ENCYCLOPEDIA on Early Childhood Development

Culture and Early Socio-Emotional Development

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Introduction

There are considerable individual differences in children's early dispositional characteristics, such as how they react to challenging situations and their ability to regulate behavioural and emotional reactions.[1] These early characteristics serve as a basis for socio-emotional development in childhood and adolescence. It has been found that early dispositional characteristics and socio-emotional functioning have an extensive and prolonged impact on social, school and psychological adjustment. In Western societies, for example, positive emotionality and sociability are predictive of peer acceptance, school achievement and psychological well-being. In contrast, defiance and aggression are associated with later peer rejection, school problems, and other adjustment problems. Finally, negative reactivity, behavioural inhibition and social anxiety in infancy and early childhood may contribute to difficulties in peer relationships and adjustment problems of an internalizing nature such as loneliness and depression.[2,3,4]

Subject

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Socio-emotional development is likely to be affected by cultural contexts. Developmental theorists and researchers have long recognized the comprehensive role of culture in children's social development in the early years.5 Culture may promote or constrain the exhibition of specific aspects of socio-emotional functioning through facilitation or suppression processes. Moreover, cultural norms and values may provide guidance for the interpretation and evaluation of social behaviours and thus impart meanings to the behaviours.[6] These arguments have been supported by findings from a number of studies in the past two decades.

Problems

Despite the importance of culture for human development, research on socio-emotional functioning has been conducted mostly with Western, particularly North American, children. Consequently, little is known about how children behave and perform in social situations in other societies. Our understanding of social behaviours, relationships and psychological adjustment is limited to Euro-American cultures.

Research Context

Over the past 30 years, there has been an increased interest in exploring children's socio-emotional functioning in different regions of the worlds, particularly Asia, Europe and South America. A number of studies have been conducted in diverse societies using both qualitative (e.g., interviewing, ethnographic, observation) and quantitative (e.g., large scale surveys, standardized questionnaires) methods. A major challenge in the cross-cultural study of socio-emotional functioning is the understanding of its cultural meaning. Two strategies to achieve this understanding are (1) to examine how socio-emotional functioning is associated with social interactions and relationships, and (2) to examine how socio-emotional functioning develops in the culture (e.g., what developmental outcomes it leads to).[6] These strategies can be used in both within-cultural and cross-cultural studies. An examination of the social interaction context and the developmental pattern of socio-emotional functioning from the within-cultural perspective is the first step toward understanding its meaning and significance and provides a critical and necessary foundation for cross-cultural comparisons on children's socio-emotional functioning.

Key Research Questions

1. Are there cross-cultural differences in the exhibition of specific aspects of socio-emotional functioning?

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2. Are there cross-cultural differences in the antecedents, concomitants and consequences of specific aspects of socio-emotional functioning?
3. Are the developmental processes and patterns of socio-emotional functioning similar or different across cultures?
4. What cultural beliefs and values are associated with socio-emotional functioning and development?
5. What are the processes in which cultural beliefs and values affect socio-emotional functioning and development?

Recent Research Results

Children across cultures may display similar as well as different socio-emotional characteristics in early childhood. Whereas similarity emerges in pervasive aspects, the distinct patterns of socio-emotional functioning have been revealed in cross-cultural research on children in different societies. For example, Chinese and Korean toddlers exhibited higher fearful, vigilant and anxious reactions than Australian, Canadian and Italian toddlers in novel stressful situations.[7,8] Chinese children also displayed more committed and internalized control or self-regulation on compliance and delay tasks than North American children in the early years.[9,10,11] Similarly, Cameroonian Nso toddlers displayed more regulated behaviours than Costa Rican toddlers who in turn were more regulated than Greek toddlers, as indicated by their compliance with maternal requests and prohibitions.[12]

Cross-cultural differences in early characteristics may be associated with parental socialization expectations, attitudes and practices. Chen et al.[7] found that whereas children's wary and reactive behaviour was associated with parental disappointment and rejection in Canada, this behaviour was associated with warm and accepting parental attitudes in China. Compared with Euro-American parents, Chinese and Korean parents were also more likely to emphasize behavioural control in childrearing.[9] In addition, according to Keller et al.,[12] rural Cameroonian Nso mothers were more likely than Costa Rican mothers, who in turn were more likely than middle-class Greek mothers, to use a proximal parenting style (body contact, body stimulation) which was believed to facilitate child obedience and regulation.

Socio-emotional characteristics in the early years may have implications for the development of social behaviours. Edwards[13] found that children in relatively open communities (e.g., Taira in

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Okinawa, one of Japan's southern prefectures, and Orchard Town in the U.S.) where peer interactions were encouraged had significantly higher scores on overall social engagement than children in more "close" and agricultural communities (e.g., Nyansongo in Kenya and Khalapur in India). Relatively low social interaction was also found in Chinese and Indonesian children, compared with their North American counterparts.[14,15]

Cross-cultural differences exist not only in overall social engagement but also in the quality of social interaction. A particular form of peer interaction which varies across cultures is socio-dramatic activity in children's play. Western children tend to engage in more socio-dramatic behaviours than children in many other, particularly group-oriented, cultures. Farver, Kim and Lee[16] found that Korean American preschool children displayed less social and pretend play than Anglo-American children. Moreover, when Korean children engaged in pretend play, it contained more everyday and family role activities and less fantastic themes (e.g., actions related to legend or fairy tale characters that do not exist). Gosso Lima, Morais and Otta[17] found that rural children in Brazil displayed less pretend or socio-dramatic behaviours than urban children. Furthermore, the urban children's socio-dramatic activities involved more fantastic characters or themes than those of rural children. Also, the prevalent characters in the pretend play of seashore children were domestic animals (dogs and horses), which, according to Gosso et al.[17], was due to the frequent contact of these children with them in daily life.

Children in societies where extended families live together in traditional styles tend to display more prosocial-cooperative behaviour than children in economically complex societies with class structures and occupational division of labour.[13] Early socialization of responsibility is associated with the development of prosocial-cooperative behaviour. Cultures that value competitiveness and the pursuit of personal goals seem to allow for more coercive and aggressive behaviour than cultures that emphasize group harmony. Researchers have reported that North American children tended to exhibit higher levels of aggressive and externalizing behaviour than their counterparts in some Asian countries such as China, Korea, Japan and Thailand, in Australia and in some European nations such as Sweden and the Netherlands.[18,19,20,21]

The role of culture may be reflected not only in the display of specific socio-emotional characteristics, but also in their functional meanings in development in different societies.[22,23] For example, behavioural inhibition in toddlerhood is associated with later social and psychological difficulties in Western countries.[24] However, longitudinal research in China revealed that early behavioural inhibition positively predicted social competence, school achievement, and

psychological adjustment in childhood and adolescence.[25,26]

Research Gaps

Several major gaps exist in the study of culture and socio-emotional development. First, there are few systematic cross-cultural longitudinal research programs. As a result, little is known about the developmental processes of socio-emotional functioning in a cultural context. Second, the existing research has relied mostly on cross-cultural comparisons. Although the findings are important in revealing cultural similarities and differences, they provide limited information about what specific cultural beliefs and values are associated with children's social behaviours and emotions and their development. Third, researchers have paid little attention to the processes in which cultural norms and values are involved in socio-emotional development. Chen [23,27] has recently proposed a contextual-developmental perspective that emphasizes the role of the social evaluation and response processes in mediating the links between culture and socio-emotional development. According to this perspective, during social interactions, peers evaluate and respond to individual characteristics in manners that are consistent with cultural belief systems in the society and express corresponding attitudes (e.g., acceptance, rejection) toward children who display the characteristics. Culturally-directed social evaluations and responses, in turn, regulate children's behaviours and ultimately their developmental patterns. How the peer interaction processes serve to transmit and construct cultures and to regulate children's socio-emotional functioning and development need to be examined thoroughly in future research.

Conclusions

Cross-cultural research has indicated the involvement of cultural factors in virtually all aspects of children's socio-emotional functioning. Cultural norms and values may affect the display and significance of children's socio-emotional functioning. The impact of cultural context on socio-emotional development is likely to occur through parental socialization practices and, in the later years, through peer interactions. Future research should explore the processes in which cultural factors are involved in children's social behaviours and emotions and their development.

Implications

Cross-cultural research helps us understand the role of social and cultural conditions in the development of social competence and problems. The findings also have implications for establishing appropriate policies related to families and children in Canada who have different

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cultural backgrounds. Moreover, the information about cross-cultural differences in children's socio-emotional characteristics and interaction styles are helpful for professionals to design culturally-sensitive and relevant programs in the community and the school for children of different backgrounds who have social and psychological problems.

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