents is a dynamic interdependent asymmetry. This encompasses three dimensions: 1) parents and children have previous relations and experiences, individual differences and cultural norms which are used in their actions or agency, 2) parents and children’s relationships are different from others, they have many experiences together and are also vulnerable to each other and dependent on each other, 3) age is a resource, and when children get older they also get better at negotiating power and, when they reach a certain age, these skills can be even better than the parents’. Here, Kuczynski and De Mol (2015) offer computer or other technology skills as examples.

Children in the current study were, on average 10 years old, and the inequality of power is expressed in the parent and the teacher contexts. The children's statements are about how they would not do anything at all, or even be afraid of doing something other than what they were told to do. Results show that children think teachers would be the group who would most likely let them be a discussion partner, but also the ones most likely to disregard their ideas, by saying that they are bad or ridiculous. Viewed in this way, while children are supposed to be individuals who have been given more rights and autonomy, especially in Western cultures, it is nevertheless still adults who have most of the power. The reason for this can be that parents are physically stronger, often have more knowledge, and that cultural norms allow parents to have more power (Maccoby, 2000).

Agency and context can differ in that it is possible adjust depending on the nature of and partners in interactions (Kuczynski & De Mol, 2015). Indeed, even if one child does not perceive possessing agency in school, he or she might feel agentic at home, and vice versa. The Swedish school curriculum (Lgr2011) expresses the importance of every child's right to express him- or herself, and this might also help some children who do not have this opportunity at home. Swedish schools are supposed to provide every child with the opportunity to be seen and heard. This, in some ways, is indeed the case in Sweden, both in terms of the consequences and outcomes of parenting education, through legislation and, through the National Curriculum and Education Act, in school settings. However there appears to be more to do before children and adults completely have the same rights.

## GENERAL DISCUSSION

The general aim of this thesis is to study children's perceptions of their agency, parents' perceptions about their parenting, and to consider how parents' conceptions can be related to children's agency. The results from the different studies are discussed below in a series of themes. The discussion regarding the findings from Study II only concern the Swedish sample.

### **Swedish mothers' and fathers' parental attitudes, attributions, acceptance-rejection**

In **Study I** and **II** different aspects of parenting were measured, namely attributions, attitudes and acceptance-rejection. Comparing the Swedish mothers and fathers concerning their thoughts about parental attributions, the results reveal that there were differences between mothers' and fathers' attributions regarding adult-controlled and child-controlled failure. One explanation for this could be in the way women and men perceive control. Earlier studies have revealed that women tend to have lower perceived control than men (Alloy & Clements, 1992; Rosenthal, 1995; Zebb & Moore, 2003). That is, men are more likely to think that they have control over various outcomes and that this could also be the case in parenting. Likewise, previous studies in Sweden have found that Swedish mothers are more likely to make external than internal explanations for younger children's disobedience (Broberg, 1997, cited in Hindberg, 2001; Durrant, 1999). Fathers, on the other hand, might not view disobedience in the same way, but instead place more responsibility inside the person. Prior studies, together with results from **Study I**, suggest that mothers more often than fathers, tend to use external rather than internal explanations for children's disobedience. The theory of cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957) implies that when individuals perceive contradictions between social realities, they strive for a balance (e.g., by finding alternative explanations). If parents, over and over again, experience dissonance between child disobedience and their own parental attitudes, one



way to balance this contradiction is to find external explanations for the child's behavior. Given that the mother, even in Sweden, is likely to be the parent who spends more time with the child, she might also be the parent who more often experiences cognitive dissonance.

Studies of parenting attitudes have previously shown that Swedish parents are not generally authoritarian (Broberg, 1997, as cited in Hindberg, 2001; Durrant et al., 1999), and this was also revealed in **Study I**, which showed that mothers and fathers held more progressive than authoritarian parenting attitudes. This makes sense in the Swedish context of striving to develop an egalitarian society where children's rights are emphasized (Durrant, 2003). Carlson and Earl (2001) observed that Swedish children are viewed as individuals with their own rights and their own unique potential. Progressive attitudes in Sweden are embodied in legislation prohibiting physical punishment, thus giving children the same rights as adults (Durrant, 2008). Parents with progressive attitudes usually encourage their children to think independently and there is often a more democratic atmosphere in the family (Okagaki & Frensch, 1998). A progressive attitude is often related to beliefs about children as agentic, or as actors. Viewed in this way, the child as actor may encourage the parents to act in specific directions when raising the child.

In **Study II** mothers' and fathers' acceptance and rejection was studied, the results revealing that mothers and fathers reported higher acceptance and warmth and lower rejection and hostility/rejection/neglect (HRN) of their children. The parents also rated themselves as relatively high in acceptance and warmth (with mothers higher than fathers), and the mothers also rated themselves as relatively low in HRN (and lower than fathers). Perris et al. (1985) also found that Swedish mothers were more accepting than Italian, Danish, and Australian mothers, and Swedish fathers were less rejecting than Italian and Australian fathers. Sweden has a unique social structure that promotes gender equality. For example, Swedish laws provide similar childcare benefits to mothers and fathers (e.g., paid time off from work following childbirth; Haas, 1990). Mothers still take most of the parental leave, but fathers take about 21% of the total days at home following childbirth (Statistics Sweden, 2006). Swedish couples with children describe their parenting as equal, but studies reveal that mothers and fathers still adopt traditional roles in the family (Bäck-Wiklund & Bergsten, 1997; Magnusson, 2006), which could explain why Swedish mothers described themselves as warmer and less HRN than fathers. The low level of HRN reported by both mothers and fathers could reflect Swedish promotion of child agency. This was also shown in **Study I** where both mothers and fathers in Sweden report progressive parenting attitudes. Additionally, Sweden strongly endorses the

child rights perspective that children's rights are equal to those of adults (Carlson & Earls, 2001). Parents reported being similarly accepting, similarly warm and as having similar HRN for their female, as well as for their male children. Furthermore, parent gender did not interact with child gender. The lack of gender differences, both when it comes to how to treat boys or girls, and in being a mother and father, can also be a result of a general striving for gender equality in Sweden.

For example, the within family correlations between mothers and fathers in attributions and attitudes could be explained by legislation that encourages both parents to take equal responsibility in parenting (Haas, 1996). A high percentage of parents in Sweden work outside the home, about 80% of mothers and 90% of fathers, and both are given equal opportunities to combine work and family (Allard, 2007). Swedish legislation designed to encourage both parents to stay at home with their child could render mothers' and fathers' attitudes more similar to each other. Mothers and fathers are provided with information about child development (Durrant & Olsen, 1997), which probably contributes to more discussions between the parents about childrearing. These discussions could result in more similar attitudes in the family.

### **Parental warmth and children's agency**

Parenting has been found to be one of the factors impacting on perceived agency. Studies have for example revealed that parental affection is positively related to adolescents' sense of agency (Hoeltje et al., 1996; Juang & Silbereisen, 2002). **Study III** examined Swedish parents' warmth towards their children in relation to their children's subsequent agency. It also examined the longitudinal relation between agency and children's externalizing, internalizing, and school achievement. The results revealed that parental warmth was not directly related to fewer externalizing or internalizing problems or higher school achievement. Instead, parental warmth had indirect effects on children's adjustment through children's agency. These links between agency and subsequent adjustment are consistent with earlier studies that have shown, for example, that the belief in the capacity to perform well in school is a good predictor of later school achievement (Juang & Silbereisen, 2002; Stetsenko, Little, Oettingen, & Balteset, 1995).

Links between agency and subsequent adjustment can be understood in the context of theory and research regarding whether intelligence is viewed as something that one is born with or something that develops in the individual. Dweck (1999) describes the theory about developmental intelligence as an incremental theory, with intelligence as something that the individual can influence by putting more time and effort into schoolwork, leading to better

results. A Swedish study by Korp (2011) reveals similar results in which social and cultural norms affect students' school achievement. If teachers have low expectations for students and respond to or treat them in that way, the students' beliefs in themselves decrease and they perform worse in school. Findings from this study should have important implications for both teachers and parents. If adults help children to believe in themselves and their own agency, children have a greater chance to develop the belief that they can affect how they behave and how they perform in school, which can result in improvements in behavior and academic achievement.

### **Child agency in different contexts**

Agency seems to have positive effects for children, but how do children themselves perceive their agency? This was studied in **Study IV** and the findings revealed that children seem to perceive that they would have agency with parents, teachers and peers, but that this would be expressed in different ways. Resistance, through ignoring or refusing, is related to adult contexts, with parents or teachers, while the democratic act is mainly used with peers. A contrast to this is that some children think they would take charge and help out in different ways to solve the problem. This is mainly seen in the parent situation and partly in the peer context, where children describe that they would employ democratic strategies to get along and come to a conclusion, hopefully something that would work for both of the children. This shift in agency can be explained by the dynamics that exist between individuals. For example, when parents and children interact there can be equality as human beings, but there is still an inequality in power (Kuczynski & De Mol, 2015). Kuczynski (2003) suggests that the power relation between children and parents is a dynamic interdependent asymmetry. This is explained by three components: 1) parents and children have previous relations and experiences, individual differences and cultural norms which are used in their actions or agency, 2) parents and children's relationships are different from others, they have many experiences together and are also vulnerable to each other and dependent on each other, 3) age is a resource, and when children get older they also get better at negotiating power and when they reach a certain age these skills can be even better than the parents. Kuczynski and De Mol (2015) offer computer or other technology skills as examples.

Children in **Study IV** were on average 10 years old, and the inequality of power is expressed in the context with parents or teachers. The children's statements are about how they would not do anything at all or even be afraid of doing something other than what they were told to do. Results show that children think teachers would be the only group who would just

let them be a discussion partner, but also the ones to reduce their ideas by saying that they are bad or ridiculous. Viewed in this way, children are supposed to be individuals who have been given more rights and autonomy, especially in Western cultures, but still it is the adults who have most of the power. The reason for this can be that parents are physically stronger, often have more knowledge, and that cultural norms allow parents to have more power (Maccoby, 2000).

Agency and context can differ since we are able to adjust depending on whom we are interacting with (Kuczynski & De Mol, 2015). Indeed, even if one child does not perceive agency in school, he or she might feel agentic at home, and vice versa. The Swedish school curriculum (Lgr2011) emphasizes the importance of every child's right to express him- or herself and this might also help some children who do not have this opportunity at home. Swedish schools are supposed to give every child the chance to be seen and heard. This is in some ways already the case in Sweden, both with parenting education, through laws and in school settings, but there seems to be more to do before a situation in which children and adults have the same rights in real life is fully achieved.

### **Methodological and ethical considerations**

The work reported in this thesis is based on data from the longitudinal project 'Parenting Across Cultures' which began with pilot interviews with both children and parents in nine countries in 2008. Studies I, III and IV report on data from the Swedish sample, while Study II has a cross-cultural approach. The data derives from participants recruited to the project, and in all of the four studies in this thesis, the same methodological and ethical considerations have been adhered to. Before starting the research all of the procedures were approved by the local IRBs (Institutional Review Boards) at the participating universities (in the current case University West), but also by NIH, who are the funders of the Parenting Across Cultures project.

Studies I, II, and III are all based on quantitative data from parents' self-reports and the first two studies provide more knowledge about how parents think about their parenting. Study III also has a parent perspective, but with a focus on how one specific parenting style can affect children's agency, adjustment and school achievement. Study IV, on the other hand, has a child perspective and includes qualitative data gained from the participating children. The child perspective is captured in terms of letting the children talk about their perceived agency and to do this on their own terms. The children were put into three hypothetical scenarios. The scenarios were sketched out beforehand, and in that sense the children did not have any input, which naturally can be questioned. Research based on data generate by children themselves has

been of increasing interest in recent decades (Frones & Backe-Hansen, 2012). Doing research with children has particular implications, both methodological and ethical. One question that can be asked before starting on any research project is whether the research is worth doing or not (Alderson & Morrow, 2011). In this project interest focused on both parents and children. Parenting is something that involves both parents and children, and since both parents and children have an impact on each other (Kuczynski & De Mol, 2015) it is natural to include both parties in studies of child-rearing. To only have one perspective would give a narrow picture of how things are when it comes to parenting and the raising children.

### **Interviews as a method**

As a method for collecting data, research interviews can vary, and in the current studies the interviews were structured, based on questionnaires with multiple choice response options. With this in mind, an interview is not at all like an ordinary conversation (Denscombe, 2009). It is mostly the researcher that sets the agenda and has a predetermined perception of the research area (ibid). An interview is suitable if the researcher is interested in, for example, an informant's thoughts or feelings, but can also be used in a structured way, as in these studies, where parents' and children's perceptions of parenting and agency are solicited. The choice to have a structured interview is a consequence of the current research being part of the larger Parenting Across Cultures project. This is an extensive project involving different countries with different cultures and, in such circumstances, a structured interview makes analyses much more manageable. The interviewers have the same questionnaire to follow, and answers with multiple choices are easier to analyze than would be the case with a data material with open-ended questions. Of course this type of data also requires a lot of work, but a qualitative data material would require even more. Further, in that pre-determined scaled response options were used, these too were discussed in terms of meaning and interpretation. Had the questionnaire instead contained open items, that is to say that participants could have answered as they chose, then a different type of analysis would have been conducted. It should be noted that there are plans to also carry out this type of interview, thus providing participants with greater scope to express themselves.

Further, a structured interview can generate data from which it is possible to standardize the answers (Denscombe, 2009) and can be particularly useful with larger datasets that are planned to be comparable, or if generalizable findings are desirable. Every participant gets the same questions and chooses from a set range of multiple choice options. Before the interviews started, pilot interviews were carried out in all of the settings and items that seemed to be

difficult to understand, or easy to misunderstand, were discussed. It is important to have sensitivity to what works or not, and one of the most important, and most positive issues to emerge in the PAC study is that all countries have been involved and have had researchers represented at the annual meetings, thus ensuring culturally-specific input.

While in the research reported on here interview data, from both parents and children, was collected over a three-year period, it is only in Study IV that it is analyzed from a longitudinal perspective. On all occasions during the period data was collected in a similar manner with the exception that, in years 2 and 3, the parents wished to answer the questions themselves. Although the parents felt that a face-to-face interview was unnecessary, it nevertheless gave them a chance to meet the interviewer in person and also to ask any questions that might have arisen after receiving the information letter. It might also have contributed to generating a sense of security before their children were interviewed in that they had the opportunity themselves to meet the interviewer. The children, on the other hand, were interviewed in person in each data collection wave.

### **Children as participants**

Interviewing children requires greater care, reflection and caution than with adults. First of all it is important to get the child's approval, even though the parent has given consent beforehand. This is a relatively new way of handling the issue of consent by also asking the child (Danby & Farrell, 2005). While there are generally different ways of starting an interview with a child, one important thing is to make the child to feel safe and confident with the interviewer (Johansson & Karlsson, 2013). In this case the interviewer choose to first meet the children in a classroom to introduce herself and to present the study. Questions about the nature of research and science were also posed. Often, children have perception of what a researcher does (Johansson & Karlsson, 2013). Indeed it is common that, in school, children carry out their own research projects and many of the children had thoughts about how to do research. Further, they may also want to know why we, as adults and researchers, want to know more about how they, as children, think about parenting and about themselves. In these discussions with the children it was systematically expressed that there are no right or wrong answers. Rather, they were told that the information they provided would generate knowledge about how it is to be a child since it is they who are the best ones to know (Johansson & Karlsson, 2013).

There is always, in an interview, a power imbalance between the interviewer and the participant, even more so when an adult interviews a child (Johansson & Karlsson, 2013). While, unfortunately, it is impossible to fully eliminate this power imbalance, one way of

reducing it is to talk to the child about everyday matters before the interview starts, for example a TV-show or their interest. If the child first has the opportunity to talk about something that it is comfortable with, this enables the child to relax and feel secure. The interview should take place in a well-known setting where the child feels safe. In the current case this was at school or at home, depending on the child's choice. Although according to Näsman (2012) the best thing is to let the child choose the place and time for the interview, this was not possible in the current case; there were over 100 children and many of the parents thought it was easier to meet the children in school since after-school activities are common.

During the interview the child was given the time it needed – without any sense of time pressure – to answer the questions. They were also told that if there were any questions that they were hesitant about, that they could come back to these later. The researcher was observant of the child's body language and, if the child started to look tired, the researcher asked if he/she wanted to take a break. After the interviews the children received a card with the name and phone number of the researcher in case of there was anything they wanted to ask about afterwards.

Sometimes, when using a multiple choice questionnaire, it can be difficult to know which answer to choose, and to make this easier symbols in shape of circles were used. Pictures were put in front of the children and, for example, while a small circle symbolized *never or seldom*, the largest circle represented the answer *often*. In this way children could visualize the answers and compare them to each other.

### **Sample characteristics**

An previous analysis by Arnett (2008) showed that the sample characteristics in influential psychology journals from year 2003-2007 derived from Western industrialized countries (96 % of research participants), and that 68 % were from the United States alone. This finding means that 96 % of research participants in these psychological studies were from countries representing only 12 % of the world's population (Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010). With these results it is obvious that the findings cannot be generalizable for more diverse populations (Henrich et al., 2010). It was an attempt to research a more diverse group that provided the impetus for the Parenting Across Culture project. In 2008, children then aged eight, and their parents were recruited for the Parenting Across Cultures project, findings from which are reported on in this thesis. The countries forming part of this project are China, Colombia, Italy, Jordan, Kenya, the Philippines, Sweden, Thailand, and the United States. The countries are different in several ways, for example by predominant religion, economics, and indices of child

well-being. However, one important fact is that, in both the Swedish and the larger multi-country sample, the families are selected on the basis that both parents were born in the country of residence. This choice was made because, in the Parenting Across Cultures project, it was necessary to have a dataset that could be used for between-country comparisons. A limitation equally affecting all four studies is the relatively small and homogeneous samples in each of the countries which make it important to point out that the results are limited in generalizability. Although Study II includes mothers and fathers from the same families in 10 communities in 9 countries, there are many countries in the world that are not included. The sample is comprised of families of children in a narrow age range (7-10 years) drawn mainly from a single urban area in each of the participating countries. There may, within any one country, be regional differences in parenting. Thus inter-parental agreement in terms of mean and relative levels could differ in parents of either younger or older children, as it could in parents married for different lengths of time. This is important to have in mind when considering the results, since they are not representative for Swedish people as a group.

Another factor is that, although the aim was to include both fathers and mothers in the studies, this was not always possible, particularly since in some couples one of the parents did not wish to participate. In Study IV, which has a focus on gender issues, there were nearly as many girls (50) as boys (53). The results on the other hand did not show any gender differences between girls' and boys' perceived agency. Children in the age of eight were recruited since this is an age where children are cognitively developed to a level to enable them to respond to questions about themselves and their parents, but are still very much affected by their parents' discipline strategies.

### **Information and consent**

Participants were recruited through schools, and both children and parents were first informed orally about the project at their schools. It is important that all involved participants are aware of the purpose of the study and that their participation is voluntary. A couple of days after these initial information sessions, the families were sent a letter with information and a consent form. The researcher contacted all of the families about a week subsequently to ask if they wanted to participate. Hence, the parents and children had time to think about whether or not to participate. The consent form provided information about how the interviews would be conducted, and that all information collected would be confidential and that no names or other facts that would expose the identities of the children or the parents would be revealed. Information was also provided, should the interviewer suspect that the parent or child was in some way getting hurt



or maltreated, that this would have to be reported to relevant authorities. This information could, of course, have had impact on the composition of the sample in terms of those agreeing to participation. The parents and children were informed that participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw from the research at any time they so choose, and without explanation (Greig & Taylor, 2007).

The parents gave both their own consent, and consent for their child's participation. This is common when interviews are made with children younger than 16 years of age (Greig & Taylor, 2007); parents are so-called gatekeepers who want the best for their children best and to protect them from anything adverse (ibid). After gaining consent from the parents, the children were themselves asked if they wanted to participate. While the parents provided written consent, the children gave their consent orally. According to Alderson and Morrow (2011), consent is important in all kinds of research and is not only required for so-called 'high risk' research. It is not up to the researcher to classify whether the research is low or high risk, since it is never possible to have a whole picture of the participant. The participant can, for example, be a child who is sensitive or worried.

Another issue that is discussed when children are participants is that researcher often contacts parents or other adults first (Näsman, 2012). It is not until after their approval that the child is approached. This might affect whether or not children agree to participate or not. If the parent has already given consent, the child might also do so, following what they might believe to be their parents' directive. In the studies included in the thesis the children were always asked for consent, a final time, before the start of each interview. The child was also informed that everything said in the interview would stay between the researcher and themselves, even if teachers or parents were to ask about what the child had said. Nor, the children were told, were they obliged to tell anything to anyone about what had been said in the interview. So, even if their parents have provided consent, the parents were not supposed to expose the children to any further questions (Näsman, 2012).

### **Measurements and analyses**

Before the research commenced, pilot studies were carried out with both parents and children. Interviews were conducted and parents and children had the opportunity to give feedback on the questions asked, for example questions which might need to be reformulated, modified or even removed. Both adults and children had suggestions as to how the clarity of certain items could be improved.

It is also important to discuss which questions are appropriate to ask and not, and in whose interest they are being asked (Alderson & Morrow, 2011). With the exception of the agency questions, all of the questionnaire items in these studies have been used before and have been tested in many countries, although mainly in the Anglo-Saxon countries. Measurements include, for example, the Parent Attribution Test (Bugental & Shennum, 1984), the Parental Modernity Inventory (Schaefer & Edgerton, 1985) and the *Parental Acceptance-Rejection/Control Questionnaire-Short Form* (PARQ/Control-SF; Rohner, 2005). The agency questions, on the other hand, although used before, had not been used with children as young as 10 years old. These questions were therefore modified to be more suitable for younger children so as to better accord with their everyday realities. One example is that instead of asking about experiencing ‘physical discomfort’, the question was formulated to read ‘*I do not get sad when I fall or get hurt*’.

One limitation in the analyses of the three first studies are that data are limited to those families in which both the mother and father provided data. The samples included a number of separated and divorced parents, where the divorced parents were in the minority. One assumption is that if the divorced groups had been included, disagreement in samples with separated or divorced parents would be greater in that parental separation or divorces often (but not always) can elicit greater disagreement or conflict about childrearing, as well as reduced involvement with one or both parents with the child. Parents’ attributions, attitudes and acceptance and rejection were self-reported and parents’ perceptions of their own parenting may not match their behaviors or others’ perceptions (Bornstein, Cote, & Venuti, 2001; Sessa, Avenevoli, Steinberg, & Morris, 2001). However, self-perceptions of parenting are important in their own right, and parental age, education, and social desirability bias to offset these limitations were controlled for. Further, the children’s perceptions of agency in Study IV was also self-reported, and it would be interesting to have parents’, teachers’ and peers’ answers regarding their perception of child agency in different contexts. Both parents and children in Sweden are rather good in knowing what is right and wrong in parenting. There are normative ways of thinking about how things are supposed to be, which can have had implications for the results.

### **Strengths and limitations of the four studies**

There are both strengths and limitations in the studies in this thesis, and some of them are discussed in the methodological sections. This section provides a short summary of both strengths and limitations, starting with limitations relating to all four studies.

A limitation equally affecting all four studies is the relatively small and homogeneous samples and limitations in terms of generalizability. Although Study II includes mothers and fathers from the same families in 10 communities in 9 countries, there are many countries from the world that are not included. The sample is comprised of school-based families of children in a narrow age range (7-10 years) drawn mainly from a single urban area and there may be regional differences in parenting, both when it comes to Sweden but also the other participating countries that are included in Study II.

The second limitation is that analyses are limited to self-reports, both for parents and children. However self-perceptions of parenting are important in their own right, and parental age, education, and social desirability bias to offset these limitations were controlled for. There was also a questionnaire for social desirability that was used to assess parents' social desirability bias. This however was not included for the children.

The third limitation to consider is the measurements that are used in the study and their validity. The aim has been to have good face validity and pretests in each country have helped to identify the questions and words that might be inappropriate for the participants, culturally insensitive, or elicited multiple meanings. With this ambition in mind, improvements were suggested in a cross-site meeting and all items were discussed. Despite this it can be that there are questions or words that are not exactly equal in their cultural meaning.

A fourth limitation concerns Study IV. When asked about perceived agency, the children received three vignettes to relate to, one vignette for each context. Whether they are comparable or not can be discussed, but the hope is that the vignettes can in some way give an indication of the differences that children experience in relationships with adults or peers. Thus, it could have been better to use several vignettes for each context.

However, despite these limitations, there are also some strengths with the studies. First, the studies concerning parents' reports are based on data from both mothers and fathers. This is not always the case when parenting is studied; indeed, it is often mothers that represent parenting when this is studied. By including both mothers and fathers, the results give a broader knowledge of parenting, not only in Sweden, but also in the other countries that are included. Another strength is that at least one of the studies, Study II, attempts to reveal more about parenting strategies than simply those in Western societies. This study includes cultures from different parts of the world, and although it is not generalizable, it nevertheless provides a more multifaceted picture of parenting that can have implications for future research. One question

that is put is whether there is a universal form of parenting? The gender issue has also been considered when it comes to the study of children agency, where both girls and boys were interviewed.

Further, the four related studies have a multi-method approach. The three first studies on parenting give quantitative results for parenting attitudes, attributions and child agency, whereas the fourth study adopts a qualitative approach for children's perceptions on agency in different contexts. There is also one longitudinal study (III) that contributes with a temporal perspective on how parenting can affect children's agency, which in turn can have implications on internalizing/externalizing behavior and school achievement. Finally, one strength that is not to be forgotten is the child perspective that is investigated in Study IV. Research concerning children should enable children's own voices to be heard. This is especially important when agency is attributed to children, and where the claim that they are part of their own development is made.

## **Conclusions and future directions**

The studies in this thesis contribute to the research area in parenting and children's agency by providing more knowledge about mothers' and fathers' perceptions of their parenting. The thesis also has a focus on children's agency, both from a parenting perspective and a child perspective. The results presented in the studies reported on here reveal that parents in Sweden are more progressive in their attitudes, and that mothers and fathers seem to think alike in parenting, maybe as a consequence of a striving for more equal parenting situations and with, for example, both mothers and fathers taking parental leave. Previous studies have shown similar results about parents in Sweden being progressive in their parenting (Carlson & Earls, 2001). Study I gives a picture of both mothers and fathers, which can be interesting for further research since it is more common to only include mothers in parenting studies. The study shows a commonality of thinking between mothers and fathers when it comes to parenting, and this might be one factor that affects whether parents stay together or divorce. It would be of interest therefore to compare divorced parents' perceptions of parenting and relate them to this study. Results of parenting studies can be of importance when, for example, parenting interventions are planned.

Study II gives a multicultural picture of acceptance-rejection in parenting and it is interesting to note that the differences between countries are hardly overwhelming. The hope is that multicultural studies, like this, can provide broader knowledge about parenting. It is shown

that there are aspects that are alike, but also that some aspects of parenting that differ depending on age, gender and culture. Moreover, there were not any large differences in how mothers and fathers perceived parenting depending on if they had a daughter or son. However, it seems that gender is something that is implicated in the ways in which mothers and fathers think cross over cultures. In some way it seems as if mothers think more alike cross culturally than mothers and fathers within the same culture. Thus, based on these results, future research adopting an intersectional approach could be of value.

Back to the Swedish sample, the progressive attitude is often related to a belief in the child and the child's agency. Further, equality is also demonstrated, but this time between parents and children. Generally Sweden is regarded as a country where children's rights are in focus, and this might be particularly true in structural terms where legislation provides children with the same rights as adults. Still, in the final study in this thesis, children express the belief that, in some cases, they do not feel that they are listened to by adults in the same way as with other children. Thus further studies on children's perceptions of agency would be provide a fruitful direction for future research. In what way can we build up contexts where our children can perceive agency, not only with peers but also with adults? This might be a challenge for parents and teachers to work with. The results can have implications for policy makers who claim the importance of children's rights, whereas the results show that children do not perceive this in their everyday encounters with parents and teachers. If, for example, the Convention of Children's Rights is followed and agency is perceived by children, this might have effects on children's health and subsequent school achievement. Further, school policies that have the good intention of making children part of discussions and decisions made in school should be more aware of children's own perceptions of the democratic intention. It was surprising to find out that the differences that children expressed between perceived agency in the parent, teacher and peer context were clearer than was expected.

Overall all it would be interesting to continue to study children's perspectives on parenting. For example, future research would also benefit from focusing on children's attributions and attitudes related to their parents. An additional direction for future research would be to ask the agency questions in another way, for example with vignettes or stories to get more of a qualitative perspective on agency. Sweden is a particularly interesting country in which to study children's agency because of societal norms promoting equality between parents and children. Carlson and Earls (2001) describe Sweden as place that has "a highly developed view of the child based on democratic values, which gives respect for the child as a person in

its own right and a belief in the child's inherent skills and potential" (p. 15). And finally, it would also be interesting to find out to what degree age has an effect on agency in different contexts, with the advantage of following pupils longitudinally. Such research could contribute to shedding light on issues such as in which way are children really permitted to play a part in making decisions about their own lives, and when might this be appropriate?

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## APPENDIX

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