Abstract Our comments on Keller et al's (2004) paper stress that new perspectives on the investigation of ethnotheories and childrearing practices are very much needed. Based on our own assumptions—the 'network of meanings' perspective—some constraints of the results reported in the target article are discussed. In order to alter some dominant and traditional Western ethnotheories, suggestions are made for taking into account both parents and relevant kin group members, not just the mother figure. Given the diversity of the existing ethnotheories, and the diversity of social strata, cultural psychology of parenting needs to go beyond the usual middle-class models. The need for an awareness of the dialogical processes established among researchers and participants is also highlighted. Finally, it is suggested that discourse analysis should go far beyond verbal communication, analyzing other kinds of social languages.

Key Words childrearing practices, dialogical processes, discourse analysis, ethnotheories, network of meanings, researcher–researched relationship

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Ethnotheories and Childrearing Practices: Some Constraints on Their Investigation

To make comments on other researchers' papers inevitably sets various challenges. One of these is the fact that the issues discussed can be seen from very diverse perspectives, as it is only from a specific viewpoint and based on some defined assumptions that we, discussants, are able to read, interpret and debate the paper. Moreover, it is by those standpoints and assumptions that we inescapably move the discussion in directions other than those initially proposed by the authors. As such, it is understood as a necessity to present our own theoretical-methodological background.

Our commentary on the work of Keller et al. (2004) is based on our socio-cultural perspective that focuses on the 'network of meanings' theoretical framework (Rossetti-Ferreira, Amorim, & Silva, 2000, 2004).

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That distinct perspective on development is rooted in the heritages of cultural-historical (Vygotsky, 1978, 1986; Wallon, 1934, 1942, 1959) and dialogical perspectives (Bakhtin, 1934–1935/1981, 1990; Vološinov, 1929/1986). Two major issues represent the central focus of our empirical investigations: infants' adaptations to day care centers (Amorim, 2002; Amorim, Vitória, & Rossetti-Ferreira, 2000; Amorim & Rossetti-Ferreira, in press) and babies/toddler's insertion into adoptive families. Thus, topics such as early child development, childcare and education, the roles of parents (and/or extensive family), and even the role of collective institutions on young children's care have been of great interest for us. That is basically why we became so identified *with* and interested *in* Keller et al.'s discourse analysis concerning ethnotheories.

Our work is based on a systemic research design set up by Rossetti-Ferreira, Amorim and Vitória (1994) which integrates the analysis of a variety of aspects implicated within a topic, allowing researchers to apprehend and discuss it from various perspectives, considering the diverse scenarios and participants, besides the socio-economic, political and cultural aspects involved in it. By following such a design, the research group is confronted by the complexity of the situations, within which a large set of elements are intermingled, being continuously reconfigured by the transformations on some of the involved dimensions. Our network of meanings perspective has the goal of articulating the various aspects/events involved in the situations, in order to investigate and understand the process dynamics and the complexity of human development.

The network of meanings presupposes that a basic human characteristic is the ability to co-construct meanings, knowledge, feelings, and one's own self through the 'inter-actions' established with others, in culturally organized and socially regulated environments. In relational and situated processes, each person's behavioral flow is framed by the context and each other's actions. Within the processes, the dynamic and dialectical network of interrelated meanings constrain a set of possible actions and interpretations to be undertaken, chiefly through the positions (Harré & Van Langenhove, 1999) and/or through the roles/counter-roles (Oliveira & Rossetti-Ferreira, 1994) reciprocally assumed by, attributed to, confronted by, negotiated with, and modified by the involved persons in the ongoing situation. Those positions or roles/counter-roles emerge in interpersonal experiences and their main characteristic is their intersubjective polarity. Since dialogical processes are recognized as fundamental in human development and existence (Bakhtin, 1934–1935/1981), a person's behavior is

always—even when alone—considered to be in relation to other partners.

The Network perspective also proposes that each of those diverse aspects involved is immersed and embedded in a socio-historical matrix, of a semiotic nature, encompassing social, economic, political and cultural elements, all historically constituted. This matrix is conceived of not as an 'external' aspect or as an abstract entity (with a set of values, beliefs, life-views, which are appropriated from the social group, during socialization), but as having concreteness in here-and-now situations, in personal actions and feelings, interactive fields and contexts.

The concreteness of the socio-historical matrix led us away from the traditional split between personal and collective aspects, leading to the articulation of micro and macro social levels. It is understood that the diverse social life conditions and multiple voices and discourses of the active person in interaction with partners in various contexts and situations are dynamically articulated, confronting, harmonizing, completing, transforming and creating new meanings and conditions.

With the flow of time and events, all those elements are continuously (re)articulated through multiple networks of meanings, configured by biological, physical, social, historical and cultural elements. Each of these (re)articulations constrains actions, emotions and thoughts, simultaneously setting limits and possibilities on persons' actions, emotions, thoughts and development. Within this perspective, a central role is attributed to the investigator, who is considered as an active research participant.

Childrearing Practices and Discourses

Childrearing has been a central focus of investigation in developmental psychology over the last fifty years. During the last few decades, a growing attention to this subject has been observed, inspired by the contrasting evidence of various childrearing models and discourses among different cultures. In addition, socio-economic and cultural transformations that increasingly led women to the labor market gave rise to the question of how to deal with children's education. This move took children's care beyond the exclusive responsibility of the mother or relatives at home, leading to the emergence of new and diverse discursive practices within the social group.

Keller et al.'s paper has a central interest in childrearing practices and discourses. Their focus, however, is on the contrasts between those practices and discourses among different cultures. The authors'

approach to the topic has support from Harkness and Super's (1992) work and their 'parental ethnotheories' concept, developed to explain the differences across cultures. This term was proposed to encompass the mutual cultural beliefs held by a social group about children's development and behaviors, and the influence of these beliefs on models of childrearing. The authors assert that the beliefs are often implicit, embedded in daily life experience, and are derived from the accumulated cultural experience of the community or reference group.

For Keller et al., childrearing models vary across cultures, implying that they 'have an adaptive function: they can be regarded as frameworks for the development of competence in a particular environment' (p. 294). Such a view is needed as it paves the way to new approaches on the issue of child development and education, and on mother–child and family–child relationships. Basically, it diverges from the mainstream theories, which have historically and dominantly been rooted in biological backgrounds, such as embryology, genetics and evolutionary biology (Baltes, Staudinger, & Lindenberger, 1999; Cairns, Elder, & Costello, 1995). The notion of epigenesis has been central to the field, leading to a teleological perspective on development (Erikson, 1959, 1968). In addition, the mother–child relationship has been discussed as grounded on biological assumptions (Bowlby, 1969), leading to the notion that, somehow, there is an ideal way of caring for a child.

Based on those assumptions, the role of caring for and educating young children has been attributed mainly and exclusively to women, at home, with the risk of possible problems in the child's health and emotional development if this is not accomplished. During the last century, this vision was dominant, chiefly in the fields of psychology and medicine, setting many mothers/parents in a very uncomfortable, anxious and guilty position whenever the family opted to give another kind of care for their child, or when life arrangements and conditions guided them to diverse forms of childrearing. In confrontation with such views, our research group has been carrying out investigations seeking to understand human development and young children's care through other perspectives. Keller et al.'s paper also has a similar goal.

Keller et al.'s aim is to identify cultural codes concerning parental ethnotheories. Moreover, it is to verify that not only are ideas (content) about parenting informed by the cultural environment, but also that the ways in which these ideas are formulated in language (markers) can express cultural codes.

The method they used to meet this goal involved interviews with mothers from three diverse cultural communities. Interviews were

conducted by using a set of five picture cards showing images that were understood to represent five relevant parenting systems during the first months of life. Seeking to understand the relation between content and style related to speeches concerning infant care, Schiffrin's (1994) proposal of linguistic discourse analysis was used. Through this, the authors compared statements by their cultural informants with respect to the same content domain; and also compared narratives by their cultural informants when talking about emotions, irrespective of the content domain addressed. The goal was to understand how cultural embodiment of ethnotheories occurs in parenting environments. This study was understood as an interesting avenue of investigation by which it is possible to analyze cultural orientations in conceptions about children, families and parenting and thereby shed light on children's early socialization environments. Our analysis of the theoretical-methodological choices made by the authors in their investigation, however, revealed that some dominant Western ethnotheories were still embodied in Keller and her collaborators' research practice.

Parenting or Mothering?

Keller et al. claim to shed new light on parents' childrearing practices. Nevertheless, despite embracing *parental* ethnotheories, it seems that they were caught by a traditional focus, where *the mother* is the central person under investigation. In their study, the mother is the only one to be interviewed; furthermore, in the figures used to trigger the interviews, only mothers can be seen caring for and relating with the baby (at least, in the presented pictures). Despite supporting their ground on *parental* ideas, the mother was always kept in the center of attention. The father and other family figures are totally absent.

This leads us to question where the father is in this parenting system. Should he not have a role in ethnotheories and childrearing? Do the authors assume that, despite the diverse social-cultural organization and family structure, the mother is still the exclusive caregiver? Are not the same Western societies' models of childrearing being used in the study, where the mother is the central figure, within a family constituted by very few members, living mostly isolated, with little interference from extended family and/or of other community members?

Moreover, despite the authors' statement that there are differences in childcare among cultures, it seems to us that there is a bias in the presented pictures (again, at least in those available in the paper): the child's context of care presented to the interviewed mothers was

exclusively a domestic environment, where mother and child seem to be all by themselves. The authors' option in presenting such pictures was, nevertheless, based on some basic assumptions, that is, the authors locate the emergence of self-construals in the family environment.

We are not setting ourselves in opposition to the relevance of the role of the mother or the family in children's care. However, we do argue that if this is a work that aims to encompass diverse cultural perspectives on child care, studying people from diverse social and family structures, embedded in their cultural specificities, should it not open itself to diversity by presenting a more varied set of pictures? Pictures in which the father and brothers/sisters, or even extended family and neighbors, could be contemplated? Or 'large collective houses' where children are cared for, together with other mother and babies? Or, in other collective environments, as babies in day care centres with their mothers and educarers? Those other contexts for raising young children have a great deal to do with parental ethnotheories. So, if the authors are searching for the diverse ways in which parental ethnotheories are expressed in daily life, why focus on the mother, at home? Or is it implicitly understood that despite diversity in cultures and ethnotheories, the child's basic structure of care is stable?

Homogeneity versus Heterogeneity

Keller et al., referring to various studies in the field, state that they recognize the 'existence of the other self-ways [or cultural models] as well as multiple modes of combinations in any cultural community' (p. 295). Moreover, they accept that there are intracultural and interindividual variations as well. In addition, they affirm that these orientations are negotiated in many ways within different cultures and over the lifespan, nuances becoming crucial. Finally, the authors state that the dependent and independent models or prototypes 'do not necessarily actually have to be found in any particular instance', and that 'the cultural pictures' of a prototype can vary (p. 296).

Notwithstanding their statements, the authors use the two cultural models—independent and interdependent selfways—as the main standpoint of their investigation. They explain that their use of these two models is due to the fact that both have been proven to be relatively stable over time.

Based on the independent and interdependent models, the authors analyze mothers' speech, seeking to find out if the mother's ideas and positionings fit within an independent and/or interdependent selfway.

In relation to this, some questions came to our mind: Why did they limit themselves to those two models? Why imprison data within two categories? On the one hand, they recognize the diversity inherent in parenting, but, on the other, their research frame leads to a homogenization of that diversity; to a simplification of the complex picture. Yet, they opt for working with these prototype models, homogenously localizing them within specific geographic areas—according to countries and to rural/urban environments. Nevertheless, any geographical area—country or town—is overflowing with diversity. For instance, in the case of the USA (usually homogenized by the label 'Euro-American'), it is well known that it is inhabited by a great deal of middle-class urban Latin-American, Afro-American, Asian-American and Native-American mothers, besides the Euro-American ones. There are not only middle-class mothers, but mothers from other social classes. More than that, within each of those groups and classes, there are interlinked a wide range of social, economic, ethnic and religious aspects, among others, with parents carrying certain childrearing beliefs and diversely educating their children.

Josephs (2002), commenting on the goal in psychology of working with cultural tools, pointed out that there are some problems with the notion of culture as defined by geographically located space (country), time (a particular historical period) and language (intelligibility). One of these problems is that by defining culture as a geographical space, the assumption is made of within-group homogeneity of the people within the space, while even when located in the same geographical space, people are heterogeneous due to virtual or real cultural voice contact with other societies. For Josephs, another problem is that cross-cultural psychology exclusively separates 'culture' (as an independent variable) from the person's psychological functioning (the respective dependent variables). However, the personal experience is guided by socio-cultural suggestions that are 'built in' to the self. Thus, any exclusive separation of person and culture is not adequate for explaining how this relational process of 'building in' works. Yet a third problem for Josephs is that cross-cultural psychology considers the self to be, 'on average', different in different societies. However, this general assumption does not help us to understand the basic principle of how the self is formed.

All in all, considering that one of Keller and her collaborators' goals is to provide 'a prototype[1] that can be used to frame conceptions of self on *a global scale*' (p. 296, our emphasis), we find it important to argue against the enduring practice of researchers using middle-class urban people to create generalizations over developmental and behavioral

topics. What can we learn among other social groups about conceptions of self, childrearing and development? How can we theoretically-methodologically apprehend diversity, yet keep the search productive?

Discourse Analysis as an Instrument for the Analysis of Euro-American and Nso Urban/Rural Cameroon Mothers' Speech

As the authors assert, 'interviews were qualitatively analyzed, using categories developed in previous studies . . ., identif[ying] specific features as being markers for independent or interdependent cultural orientations' (p. 300). In addition, data were analyzed with a selection of the many linguistic methods used for discourse analysis.

Concerning this methodology, we wonder whether it is adequate to use similar discourse analysis techniques for the interpretation of Euro-American as well as Nso mothers' speech. Considering a language with a definite structure (in the Nso case, it is not even alphabetical), organized under a certain logicality, carrying characteristic styles, and even constructing specific contents (and not others), how can one seek to apprehend, interpret and discuss the presented linguistic markers, which were based on and constructed within another language? How can one search for terms, expressions and/or language styles which sometimes (as the authors themselves affirm) can have no equivalence in the other language? How do we analyze such markers, as in this case, if they are the result of Lamnso translated into an English version?

Moreover, can methodological tools—such as discourse analysis—elaborated under specific socio-cultural and historical conditions, be applied to all kinds of communication in diverse social groups and cultures? By using such types of analysis, is it implicit for the authors that language structure is universal and that all languages encompass some common aspects?

Such questioning is deep-rooted in our assumptions concerning Bakhtinian notions of language (Vološinov, 1929/1986). Based on those, language is conceived as ideologically saturated. In addition, it is understood as never unitary, not even when a national language is considered. According to Bakhtin, language is always plural, deeply stratified through a multiplicity of social voices, dialects and social languages (professional jargons, besides familiar, generational, authoritative, socio-political, scientific and other languages). Each of them carries specific themes and viewpoints, with meanings, philosophical and moral values, all reified and relative, as they are specific group's languages.

Moreover, content, style and compositional construction are considered to be indissolubly merged. Yet a stylistic analysis must consider the whole set of elements related to the utterance, as the specific communication context, and the kind of relations and positions established among the interlocutors. Such an analysis must consider the whole verbal communication chain, within which the utterance is only an indefeasible link.

Based on these assumptions, we do not think that it is suitable to apply this type of analysis to languages so diversely structured. Somehow, this topic appears now and then to bother the authors themselves, as they occasionally have difficulty and show ambivalence when analyzing some markers (for example, the '*you*' marker, when discussing its appearance in English, German and Lamnso mothers).

In Keller et al.'s paper, the confrontation between the languages (understood in a broad sense) is clearly expressed in the second question directed to the Nso rural mother. Concerning this topic, it is worth saying that, in the investigation, the researchers' expectation is that the interviewee will choose among the five pictures, one by one, always guided by the question: 'Which is the best?' The whole procedure thus represents an involvement of aspects of value, which for the researcher should appear in a decreasing way. Such a procedure leads to the supposition that the interviewees will leave the worst, or the least valued, till last.

Contrary to this expectation, the rural Nso mother deals diversely with the situation. For her, it appears that there is a nice feeling regarding the last picture she picks up. Based on her own expectation, however, the interviewer tries to explore with the mother what would be *wrong* with that picture. After the Nso mother denies that anything is wrong, sustaining the high and positive value attributed to it, the researcher's conclusion stresses that the 'interviewer seems to sense some ambivalence that the mother is not willing to admit to' (p. 318).

Taking this into consideration, we question how appraisal aspects are manifested within a culture—and how they differ between cultural systems. For instance, is it always in a decreasing presentation? Or are there other possible ways to express it? How, in research, can we deal with these differences and divergences within our relationship with the interviewee?

The Researcher–Researched Relationship

As mentioned in our introduction, the researcher is not considered as neutral in any investigation. He/she always has an active role in the

construction of the way certain issues are explored, carrying and embodying the research with a whole set of assumptions. By doing so, he/she attributes meanings and positions to the investigated subject. Moreover, the contact with the studied topic sets him/her within a complex and dynamic network of meanings, which structures and canalizes questions and interpretations of the observed events, thus constraining the construction of narratives about it.

As such, we set ourselves in accordance with Wallon (1941/1986), who states that there is no observation that is an exact and complete copy of reality, as there are no observations without choices. These choices are always considered as determined by the relations that exist among the investigated issue and the researcher's expectations and hypotheses. Likewise, Maturana and Varela (1992) state that biological and structural aspects make it impossible for any human being to access reality independently of their own selves. We cannot escape from this situation.

Despite stressing this, we are not here proposing a total relativism, where everything can be possible. While the researcher may make claims, he/she cannot say everything. There are various constraining elements on the actual research setting, as well as on the events and behaviors. There are constraints on the meaning attribution processes, limited by our biological structure, by the historical time in which we live, and by our culture. There are constraints on the interpretation.

What we indicate here is the need, imposed on researchers, to consider and exercise their reflexivity upon their own assumptions. Following Maturana and Varela (1992), researchers have to act 'like an eye trying to see itself'. This notion has acted as a guideline for our research work, seeking to draw attention to our own role and to its possibilities, limits and implications. It has also been a guideline for our analysis of Keller et al.'s empirical data, as presented in their paper.

Let us take the first question as an example. Considering it, in the four interviews, it can be clearly seen that it was elaborated differently regarding each of the mothers. For the Euro-American mother, the question was set as: '*Which is,* ***according to you****, is the best . . .*' (p. 302, emphasis added). It was phrased similarly for the German mother: '*Which of the pictures shows what* ***you consider to be*** *. . . .* ' (p. 305, emphasis added). That is, the way the question is posed to the interviewee already presupposes that the interlocutor utilizes the independent model. The question is direct, objective and establishes the mother in an active role, through which she can autonomously present her own positions, which will be exactly the conclusions drawn by the authors.

A different procedure is used for the Nso mothers. For the Nso rural mother, the question is presented as: '*These are pictures of mothers with their three months old babies. Look at these five pictures and* ***tell me*** *which one is the best* ***for you****?'* (p. 307, emphasis added). A similar elaboration was made for the Nso urban mother: '*From these five pictures* ***show me*** *the one that is the best* ***for you*** *and* ***why you have chosen the picture****'* (p. 309, emphasis added). In these cases, the question is formulated almost as explaining the proposed topic, as if there was a supposition of an interlocutor with a greater difficulty in following it. The demand for an answer carries an expectation that it should be given in relation to the interviewer (tell me; show me), creating an interdependent relation among them. Finally, the position whereby the interviewer establishes the interviewee in the role of an active person comes almost at the end of the given idea (*for you*). Based on the answers, the authors' conclusion concerning these mothers is that they 'clearly embody an interdependent perspective' (p. 311).

Therefore, the way the questions were asked, and the interviewers' replies to the participants' answers, reveal that meanings had been implicitly attributed beforehand, establishing the interviewed in certain places/positions which guided the researchers' conclusions.

Another example can be seen again in the first question posed to the Nso urban mother. As seen above, the interviewer asks: '*show me the one that is the best* ***for you****'*, which led to the following answer, after one round: '*This picture is best* ***for me*** *because when you are. . . .*' (p. 309, emphasis added). In analysis, when commenting on the mother's use of the words *for me,* the interpretation given was: 'It might seem that this mother introduces her preference *indirectly* . . . {emphasis added}; however, this is a standard way of saying *I like it* in Lamnso' (p. 309). No consideration was given to the fact that the answers were fully grounded in the semantic field of the question asked.

Similar situations occurred in the Euro-American and German mothers' interviews. Both mothers seemed to intend to highlight their position as mother in relation to the child. The Euro-American mother, on one side, discussing the child's feeding, goes on to compare the use of formula and breastfeeding. Almost at the end of the elaboration of her idea, she mentions that breastfeeding is the '*only thing that distinguishes the mother from anyone else*' (p. 323), highlighting the importance of her role and her relation with the child. Such a relational aspect, however, was not really explored during the interview and analysis.

In the German mother's case, when answering why breastfeeding is important, among other orders of factors, she very timidly mentions, at the very end of her phrase, that it is '*because it's nice, too*' (p. 306). For

us, it seemed that she was pointing to her pleasure in the contact with the baby. Again, this topic was not explored in the interview (at least not in the framed speeches). Finally, conclusions concerning these mothers are that 'they clearly express an independent understanding of their person'. Furthermore, that 'relationship between mother and baby develops between two separate and independent persons' (p. 311).

Taking the Bakhtinian position on the dialogical processes, it seems to us that it is possible that the assumptions—autonomous/independent or interdependent selfways—are already set by the ways of asking the questions, and subsequently co-constructed in the interview. This issue is briefly mentioned by the authors, when they note that '[s]ome authors even suspect that parental ethnotheories emerge in response to interview questions that researchers pose' (pp. 294–295). However, they position themselves against this possible view.

Our comments do not seek to deny that there are differences between those cultures. Instead, it is being argued that researchers should consider deeply the methodology used, as well as identifying researchers' implicit positionings. Otherwise, there is a risk that the methodology of data collection will directly contribute to the results found, as the question investigated and the interpretation of the answer already carry the basic assumptions from which they depart.

Final Comments

Clearly, the authors' search for diverse discourses and practices regarding childrearing is a very interesting and valuable line of research. It should be widely explored, in order to shed light on this very nebulous field of children's education and care.

Such investigations could be greatly enriched by incorporating an even wider diversity of research participants, as discussed above, for an even greater diversity of ethnotheory models. This diversity of models should be explored by several instruments and perspectives, and moreover should even encompass diverse social classes, as well as different ethnic, economic, political and religious groups, not aiming to make the diversity fit into one single-class model. That will lead us to appreciate and learn how diverse social groups even among us deal with childrearing ideas and practices.

An interesting way to find out about these childrearing practices and ideas is to investigate them through observation (such as by video recording). Ethnotheories can be deeply revealed by analysis of the environments in which parents, relatives and/or other caregivers set

for the care and education of the child; by the people responsible for such care; by the promoted postures; by the way people talk to them (if they talk); by the tone of voice, the speed of the speech; by the emotions expressed (or not), promoted or inhibited; by the places to which people mainly direct children's field of vision; by the way they touch, hold, react, interact; by the (frequent or rare) glance directed (or not) to the child. As Bakhtin stressed, utterances are not only verbal. And we add that they encompass actions, emotions, postures, environmental organization, all of which can tell us a great deal about group/parental ethnotheories.

Of course, the observations will always be analyzed through the researcher's own field of meanings, knowledge and conceptions. However, by a strict analysis of the empirical data, which must include analysis of the researcher's role as well, new meanings and pathways can be constructed. Dialogicality is a necessary part of analysis, including the people who are being studied (children among their families), independent of the subject's age (since human beings, from birth, live and relate through dialogical processes). Such dialogicality analyses need to consider the dialogical processes established among research participants and researchers in the situated contexts within which the research is conducted. Research is best understood as a co-construction. Through these various pathways, avenues, streets and roads we can take new steps towards the understanding of how relational processes occur; how cultural values get embodied in childcare practice and in the early social environment; and, how these aspects are negotiated with/by active human beings (including infants), contributing to the constitution of the person's self, the group's ethnotheories, and continuously giving life to and even transforming them both.

Notes

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1. The two selfways orientations provided by the independent and interdependent models.

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