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## **MOTHERS' CONVERSATIONAL STYLES ACROSS CULTURES: THE CASES OF ESTONIA, FINLAND, SWEDEN, AND THE U.S.**

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This chapter addresses everyday family interactions with teenagers, with a special focus on cross-cultural similarities and differences in mothers' conversational styles. The aim of the study was to examine whether the pattern of language use that has been found to be typical of North American middle-class mothers – e.g., being talkative, but not directive – characterizes also maternal conversational style of mothers in the stereotypically silent Scandinavian and North European region.

A lion's share of prior research on mother-child interaction has been conducted in Anglo-European contexts, in the United States and Great Britain. Data from contexts other than Anglo-American ones, for languages other than English, are under-represented (cf., Lieven, 1994). These within-culture studies have revealed that some mothers tend to be primarily concerned with engaging children into conversation, while others are talking mainly with the purpose to control children's behavior (Halle & Shatz, 1994; Hoff-Ginsberg, 1991; McDonald & Pien, 1982). Furthermore, children whose mothers engage more frequently in conversations with them have been found likely to be more talkative, and to have more developed linguistic and conversational abilities than others. For example, Hutterlocher, Haight, Bryk, Seltzer, and Lyons (1991) demonstrated that the amount of maternal talk is the best predictor of children's growth in vocabulary. Similarly, less talk addressed to children in non-Western countries compared to children in the U.S., France, and Russia, has been seen as a source of slower pace of linguistic development (Slobin, 1972). The use of the conversation-eliciting style has been regarded as the optimal way of facilitating cognitive, social and emotional development in the child, in contrast to a more directive interaction style. Maternal conversational style has also been found to vary as a function of the socio-economic strata the families belong to, in particular of the SES-corresponding differences in

parental beliefs and attitudes (see Hoff-Ginsberg, & Tardif, 1995, for an overview). It is known, that parents in lower socioeconomic strata, on the average, value conformity, whereas parents from higher socioeconomic strata value independence and self-direction in their children. Hoff-Ginsberg (1992) found middle-class mothers to differ significantly from working-class mothers in their bigger amount of talk, and smaller amount of direct control of children in everyday activities. The directive style, in turn, has been treated as something typical of lower SES mothers (see Bernstein, 1965; Hart, & Risley, 1992; Heath, 1983; Hoff-Ginsberg, 1991; Hoff-Ginsberg, & Tardif, 1995; Ochs, & Schieffelin, 1984).

While social class may be an important predictor of North American mothers' preferred conversational style, comparative research on mother-child interaction has documented a rather wide cultural variability in respect to how much mothers talk with their children, and how much talk they expect from their children (Bornstein, Tal, & Tamis-LeMonda, 1991; Schieffelin & Ochs, 1986). American, particularly European American mothers have been consistently found to be more likely than mothers from non-Western cultures to be talkative, and to encourage their children to talk (Bornstein et al., 1991; Clancy, 1986; Fernald & Morikawa, 1993; Fischer, 1970; Johnston & Wong, 2002). Clearly, the characteristics of the mothers' conversational style are not reducible to social class differences. For example, a comparative study on middle-class American and Puerto Rican mother-infant interaction found the Puerto Rican mothers to direct their infants' attention more often and to issue directives in the form of commands much more frequently than their Anglo counterparts (Harwood, Schoelmerich, Schulze, & Gonzalez, 1999). There have also been a few attempts to examine directly both the amount of maternal talk and the control of children in everyday mother-child interactions cross-culturally. In a cross-cultural study of middle-class mothers' interaction with 2-year-old children the U.S. mothers were found to be more talkative in comparison with mothers from Estonia and Sweden (Junefelt & Tulviste, 1997). Estonian middle-class mothers were found to talk least, and to elicit least conversation from their 2-year-olds, being highly directive at the same time (i.e., concerned with telling children what to do or not to do by issuing a lot of imperatives). They wanted their children to concentrate on ongoing activities and discouraged talking while eating (e.g., "It's meal-time now. Don't talk!") or puzzle solving (e.g., "Don't talk, think!"). The

results demonstrating the Estonian middle-class mothers' tendency to control children's behaviour and to be less interested in children's verbalization challenge the view that the controlling maternal style is a characteristically working class phenomenon, and that the conversational styles are mainly SES-related. Hence, the following questions arise. Is the amount of maternal talk and conversational style a culture-specific phenomenon, rather than an indicator of the mother's socioeconomic status? Which factors account for variation in the cultural pattern of the verbal aspect of parenting?

A reason for cultural differences in maternal conversational styles might be the fact that cultural differences exist also in ways in which people use the language while talking with adults. It is a well-established fact that people in some societies or even in some ethnic groups in the U.S. (e.g., the East Asian Americans) generally talk less because they have different cultural practices and meanings of talking and not talking than those of talkative European Americans (Kim, 2002; Kim & Markus, 2002). Similarly, the explanation of the observed cultural differences in the amount of verbal control over children's behaviour and in the directness of the means of controlling children (i.e., direct imperatives vs. indirect declaratives or questions) may lie in the finding that people from different cultures differ greatly in terms of conversational indirectness (see Blum-Kulka, 1997; Holtgraves, 1997). In any case, the amount of talk addressed toward children seems to reflect a culturally rooted meaning and practice of talking and not talking common in a given sociocultural context. The view that verbal communication is a prominent value in the U.S. (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1986) has been demonstrated to be true in numerous cross-cultural studies on mother-child interactions. Hess et al. (1980) found that the U.S. mothers expected verbal assertiveness and social skills in their children, while Japanese mothers expected self-control, compliance and social courtesy. The studies suggest that North American mothers regard their children as potential active conversational partners from birth and foster their communicative development from early on. Because talkativeness is positively valued, children are socialized into their culturally prescribed role of an active speaker, whereas in Japan, where the importance of listening (as opposed to talking) is stressed, children are socialized into the role of an active listener in interactions (see Blum-Kulka & Snow, 1992; Clancy, 1986). Blum-Kulka (1990, 1997) found that American

mothers of schoolchildren also paid considerably more attention to following conversational norms and turn taking than mothers from Israel at the dinner table.

The aim of the current paper is to examine maternal conversational styles in the stereotypically silent Scandinavian and North European socio-cultural contexts as they might differ from those in the U.S. The data presented here were derived from 2 separate cross-cultural studies on mothers' mealtime interaction with adolescents. The first study was conducted in Estonian and European American families (Tulviste, 2000), the second study in Estonian, Finnish, and Swedish mono- and bilingual families (Tulviste et al., 2003a, 2003b). All data were collected under similar circumstances. The target children's age group – adolescence – was selected for the study because it is the time of major developmental growth in pragmatic competence, i.e., the ability to use the language in various contexts in socially and culturally appropriate ways (Cooper & Aderson-Inman, 1988). Also, considerably less research has been conducted on mothers' interaction with children in this developmental period than in infancy or early childhood.

The studies were conducted in four countries – in Estonia, Finland, Sweden, and the U.S. As told above, most of the previous research on maternal conversational style has been done in the U.S. – in a country where in many contexts talking is a highly valued skill (see Kim & Markus, 2002). Therefore, the language socialization pattern of mothers of adolescents living in the U.S. has been compared to that of mothers from socio-cultural settings where talking seems not to have the same meaning as in the U.S. People from Scandinavian and North European regions, especially from Finland, are known for their meager talk production. "The silent Finns" (Lehtonen & Sajavaara, 1985; Sajavaara & Lehtonen, 1997; Smith & Bond, 1999) have been characterized both by others and by themselves as least talkative among the Europeans. It is important to point out that the Scandinavian Swedes and the Finno-Ugric Estonians have also been viewed as not very talkative (Daun, 1996; McCroskey et al., 1990; Tulviste, 2000). Besides many similarities there are several differences among the three neighboring countries. Namely, Sweden is a country with long traditions of "equality ideology" (Welles-Nyström, 1996) where even young children are treated as equal persons to other family members and their independence is frequently stressed (Daun, 1991). In this respect, the

Swedes have been noted to differ also from the somewhat more conservative Finns. Estonia, in turn, spent fifty years incorporated to the authoritarian society of the former Soviet Union, and was in isolation from its democratic Nordic neighbours (such as Finland and Sweden) until 1991. It is possible that these differences are reflected also in maternal conversational styles. Moreover, seeking for an answer to the question, to what degree maternal conversational styles are determined by the peculiarities of the specific culture and/or ethnicity, Estonian and Finnish families living in their countries of origin were compared with those living in Sweden. It has been found by previous research that control exercised by the family is greater in minority groups in comparison to the host society (see Garcia Coll & Brillón, 1995). The immediate context is very likely to influence the conversational patterns of bicultural families. For example, Blum-Kulka (1997) revealed in a comparative study on Israeli, Jewish American and American Israeli families' mealtime discussions that the American Israeli sample was systematically different from both the American and the Israeli samples.

### ***Hypotheses***

1. Based on previous research we expected the U.S. American mothers to be most talkative, and all Finno-Ugric mothers (Estonian and Finnish mono- and bicultural mothers), regardless of their place of living, least talkative. Swedish mothers were expected to take a place somewhere between the U.S. American mothers and the Finno-Ugric mothers.
2. Similarly, we predicted that the U.S. American mothers are more likely to encourage their children to talk, and all Finno-Ugric mothers, in contrast, do not prefer the conversation-eliciting conversational style. As to the Swedish mothers, we expected them to take a place somewhere between the U.S. American mothers and the Finno-Ugric mothers in this respect.
3. We expected the directive conversational style to be preferred by Estonian mothers. It was predicted that Swedish, U.S. American, and Finnish mono- and bicultural mothers control their teenagers' behavior relatively seldom. We also expected the Estonian mothers living in their country of origin (in Estonia) to be more directive than the Estonian mothers living in Sweden.

## Method

The cross-cultural comparison is based on the following six samples: 10 American (NorAme) families of European descent living in the U.S., 17 Estonian (EstEst) families living in Estonia, 17 Finnish (FinFin) families living in Finland, and 19 Swedish (SweSwe), 18 Finnish (SweFin) and 18 Estonian (SweEst) families living in Sweden. The target children's sex distribution was rather even in all samples, 4 boys and 6 girls (ages 13-17,  $M = 14.7$ ,  $SD = 1.6$ ) in the U.S. families, 10 boys and 7 girls (ages 9-13,  $M = 10.88$ ,  $SD = 0.86$ ) in Estonian monolingual families, 7 boys and 10 girls (ages 10-12,  $M = 10.88$ ,  $SD = 0.78$ ) in Finnish monolingual families, 9 boys and 10 girls (ages 9-13,  $M = 10.94$ ,  $SD = 1.13$ ) in Swedish monolingual families, 8 boys and 10 girls (ages 9-12,  $M = 10.17$ ,  $SD = 0.99$ ) in Finnish bilingual families, and 8 boys and 10 girls (ages 10-13,  $M = 11.72$ ,  $SD = 1.07$ ) in Estonian bilingual families. As no sex differences were found in the preliminary analysis, this variable was not included in further analyses.

The mothers' education ranged from college education to university degrees. All families were middle-class, as defined by the mother's educational level and/or profession, and living in urban settings. In most families there was more than one child. No family had a child younger than 3 years.

The suitable participants were identified through elementary schools, including the Estonian School in Stockholm (for the SweEst sample) and the Finnish School in Stockholm (for the SweFin sample). Letters shortly describing the study were sent to the early adolescents' families asking to indicate their willingness to participate. The Swedish families' data were collected in Stockholm, the Estonian data in Tallinn and Tartu, the Finnish in Oulu, and the U.S. American data in Greensboro, North Carolina. These families were monolingual and spoke – respectively – Swedish, Estonian, Finnish, and English as the first language. Swedish is an Indo-European language of Germanic subgroup. Estonian and Finnish belong to the Finno-Ugric languages and have many similar characteristics: both are agglutinating languages, both have a large number of cases – 14 in Estonian and 15 in Finnish language, both lack grammatical future and grammatical gender. All American families were of European descent, and the mothers were born in the U.S.

For bicultural samples in Sweden, only the families who reported that Estonian or Finnish is their home language and they speak Estonian or

Finnish at home with their teenagers were selected to participate in the study. All Estonian mothers had lived in Sweden for more than 5 years at the time of the study, 9 mothers were born in Sweden. Finnish mothers had lived in Sweden some twenty years, all families were bilingual. Both in Estonian or Finnish schools in Stockholm children participated in bilingual education programs.

### **Procedure**

Mealtime interactions were videotaped at participants' homes. The participants were asked to select for videotaping the meals when they are not in a hurry. They were told that the mother and the early adolescent must be present; all other family members were encouraged to participate for the meal to be as "ordinary" as possible. They were asked to ignore the fact that they were being recorded. The recording researcher interacted minimally with the participants once the videotaping began. In EstEst families the mean duration of a meal was 15,12 min ( $SD = 6,33$ ), in SweEst families 20,36 min ( $SD = 7,80$ ), in SweSwe families 20,52 min ( $SD = 5,61$ ), in SweFin families 19,67 min ( $SD = 6,98$ ), in FinFin families 19,39 min ( $SD = 5,32$ ), and in NorAme families 22,54 min ( $SD = 6,34$ ). In each country a native speaker (a graduate student or a researcher) conducted the recordings, made transcripts and analyzed the data. Gathering data in different cultures and different languages necessitated a lengthy joint training of transcribing and data analyses. At least one transcript from each sample was translated into English, and analyzed by all researchers. All coding questions and problems were discussed with the research group.

The composition and number of family members participating at meals varied considerably both within and across samples. In the current study the amount of talk and the regulatory speech analyses were performed only for the mothers. All video recordings were transcribed using the conventions of the Child Language Data Exchange System (MacWhinney, 1991).

1. *Talkativeness* – the average number of utterances per minute (cf., Hoff-Ginsberg, 1991). An *utterance* was separated from subsequent utterance primarily on the basis of intonation contour and pause duration.

2. *The type of regulatory speech*. The regulatory utterances were identified in the transcripts, and coded according to the mothers' aim (to control behavior or to elicit talk) into the following categories:



- (1) *behavioral directives*: utterances that involved giving commands or permission, requesting or encouraging desirable action, or preventing the conversational partner from acting (e.g., "Eat salad!", "You have nice moustache [from milk]");
- (2) *conversation-eliciting utterances*: utterances that attempted to elicit a verbal response from the conversational partner (e.g., "Why do you think so?", "What happened to her?", "Tell more!").

The behavioral directives were coded by two independent judges with more than 83% agreement on all protocols. Disagreements were resolved through discussion and scrutinizing the original recordings when necessary.

### Results

There were large individual and cultural differences in the amount of talk and in the duration of meals (see Tulviste, 2000; Tulviste et al., 2003b). Proportional, instead of absolute, frequency measures were used to attain measures of maternal control without the influence of the amount of talk. Thus, behavioral directives and conversation-eliciting utterances were analyzed in terms of frequencies per utterances.

A one-way ANOVA yielded significant effects of Culture (EstEst vs. SweEst vs. SweSwe vs. SweFin vs. FinFin vs. American) on mothers' talkativeness,  $F(5, 93) = 4.39, p < .005$ .

Table 1

*The Mean Values for the Mothers' Amount of Talk, Conversation-Eliciting Utterances and Behavioral Directives across Samples*

	EstEst (n=17)	SweEst (n=18)	SweSwe (n=19)	SweFin (n=18)	FinFin (n=17)	NorAme (n=10)
Amount of talk	7.39 <sup>5,6</sup>	7.10 <sup>5,6</sup>	9.94 <sup>1,2,4,5</sup>	7.66 <sup>5,6</sup>	7.32 <sup>5,6</sup>	9.46 <sup>1,2,4,5</sup>
Conversation-eliciting*	0.28 <sup>5,5</sup>	0.28 <sup>5,5</sup>	0.12 <sup>1,2,4</sup>	0.20 <sup>1,3,6</sup>	0.20 <sup>1,2,6</sup>	0.31 <sup>3,4,5</sup>
Behavioral directives*	0.09 <sup>2,3,4,5,6</sup>	0.03 <sup>1</sup>	0.05 <sup>1,4</sup>	0.02 <sup>1,3</sup>	0.04 <sup>1</sup>	0.02 <sup>1</sup>

Note. \*per all utterances. Superscripts show significant differences among samples according to the LSD Test at  $p < .05$ ; the samples are marked as follows: 1 = EstEst; 2 = SweEst; 3 = SweSwe; 4 = SweFin; 5 = FinFin; 6 = NorAme.

As Table 1 shows, there are two distinct samples – Swedish and U.S. American mothers – that were most talkative among the investigated samples.

A one-way ANOVA yielded significant effects of Culture (EstEst vs. SweEst vs. SweSwe vs. SweFin vs. FinFin vs. NorAme) on mothers' conversation-eliciting utterances,  $F(5, 93) = 5.62, p < .0005$ ; the American mothers and mothers from both Estonian samples elicited talk significantly more frequently than the Swedish mothers and mothers from both Finnish samples.

A one-way ANOVA yielded significant effects of Culture (EstEst vs. SweEst vs. SweSwe vs. SweFin vs. FinFin vs. NorAme) also on mothers' behavioral directives,  $F(5, 93) = 6.82, p < .0001$ , due to the fact that Estonian mothers living in Estonia used the directives significantly more frequently than mothers from other samples.

### Discussion

The study focused on the question whether the pattern of language use that has been found to be typical of North American middle-class mothers – i.e., being talkative, but not directive – characterizes also maternal speech in the stereotypically silent Scandinavian and North European region.

As expected, the results of the study confirmed that the U.S. American mothers were talkative. An unexpected finding was that the Swedes – originally treated as “silent Scandinavians” – talked as much as the U.S. American mothers. These two distinctly talkative samples differed greatly from all other samples of the study. The data showing that the Swedes were as talkative as Americans might reflect a change in socialization styles that took place in Sweden in the 1960s. During interviews, many Swedish parents and grandparents expressed their opinion that nowadays people are talking much more than it was common in Sweden when they were young.

The Estonian mothers did not produce more speech than the “silent” Finns. The bicultural and bilingual Estonian and Finnish mothers living in Sweden were, in respect of their scarce talk, similar to their monocultural Estonian and Finnish counterparts. Thus, little talk appeared to be something typical of all Finno-Ugric mothers, regardless of their place of living.

Contrary to the prediction, infrequent use of conversation-eliciting utterances was not typical of all four Finno-Ugric samples. Quite the reverse, mothers from both Estonian samples encouraged talking as frequently as the U.S. American mothers. Consequently, the Estonian teenagers residing in Sweden occurred to be as talkative as Swedish monocultural teenagers, albeit teenagers in Estonian families living in the country of origin talked very little in spite of being continuously encouraged by their mothers (Tulviste et al., 2002b).

Cross-cultural differences also occurred in the frequency of controlling behavior. As expected, the Estonian mothers in Estonia had a strong tendency of being concerned with controlling the child's behavior. Interestingly, the Estonian mothers living in Sweden did not take a place somewhere between the monocultural Estonian and Swedish mothers in respect of controlling children – they showed almost no interest in behavioral control. Thus, the study contributed to the previous findings the results showing that the Estonian monocultural mothers made actual attempts to verbally control the children's immediate behavior more frequently than the mothers using the same linguistic system – Estonian language – but residing in a different country – in Sweden. Therefore, we can say that the country in which the family lives seems to have a great impact on real-life conversational style.

Our findings of the Estonian mothers' tendency to control frequently their children's behavior stand in contrast to the commonly held assumption that middle-class mothers are not directive. One might expect that it is partly due to the Estonian parents' upbringing in an authoritarian society (e.g., the former Soviet Union) where it was forbidden and dangerous to elicit talk and behavior unsupportive of the ruling Soviet ideology. Surprisingly, analogical Latvian data (unpublished research material) contradicted the latter view by showing that the Latvian mothers were not as directive as the Estonian mothers. Furthermore, it proved difficult to categorize mothers from different samples on the basis of the relative frequency of controlling behavior vs. eliciting conversational participation from teenagers into different conversational styles. Namely, the U.S. American mothers and the Estonians living in Sweden were clearly more likely than the others to prefer the conversation-eliciting style. The Swedish mothers and both Finnish samples used both types of regulatory utterances significantly less, and the Estonian mothers significantly more frequently than others.

Clearly, the relationship between the two styles is more complex than that of two opposites. On the other hand, within samples it was easy to identify mothers who clearly preferred the controlling conversational style, as well as mothers who were more likely to use the conversation-eliciting style.

Summarizing, there is considerable evidence that the within-culture differences in maternal conversational styles are reflected also in the cross-cultural differences. Therefore, one might speculate that the factors that account for variation within any single culture, might be responsible also for cross-cultural variation. There is still little that is known about these factors. Some authors have ascribed the differences in maternal conversational style to differences in maternal beliefs and values about the nature of the child and his/her development, about children's place in the community and about the parental role as such (Clancy, 1986; Heath, 1983; Ochs & Schieffelin, 1984). Others have explained the variation by culture-specific concepts of selfhood (e.g., independently vs. interdependently oriented self as described by Markus and Kitayama, 1991). According to this view, middle-class mothers in certain cultures might be similar to Anglo-American working-class mothers in respect of valuing an interdependent self. Thus, these parents would encourage children to be rather relation-centered than emotionally self-focused, and they do not promote the expression of individuality, personal opinions, and self-determination to the extent typical of middle-class Anglo-European mothers. There are data supporting this view. Namely, the Swedish teenagers were found to differ from Estonian and Finnish teenagers by talking more and having longer negotiations with other family members (Tulviste et al., 2003b; De Geer et al., 2002). In addition, the Estonian mothers living in Estonia were found to differ from the Estonian mothers living in Sweden by a considerably lower emphasis on the value of self-direction (Tulviste & Kants, 2001).

Furthermore, in the light of these findings it seems to be questionable also whether the frequent control of children's behavior has a definite negative effect on child development, as it has been suggested by some authors. Some of the previous findings deepen this doubt. For example, Wang and Phinney (1998) found that Chinese-American children's cognitive competence was positively related to the authoritarian parenting style – a result that contradicts to the negative connotation that the authoritarian

parenting style traditionally has in developmental psychology, based on Anglo-American studies. Great variability has emerged also in how children in various cultures perceive parental control. For example, it was shown that in North America and Germany, parental control was perceived as parental hostility and rejection, in Japan, in turn, it was perceived as parental warmth and acceptance (see Kâğıtçıbaşı, 1996). All these studies demonstrate the culture-specificity of ways of talking with children. The optimal way of verbal socialization seems to differ across countries, ethnic groups, and language communities.

In sum, the study supported the suggestion that in regions where people generally talk less (e.g., the Finno-Ugric samples), due to different cultural practices and meanings of talking and not talking than those of talkative European Americans, mothers are also talking less while talking with their teenagers. Educational practice in the U.S. with non-native speakers, especially with East Asian background (see Kim & Markus, 2002), and the current comparative data of similarly meagre talk production of Estonians and Finns living in their country of origin and in Sweden, demonstrate that the cultural practice of talking seems to be relatively difficult to change. An intriguing question arises: should it be done at all? It is known that talkativeness carries with it a psychological "meaning" that varies across cultures (Kim & Markus, 2002). There seems to be a traditional culture-specific balance of silence and speaking. Should it be disturbed? It is also known that on the average people favour the conversational styles more typical of their culture. For example, British managers in American companies in Great Britain favoured the typical British communication style and perceived the American style as being comparatively dysfunctional, while the American managers said in interviews the same about the British communication style (Dunkerley & Robinson, 2002). But the question remains – should mothers in relatively silent cultures try to talk more with their children and to encourage their children to speak up at home? Before answering, however, studies should be designed to compare how maternal talkativeness and conversational style are related to child development in various cultures. For example, whether the finding of Anglo-American studies (see Beyer, 1995; Masur, & Turner, 2001) showing that children of more talkative and less directive mothers are likely to score higher on measures of linguistic, cognitive and emotional competence, holds true in the cultures where talkativeness has not as high repu-

tation and mothers' control as low reputation as in the Anglo-American context.

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