

## **PARENTS' ROLES IN CHILDREN'S MENTAL REPRESENTATIONS: AN EMPIRICAL STUDY**

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**Abstract:** *The world today treats gender issues delicately and under the authority of political correctness. Gender equality, the rights and obligations of men and women, and equity in their authentic establishment are topics treated differently according to the given socio-cultural context. This study explores the impact of this context on children's mental representations, and presents an in-depth description of their image of mother and father, in a young democracy, where religion unites the national perspective and vocally defines gender roles. For this research, the drawings of a group of primary school students were analysed (n=215). Also, students were asked to describe their mother and father in an open question survey. The analysis presents separate images of the two parents, puts together common characteristics, and makes connections with the socio-cultural environment. The voice of change is heard through the aspects encountered in children's mental images.*

**Keywords:** *parents' roles; children; mental representation; socio-cultural context;*

### **1. Introduction**

The first part of children's life takes place in the family, and this fact leads to decisively curving their personality. At the individual level, in future terms, parents' image, with their roles deeply and instinctively analysed and absorbed by children, translate into a perpetuation of psychological characteristics, which, good or bad, are resistant to change, and the probability to direct their future family life is high (Winnicott, 2018).

At macro level, the parental model, culturally impregnated (Hussain, Naz, Khan, Daraz, & Khan, 2015; Liben, 2014), is carried on by children through the common denominator found in mental images and expressed in behaviour (Eccles, Jacobs, & Harold, 1990; Knafo & Galansky, 2008; Reilly, Neumann, & Andrews, 2016), that further define social values, beliefs, and attitudes (Vygotskiĭ & Cole, 1978).

Still, the world is changing. Where does this change come from? The voice of children, as an echo of processing the mental images in relation to the changes in the socio-cultural context – much more dynamic and, at the same time, more uniformized by social mobility (Gariup, 2017; Ivic, 2016), produces transformations in the common denominator (Surr, 2017). In this process of transformation, children's perception of parents, with their already modernized roles in a constantly changing socio-cultural environment, is an important variable.

#### **1.1. Children's mental representation**

Intergenerational relations have become more and more important (Bengtson, 2001; Bertram, Baayen, & Schreuder, 2000; Saraceno, 2008; Swartz, 2009). When analysing our society, problems regarding the family as a social unit are important variables to take into consideration. Here, the intergenerational relations are examined through the relations between parents and children. The study of this relation requires a two way look: first, the impact of parents in children development (Vandell, Belsky, Burchinal, Steinberg, &

Vandergrift, 2010), and second, the *new* reversed by children in their own families and in the society, in general (Jans, 2004; Woodhead, 2006; Vandell et al., 2010).

Mental representations are the background for our attitudes, behaviour and beliefs. A drawing can be a valuable source of revealing children's mental representation (Cox, 1993; Farmer, Spearman, Qian, Leonard, & Rosenblith, 2018; Klepsch & Logie, 1982). What children can't express in words, we can find in their drawing.

Karmiloff-Smith (2018) articulates, regarding children's drawings, that "development is accounted in terms of reiterated cycles of change from internal representations specified as a sequentially fixed list, embodying a constraint that was inherent in the earlier procedural representations, to internal representations specified as a structured, yet flexibly ordered set of manipulability features" (p. 40).

Concerning parents mental representation in children's minds, Halford (1993) argues that cognitive development is experience driven. These experiences curve the mental images of models that children will further represent. A series of factors build these experiences and the result is not an accurate representation of what is perceived, but a cumulation in which new correlations merge in original outcomes.

For this study, the variables inside children's mental representation process are the mother's role, the father's role, and the socio-cultural environment.

## ***1.2. Socio-cultural context and parents role***

The city of Sibiu, the place where this study was done, is situated in central Romania, in the region of Transylvania. Along the history, the place, like the country as well, passed through a series of cultural and demographic changes. Different parts of today's territory of Romania were in the composition of Dacia, the Roman Empire, the Ottoman Empire, the Russian Empire, and the Austro-Hungarian Empire. From 1945 to 1989 Romania was under the communist regime. Since 1989, the country is a democracy, administrated as a semi-presidential republic.

At present, the majority of the population in Sibiu is represented by Orthodox Romanians (94%), besides Roman Catholic, Greek Catholic and the Evangelical-Lutheran (INSSE, 2018). The proportion characterizes the population of Romania as well.

Is important to mention the inhabitants religion because, as studies report, parental style is influenced by the religious beliefs and the image of God defines gender roles (Baring, 2012; Chou & Uata, 2012; Landor, Simons, Simons, Brody, & Gibbons, 2011). Romania has a European-national orientation, 51% of Romanians claim to be equally proud of being Romanians and Europeans. Still, Romanians define their cultural identity through their religion, namely being Orthodox, and their birth place, geographically located inside Romania's boundaries (Standard, 2012). This important variables defines life in all its aspects and echoes parenting as well (Lebedeva, Nadezhda, Dimitrova, Radosveta, Berry, 2018).

As mentioned above, Romania is a relatively young democracy. Although, more the 40 years of communism have deeply influenced the lives of Romanians in all life aspects. The Family Code issued in 1954 enforced the principles of equality between men and women in public and private life. Both men and women had to be employed with supposed equal rights, and the state was to be responsible for their children education. As Dumanescu (2014) states, traditional roles of the women (raising children and domestic activities) were actually doubled by jobs, leading to overwhelming responsibilities. Fathers remained entirely providers for their families and education was to be ensured by state schools. This was the ideal family in communism. Still, a duplicity of behaviour was observed (Falls, 2011). The phenomena were essentially a way of maintaining the traditional roles, while obeying regime ideology.

Today, the nuclear family, with traditional roles, remains dominant (Mihai & Butiu, 2012). “Women tended to embrace pre-communist assumptions about their own status in society, most notably the value of their role in the family and the deep differences between men and women”, articulates Robila (2002, p.147). The author also concludes that “it is still expected, both formally and informally, that women should find their satisfaction primarily in family and motherhood. While parenthood is highly desired by both men and women, household tasks are expected to be performed by women” (p. 147).

Studies regarding parental roles in Romanian families expose similar conclusions. The purpose of this study is to assess the impact of this family image in children’s mental representation, having in consideration the changes brought by the new socio-cultural environment. Also, the voice of change encountered in the processed mental images of children is searched.

### 1.3. Research questions

In order to reach its purpose, the following questions guided the study:

1. What parent roles depart from the written description and mental images of children regarding their mother and father?
2. Are these roles impregnated with socio-cultural beliefs? Are there contradictions/novelities?

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

This study involved 215 students aged 6 to 11. The students are enrolled in a public school in Sibiu, Romania. Geographic positioning, as stated, is important because one of the independent variables is the socio-cultural environment itself. The distribution of the participants is presented in Table 1.

The socio-economic level of the students’ families is appreciated as average. 95% of children are of Orthodox religion. Of the total, 3% of participants come from monoparental families. No special needs student participated in this research.

Table 1. Direct participants

Gender	Preparatory class	1 <sup>st</sup> grade	2 <sup>nd</sup> grade	3 <sup>rd</sup> grade	4 <sup>th</sup> grade
Boys	23	18	19	18	21
Girls	20	22	24	20	30

### 2.2. Procedure

The children were given a questionnaire with the request to first fill in data such as sex, age, and grade. In the questionnaire, students answered two open questions that they had the suggestion to fill in as they please. The statements were “*My mother is .....*” and “*My father is .....*”. The free space to complete was two rows for each description.

Below, two equal text boxes were outlined. Here children were asked to draw separately their father and mother. The request was “Please draw your father and your mother as you imagine them now”. Children started to draw without receiving any other specifications related to the positioning of the drawing, which part of the body to drawn, how

many elements should be included in the representation, or whether to use colours or pencil. No time limit was set. The size and quality of the support paper for drawing was the same for all distributed questionnaire. The researcher observed children drawing the entire time and answered any questions. The procedure followed the first two steps of Corman (1964).

### 2.3. Coding

Questionnaires were coded<sup>vii</sup> using grade (0 –preparatory grade, 1- first grade, 2 – second grade, 3 – third grade, and 4 – fourth grade), name initial, age, and sex (B – boy, G – girl). Data was analysed using NVivo 10.

### 2.4. Ethics

Legal consent was obtained priori starting the research. During the actual study, students receive the information that they can withdraw at any time. The initials used in coding are fictive and do not refer to the real names of children.

## 3. Results

### 3.1. Open questions

In Table 2 and Table 3 we will present the words that link children’s description of their mother and respectively their father merging in a common denominated image.

Table 2. Mother description in words

<b>Word used</b>	<b>Frequency in text</b>
kind	66
lovely	53
beautiful	45
hardworking	38
caring	18
gentle	13
clever / smart / intelligent	10
the best mom	10
understanding	9
pretty	7
generous	7
helpful	6
patient	6
makes jokes / is funny	6
good housekeeper / cook	5
happy / cheerful	4
attentive	3
merciful	2
bad	1

To the words in the table we can add expressions such as:

<sup>vii</sup> Code e.g. 1T9G, for a first grader 9 years old girl

*She lets me go out.*  
*She is good with me only when I do not do stupid things.*  
*She loves all children and she is kind to them.*  
*She is good with people around.*  
*She buys me everything I want.*  
*She is cool.*  
*When I get sick, she sits next to my bed and gives me the necessary medication.*  
*She teaches me only good things.*

Boys use more descriptions of physical appearance and specify what the mother’s job is. We observe that the stated professions are socially prestigious (doctor, nurse, medical assistant, and translator). In the boys' description, “beautiful” often appears, and the attention to this aspect is revealed by details like "she has a ring".

Girls use words like “housekeeper”, “hardworking”, and “kind” when describing their mothers. One of the girls says her mother is “obedient” and another uses the word “vigilant”.

Table 3. Father description in words

<b>Word used</b>	<b>Frequency in text</b>
kind	55
industrious	38
loving	23
good worker	16
tall	16
strong	11
clever / smart / intelligent	9
brave	8
makes jokes	8
understanding	6
cute	5
the best dad	5
attentive	5
patient	5
happy / cheerful	4
big	3
gentle	3
a good cook	2
handsome	2
bad	2
protector	2
householder	1
honest	1
fast	1

Fathers are also described in expressions such as:

*He buys everything I want.*  
*My father is more severe sometimes, he always tells me to tell the truth, and not to lie.*  
*He likes sport.*  
*If I do not know something, he helps me.*

*My father has a BMW.*

*Dad is very good and he wants nothing bad to happen to me.*

*He's always trying to make me go through difficult challenges in order to be strong and ready for life.*

Children also notice the soft part of fathers:

*Every night he gives me a good night's kiss.*

*Dad is careful and good to me.*

*Dad is good with all kids.*

*My father is hardworking, he brings the food home, he irons clothes, and he cooks.*

*He is an extraordinary chef.*

The occupations mentioned for fathers are professor, doctor, and actor, but girls also mention jobs like line-worker and manual worker.

Mothers and fathers have 11 commune characteristics, namely they both are: kind, beautiful/handsome, clever/smart/intelligent, the best mom/dad, understanding, patient, make jokes/are funny, good housekeeper/cook, happy/cheerful, attentive, and bad. The frequency in text for these common characteristics is higher for mothers, with the exception of last two, respectively fathers are perceived to be more attentive and worse.

Mothers are described using 8% more words than fathers. For mothers we found 19 features mentioned with different frequencies, and for fathers 24, but with lower frequency. Mothers are therefore described with fewer characteristics, but in more words.

Regarding the drawings, although the request was "Please draw your father and you mother as you imagine them now", 24% of the children draw in the left box the mother. This aspect is important to mention for perceptual hierarchy (Edwards, 2016). Further data collected concerning the children's drawings are presented below.

### **3.2. Drawings**

Drawings analysis was done through three aspects: the graphic level, the formal structure level, and the content level (Corman, 1964). We will present those elements of the drawings that we can link to the study interest variables, namely the parents' roles and the socio-cultural environment. Appendix also contain various drawings as argument for the results presented in this section.

#### **3.2.1. Graphic level**

Two aspects are important at the graphic level: the extent/dimension and the force/contour stress used in the drawing. Depending on the temperamental type, children use either large or short/segmented lines in the graphic representation of their parents. In the first case, the drawing expresses an image full of vitality, and in the second case, the tendency to return to one's own person. It is worth mentioning that the drawings were made using the same type of line (see Figure 1). If the father was drawn with ample lines, the mother was drawn the same.

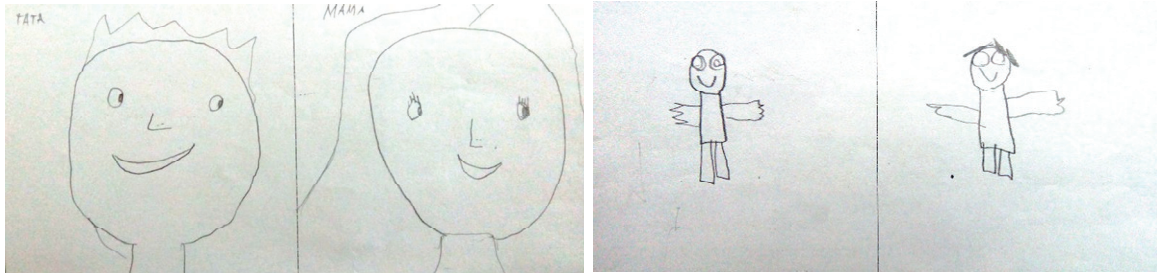


Figure 1. Extent and force in representing parents (4S11RB – left, 0T7OB – right)

The same observation can be stated about the dimension of the representation. The image of the father is roughly equal to that of the mother, and vice versa. Children rarely cross the contour of the outlined box. The drawings are rather positioned in the middle of the box, with the inclination to attach them to the bottom, which suggests connection to primordial instincts.

White areas were also observed in the drawings, especially in the lower part of the paper, but this observation about the "little depressed" could only be verified by talking to children who made the drawings (see Figure 2).

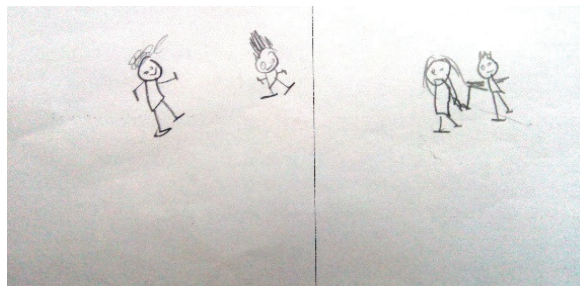


Figure 2. White area (0H6B)

The drawings are not outlined with strong lines which would indicate suppression of violence for none of the parents, nor with lines drawn poorly, which would make us think of the impossibility of affirming in drawing the mental image of their parents.

Most of the drawings have a progressive construction (from left to right, see Figure 3) when other elements are added next to the parent's image. This observation indicates a natural perceived continuity regarding the family.



Figure 3. Progressive drawing construction (0G6B)

### 3.2.2. Formal structure level

As far as the graphic structure is concerned, we mention that the degree of perfection of representation increases with age. Still, preparatory grade children can be quite accurate in their representation (Figure 4).



Figure 4. Accuracy in drawing and age (Preparatory grade – left 0V7B, fourth grade – right 4J11G)

Another important remark found in most drawings is the use of straight lines in detrimental curved ones (Figure 5). The observation expresses a nuance of rigidity and isolation.

### 3.2.3. Content level

Here we come back to the hierarchical order and we reiterate that 24% of the children did not follow the direction of drawing first the father, then the mother. Regarding the content itself, besides the representation of the parents, we mention that the following elements have been added: houses, sun, the flag of Romania, children (probably personal representation), butterflies, hearts, flowers, trees, kitchen furniture in the mother's image, working instruments in the father's image, and details of the mother's clothes (see Figure 6 and Appendix).

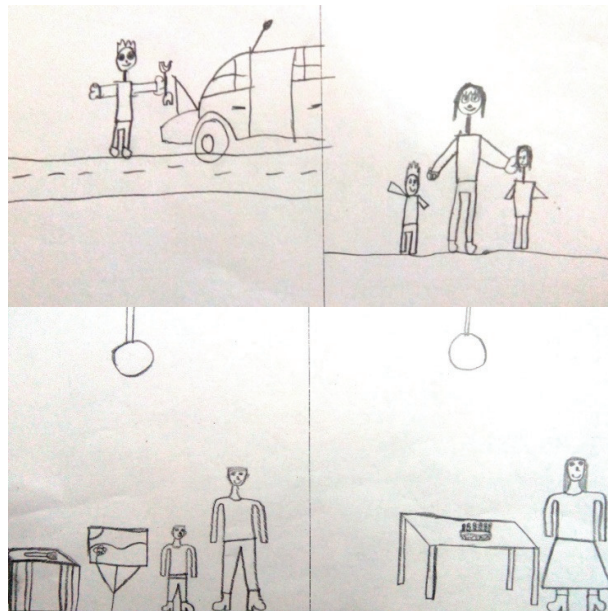


Figure 5. Straight lines (0U7B – up, 0R6B – down)



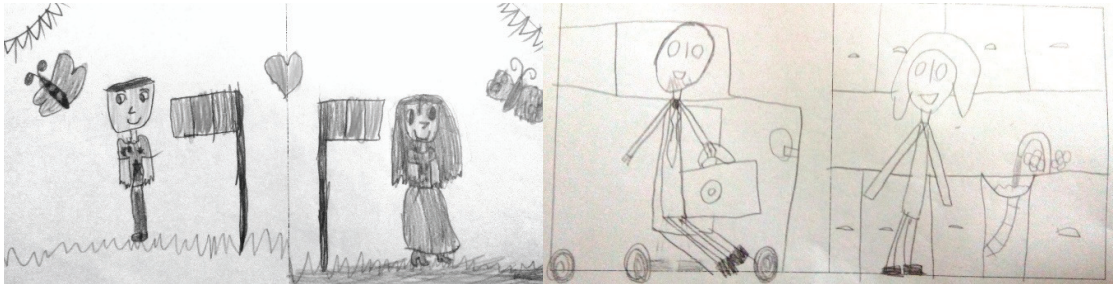


Figure 6. Content elements (1K7G – left, 1C7B – right)

The affective tendency is to value parents by adding elements equally to the mother and to the father. If a child drew his mother in detail, he did the same for his/ her dad.

#### 4. Discussion

Certainly, the first aspect that we can bring into discussion is the equality of parental roles in children's vision. This observation characterizes most of the written responses and drawings of children. The deviations from this common denominator will be discussed below in order to answer the first research question, namely what parent roles depart from the written description and mental images.

From the interpretation of the results gathered through the open questions, we conclude that the father's image is dichotomic. He has both the role of provider, protector, strong handy man, and, in the same time, is sensitive, caring, and helps the mother in daily home responsibilities. So, the father conserves the traditional role, but adds in a new one that overlaps the mother's.

Mothers remain stable in their traditional role. They are the kind, beautiful, hardworking, gentle persons that fill the lives of children with affection. They are described with more words. Physical appearance is important. Mothers are beautiful. Details about their beauty and the accessories that they put on are noticed by children.

The new element seized in the perception of mother is the respect for their high-status jobs that children have to mentioned and draw, when describing what their mothers do for a living.

So, we can answer the second research study too. The roles of parents are impregnated with traditional socio-cultural beliefs, but novelties also arise. Fathers are becoming more sensitive, and mothers' high-status jobs are to be mentioned. Related to other aspects extracted from children words and drawings, the change occurred in mother's role has a nuance of appreciation. But she is still caring, gentle, and "has a ring".

#### 5. Conclusion

The roles of the mother and father, as they are extracted from children's words and graphic representations, are mostly traditional. Mother is in charge of gently raising children and thoughtfully resolving domestic activities, and father is a provider, and a protector. Even if the content of the drawing is different depending on gender (kitchen furniture for mothers, working instruments for father), the images of the two parents are drawn in mirror. Equality is captured from drawings and word description as well. In fact, 34% of written descriptions use the same characteristics in feminine and masculine forms.

The *new* seized in children's mental representation is the high-status job appreciation regarding mothers and the sensitive, caring, and helpful in daily home responsibilities part of fathers.

Children fill in their drawings with symbols like houses and the flag of Romania. The impregnation of this elements reverberates deep socio-cultural believes.

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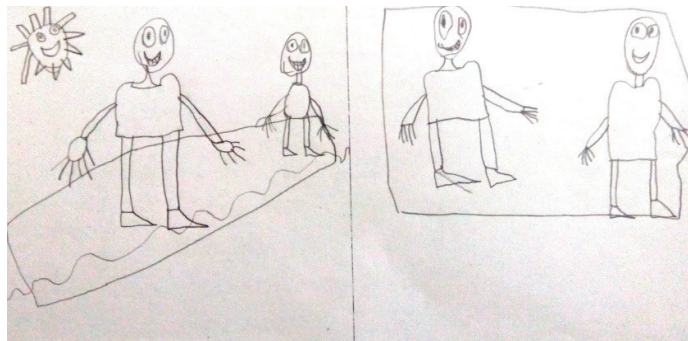
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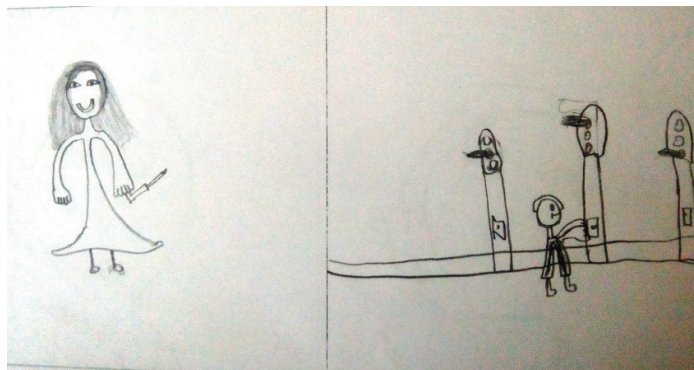
**Appendix**



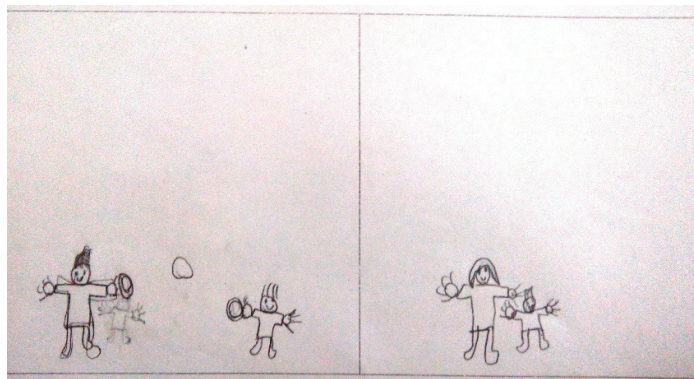
2J9G



1G6B



2J9G



0H7B