

EMOTIONS

Culture and Emotions in the First 5 to 6 Years of Life

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September 2011

Introduction

Emotional development in infancy and early childhood are important for a host of interrelated skills, including cognitive development and interpersonal relations. For example, the ability to regulate one's emotions in challenging situations enables children to sustain learning; the ability to communicate one's own feelings to others effectively increases the chances of one's needs being met; and the ability to understand what others are feeling enables children to modify their behaviour so as to sustain harmonious relations with others.^{1,2} Although these three basic emotion-related competencies (experiencing, expressing, and understanding) must be achieved by every child, the culture in which the child develops may govern how these competencies are achieved and manifested.

In every culture, children's and parents' experience, expression and understanding of emotion are embedded in the physical and social structures within which they live and the beliefs, values and practices of the culture.^{3,4} For example, the physical and social structures of the culture might influence children's emotional development via the number of adults living proximally enough to hold a child throughout the day and night, or whether comfort objects, such as stuffed animals, are available in the culture. And beliefs, values and practices of the culture might influence development via caregivers' encouragement of exploration versus comfort seeking in response to children's distress, and whether caregivers achieve those goals with objects versus family members. A consideration of children's age may be relevant as well; cultures likely vary considerably in what they deem appropriate at different stages of development.⁵

Problems

First, despite recognition of the direct and indirect ways that children's emotional experiences, expression and understanding are differentially socialized across culture, knowledge and advice-giving about children's early

emotional experiences is still largely based on samples of European American children. Generalizing about children's emotional experiences cross-culturally from studies based on European American populations should only be done with the utmost caution.

Second, when children and their parents are studied across cultures, researchers often depend on procedures that have been developed in one culture only, and so may convey particular meanings that are not shared across other cultures, making interpretation of cross-cultural studies difficult.^{6,7} One important solution to ethnocentric research is to create multicultural research teams that can help identify culturally-specific meanings within the research setting.

Research Context

Many methodologies are used to examine infants' and children's experience, expression and understanding of emotion. To assess emotional experience, for example, frustration is induced by arm restraint or visible toys which cannot be accessed, distress by caregivers' expressionless faces or ignoring behaviours, and fear by toy spiders or approaching strangers. To assess emotion understanding, children view faces or gestures of other children or adults and then report what emotions are represented. To assess emotional expressiveness or skill in communicating emotions, researchers investigate infants' and children's emotional expressions when they know children are having feelings or they ask children to pose various emotions. As noted above, researchers struggle with whether procedures evoke or mean the same thing across cultures.⁷

Key Research Questions

1. What are the ways in which cultures differentially affect children's experience, expression and interpretation of emotion?
2. What contexts associated with different cultural experiences impact children's emotional development?
3. What are the cultural similarities and differences in how parents and caregivers teach children about emotion across cultures?

Recent Research Results

Cross-cultural differences have been increasingly documented in children's experience, expression and interpretation of emotion.⁸ Below we list some examples to highlight the variety of differences.

With regard to children's emotional experience, in one study, Japanese female toddlers experienced more distress than German female toddlers to a broken toy, with German toddlers showing more positive and less negative regulation than Japanese toddlers.⁹ Although a second study found similar levels of distress intensity among preschoolers, distress ebbed more quickly for German preschoolers' responding to another child's loss, but more slowly to their own loss, compared to Japanese preschoolers; these differences are consistent with acculturation regarding self- versus other-focused responses.¹⁰ In a sample of older children, Tamang children in Nepal reported that they would feel more shame and less anger in interpersonal conflict situations than Brahman children in Nepal or children in the United States.¹¹ And, Japanese preschoolers expressed less shame, pride and embarrassment but more embarrassment than both African American and European American children in achievement contexts.¹²

When it comes to children's emotion expression, 3-year-old Chinese girls were more expressive in response to evocative pictures than European American girls, however, the children did not differ in their responses to sensory stimuli (odor). This may indicate that expressiveness may vary more across culture specific contexts and socialization than physiological reactivity.¹² In another study, 4- and 7-year-old Chinese American children reacted with more negative and less positive expression in response to a disappointment than European American children.¹³

Concerning emotion understanding, accuracy seems to vary by culture as well, with greater accuracy for sadness and disgust by Europeans than Asians, fitting with themes of emotional suppression of these emotions in Asian culture.¹⁴ Additionally, decoding strategies seem to vary by culture, with East Asians gazing less at the mouth region than Europeans, suggesting that not only skill but detection processes are influenced by cultural differences in where people look for emotional information. Cultural norms and expectations for emotion understanding may also be moderated by gender. In the United States, where girls are taught more explicitly about emotion than boys,¹⁵ females are consistently more skilled at judging others' emotions throughout the lifespan.¹⁶

These differences may be understood within the context of individuals' particular cultural models, which govern the perceptions, meanings, and expectations they assign to social situations.¹⁴ Differences in children's emotions can be further understood and classified within five broad cultural frameworks: collectivism/individualism, power distance (the extent to which societies expect inequality in status relationships and emphasize obedience according to these expectations), children's place in family and culture, ways children learn, and value of emotional experience and expression.^{3,17}

Research Gaps

Although cross-cultural research is increasing, greater multi-culturalism in the research endeavor is warranted. First, the dimension of collectivism-individualism and the frameworks that help organize cultures need to be further tested across and within cultures. Second, attention to specific emotions and different emotion-related skills across different cultures is needed. For example, it is useful to know that anger is treated quite differently in the Tamang and Brahman cultures;¹⁸ shame varies in the degree to which it is perceived positively among Chinese, Japanese and European American families;¹⁹ and exuberant expression of positive emotion is valued differently by European American versus Taiwanese Chinese culture.²⁰ Third, process-oriented studies are needed to show how parental or cultural values directly lead to children's differential experience, expression

and understanding.

Conclusion

Consideration of children's emotional development and specifically their skills in experiencing, expressing, and understanding emotion¹ needs to be embedded within an understanding of the goals and values of the family culture in which children are developing, and the host culture as well, when these differ. The greater the insight into the norms and values of the culture, the greater the ability to strengthen the emotion-related characteristics which are desirable for that culture. Further, understanding children's emotional development through the lens of culture also cultivates an acceptance of differences without evaluating which culture's emotional lives are better.

Implications for Parents, Services and Policy

As the world becomes increasingly multicultural, sensitivity to the norms, values, and emotion-related strategies of both family and host cultures becomes increasingly important for caregivers. Because research has just begun in this field, collaboration between researchers, parents, service providers and policy makers is even more important for developing empirically-informed policies that can be used in education, social services and other policy domains.²¹ In the meantime, there is a need for caregivers to be recognizing, supporting and expanding children's skills within their family and cultural styles, as well as preparing them for emotional competence in their host culture. Additionally, when children are not performing as expected within daycare or educational settings, a consideration of family and cultural styles of experiencing, expressing and understanding emotion is warranted before determinations of deficit are suggested. In particular, the meanings of behaviours, both engaged in by children and by caregivers with children, needs to be considered within the cultural context.

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