

**Social Representations of Giftedness among
Parents of Gifted Children and Parents of Non
Gifted Children from the Center and Periphery
in Israel**

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the social representation aspects of cognitive giftedness among parents of gifted children and parents of non - gifted children from the center of Israel and its periphery. Central Israel and the periphery are different geographical and social spaces/areas as a result of different urban planning, the circumstances involved in establishment of the cities and government allocation of resources. Moreover, there are differences between these two spaces/areas in the educational system both formal and informal and the images they have in the media.

The research is based on two different but complimentary theories: First, the relationship between knowledge, power of technologies and spaces as described by Foucault (1984) and developed by Ofir (1992). Second, the social representation theory. Foucault (1984; 1995; 2005) described the physical space and the knowledge that has a strong relation to social power and discourse. Investigations that have been done in the physical space illuminate social phenomena through strong relation between knowledge and social power (Ofir, 1992). Previous giftedness research focused on the technologies of power. The current research adds the “physical” space.

Studies on social representation theory focus on the ways in which people and groups produce knowledge in order to make their world more comprehensible. Context is a very crucial concept in the social representation theory. The “context” includes three dimensions: time, territorial space and people. Friling and Tuval (2014) define space as territorial place that has geographical, physical and cultural boundaries. These three dimensions create a unique cultural identity (Yiftachel & Tzfadia, 1999).

The central research question and the secondary questions: What are the dimensions of social representation of "gifted"? This question stemmed from four sub-questions: (a) What are the dimensions of social representation of giftedness among parents of gifted children in the center compared to the dimensions of social representation of giftedness among parents of gifted children in the periphery? (b) What are the dimensions of social representation of giftedness among parents of non-gifted children in the center compared to the dimensions of social representation of giftedness among parents of non-gifted children in the periphery? (c) What are the

dimensions of social representation of giftedness among parents of gifted children in the center compared to the dimensions of social representation of giftedness among parents of children who are not gifted in the center? (c) What are the dimensions of social representation of giftedness among parents of gifted children in the periphery compared with the dimensions of social representation of giftedness among parents of non-gifted children in the periphery?

The investigation into comprehending the social representation dimensions was done by using structural orientation. The social representation, based on this orientation is a hierarchical and organized system. This system includes: core and peripheral elements. The core elements describe the center of the social representation and the peripheral elements are the sub-system. There are quantitative and qualitative differences between the core and the peripheral elements.

The numbers of words or categories the central elements have are less than the peripheral elements of the social representation. A qualitative difference is the function and the dynamics they have. While the central elements are stable for a long period of time, the peripheral are changing.

Methodology: The study population included parents of gifted children and non-gifted children from the Jewish sector. After obtaining the approval from the Chief Scientist, letters of invitation were sent to parents of gifted children through the directors of gifted centers, as well as through principals in schools where there are classes for gifted children. The choice of centers and schools was based on the Central Bureau of Statistics' Peripherality Index (Tsibet, 2008). This research was done using mixed methods (Creswell, 2013): qualitative and quantitative. The qualitative investigation includes 100 associative questionnaires (Abric, 1993; Lo Monco, 2014) and 80 episodic interviews. The assumption of this interview method is the same as the social representation theory: the crucial function of context.

The quantitative research focuses only on sibling relationships where one of the children is gifted because of the limited information parents gave during the interviews, and the importance of sibling relationships during life. As part of the quantitative investigation process questionnaires on sibling relationships (Furman & Buhrmester, 1985) were completed by four research groups including 202 parents of gifted children and non-gifted children from the center and the periphery of Israel. In

the current study we used the short version of the questionnaires based on Derkman and his colleagues (Derkman et al., 2010). They examine the construct validity and reliability. They find that the crucial elements of the sibling relationship questionnaire are warmth/closeness and conflicts. While the original questionnaire was given to the child, in the current research, the questionnaires are given to the parents. We used the Hebrew version which was translated and checked for validity and reliability by previous researchers (Hanuka –Levy, 2009).

The analysis of associative questionnaires includes qualitative and quantitative aspects. The qualitative aspect includes a lexical-semantic analysis that groups synonyms or words that have similar meaning into the same category (Bonnec, Roussiau, & Vergas, 2000). In the next phase a loading measurement was produced, based on the values the participants gave to the words: positive, negative, natural or mixed: both positive and negative. The number of words each group produced was also examined. In order to find the central and the peripheral elements two different measurement produced: importance and frequencies. For each measurement an average was calculated. Crossing the results above and below the average from both of these measurements creates 4 quarters. Words or categories which were above the average at both of the measurements were considered as belonging to the center of the social representation and all the other are considered as peripheral elements of the social representation.

The analysis of the episodic interviews was based on by two methods: “the four-ways model” for narrative interpretations” (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, Zilber, 2010) and thematic analysis. In the “four-ways model”, there are two ways to interpret the data: to focus on the content versus the structure or to focus on the whole story or its parts. Analyzing the data based on the thematic analysis exposes the themes. In the social representation theory, theme is a system of concepts. There is a dialectical relationship between the concepts. The thematic analysis includes six phase: Familiarizing with the text, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes and producing the report.

The data were analyzed in two levels: description and interpretations (Frith & Gleeson, 2004; Niece, 2011; Halldorson, 2009). The description analysis is presented in the results chapter and the interpretations in the discussion chapter.

In order to examine the hypotheses of sibling relationships, two way MANOVA analyses were done. The dependent variables were: sibling relationships: warmth/closeness and conflicts. The independent variables were: type of parenthood (parents of gifted /parents of non- gifted) and territorial space (center /periphery areas in Israel).

Results: Analysis of the association questionnaires produced information on three areas: Core and peripheral elements of the social representation (s.r), type of the social representation, and its qualitative and quantitative make-up. The type of measurements of the s.r is positive: The frequencies of the positive words or categories were higher than the frequencies of all other types (negative, neutral or mixed – positive and negative).

The quantitative analysis of the associative questionnaires includes examination of the number of words each group mentioned. The lowest number of words was found in the group of parents of gifted children from the center of Israel, which was 24. The range of the number of words among the other groups was 30-31. There wasn't any relationship between the number of the words and their frequencies.

Analysis of the core elements which were described by parents of gifted children from the center and the periphery revealed an identity composed of three elements. These elements are “wisdom”, “desire for knowledge” and “uniqueness”. In both groups the element “cognitive intelligence” was in the second quarter. Among parents of gifted children and parents of non- gifted children from the center of Israel there was an identity composed of ”wisdom” and “creativity”. The average of the frequency of the elements:” desire for knowledge” and “cognitive intelligence” were high in both of these groups, although they weren't in the same quarters.

Two aspects of the social representation of giftedness emerged based on the interviews. The first is about the concept of giftedness and the second is the contexts of the social representation of giftedness. Each of these aspects includes themes and sub-categories (in parenthesis) :

1. The concept of giftedness – psychological characteristics (cognitive and non-cognitive); mode of giftedness (one area; different areas) and giftedness as exceptionality

The social representations of giftedness were found in the following contexts:

2.a. **Family**- the relationship in the earlier years (parental investment; type of investment); parental experience (emotions and feelings; issues in parenting of gifted children) and sibling relationships (assumptions; typology; mechanisms of regulation).

2.b. **Education**- the relationship between the educators and the parents of gifted children (Educators' initiatives; Parental initiatives), relationship between the educators and the gifted child (emotional aspects; pedagogical aspects); education for gifted children (integration; differentiation; mixed attitude).

2.c. **Social** - social roles and position (leadership; integration into society; social isolation), social abilities and skills.

The social representation of giftedness includes core elements which are shared by all groups and peripheral elements which are unique to each group. In addition, there were common elements in the group of parents of gifted children and common elements in the group of parents of non- gifted children. Thus, it is not unreasonable to conclude that there is one social representation of giftedness which is common for all and moreover, there are fields of social representations among different groups. The unique elements which are held by the different groups are the peripheral elements which belong to the shared social representation of giftedness.

The core elements of the social representation of giftedness are “the concept of giftedness” the cognitive and the non-cognitive characteristics, the social context – the social loneliness, the family context representations of pride, happiness and stress, representations of action: investment and nurturing, assumption – imbalance, parental responsibility and sibling mechanisms: “differential equation”. The educational context: the relationship between the educators and the gifted child and the representations of feelings and experiences.

The contents of the social representations articulate differential knowledge: cognitive, emotional and behavioral. The four groups in this study shared two different types of knowledge: cognitive and non-cognitive. The cognitive knowledge includes the description of giftedness as intelligence. The non –cognitive knowledge includes the gifted child's characteristics: curiosity/ knowledge, wisdom, organizational abilities, persistence and creativity.

These two types of knowledge, the cognitive and the non-cognitive represent “common sense” which is one of the crucial elements in the social representation theory. Common sense reflects the ways in which a person structures his/her social world in relationship to the culture and the society he/she lives in. The principles of “common sense” are different from the principles of science. Scientific thinking is based on coherence and reliability while “common sense” knowledge might be contradictory knowledge.

The common elements in the groups of parents of gifted children from the central and the peripheral areas in Israel include elements of the concept of giftedness which are non-cognitive: organizational abilities, persistence and wisdom. The parents of gifted children describe giftedness in a cognitive area only.

In the social context, parents of gifted children describe the social role of leadership and integration into society and the social position of loneliness. In the educational context, the common elements are the pedagogical aspects in the relationship between the educators and the gifted child and the initiatives of the educators. In the family context the common elements are social representations of feelings: the loneliness parents of gifted children feel and the challenges they have. The social representations of the actions are parental investment and types of parenting.

The elements that parents of non -gifted children shared are the concept of giftedness in different areas and the educational context: education for the gifted child. While the preference of parents of gifted children from the center of Israel is to separate their children into special gifted classes, the parents of non-gifted children from the same area prefer that gifted children not be separated. Parents of gifted children from the periphery articulate mixed attitudes: for and against separated classes.

One of the important results is the attitudes towards giftedness as a social exceptionality. There is a difference between parents of gifted children from the center and the periphery in the recognition they asked. While parents of gifted children from the center of Israel wanted a formal recognition of giftedness as “special education”, parents of gifted children from the periphery prefer not to emphasize the exceptional abilities in public. A contrary result is found between

parents of non- gifted children from the center and the periphery. The first group emphasized the importance of growing up with “normal children” and study in class with children who aren’t gifted without considering the special needs the gifted children have, while the last group articulated admiration of gifted children. The meaning of these results is interpreted in light of the change of the social values particularly in the education system: from collective to individual values and the different effects this has on the center and periphery.

The hypotheses regarding sibling relationships were that: (a) Parents of gifted children (PGC) describe higher warmth/closeness behaviors in comparison to parents of non-gifted children (PNGC). PGC may describe less conflict between siblings than the parents of non- gifted children (b) Parents from the center of Israel describe lower warmth/closeness and conflicts than the parents from the periphery area (c) The gap between PGC and PNGC from the center of Israel is higher than the gap between PGC and PNGC from the periphery.

The first hypothesis about warmth/closeness behaviors was supported. PGC described higher levels of warmth/closeness behaviors than PNGC. In contrast to the hypothesis PGC described high levels of conflict in comparison to PNGC.

The second hypothesis was partially supported. Parents from the center of Israel described low levels of warmth/closeness and conflicts in comparison to parents from the periphery. There wasn’t any difference between the group in conflict found by using a covariance analysis of religious identity and age.

The hypothesis about the gap between the groups according to their geographical areas was partially supported. The analysis with and without covariance on the demographic variables: education and religious identity found differences in warmth/closeness behaviors between PGC and PNGC from the center of Israel in comparison to the level of this variable between PGC and PNGC from the periphery of Israel. Parents of gifted children described a higher level of warmth/closeness and conflict between siblings than parents of non-gifted children. The meaning of this result is that sibling relationships when one of the children is gifted are intense.

It is not unreasonable to conclude, based on the result of sibling relationships, that parents of gifted children have a more acute multi-faceted perspective on sibling relationships.

In other words, in their perspective, sibling relationships between children where one is gifted can be warm and close and at the same time this relationship can also contain conflict. The current study suggests a more accurate perspective, unlike previous research, which described the relationship between siblings as containing only warmth/closeness or conflicts.

The current study contributes to understanding the experience of being parents of gifted child. According to Golon (2008) there is a need to develop this area. This is the first research which adopts an interdisciplinary perspective in studying giftedness from the parent's perspectives: psychological, educational and sociological points of view. Insight and deep understanding emerged because of the relationship among these three areas that would not have been achieved without such integration.

The investigation of the social representation was done by using different sociological theories: The first is those which described the relationship among specific discourse in specific space (Foucault, 1980). The second is collective identity which emerged in specific geographical area (Yiftachel & Tzfadia, 1999).

The main contribution of this study is the understanding how a change in social values effects in different ways on different group in Israel. The neo liberal values which are the current main values in the society and in the educational system fully adopted by parents from the center of Israel but partially adopted by parents from the periphery.

Introducing epistemological and ontological concepts to investigate a social representation is another contribution of this study. These concepts were based on the father of the linguistic modern theory Ferdinand de Saussure (1916/2005). This is the first time in which sibling relationships between families where one of the children is gifted has been done in Israel from the parents' perspective and which compares between PGC and PNGC perspectives.