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Cultural Differences in Emotional Development

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Introduction

Everybody seems to know what an emotion is, until being asked to define it.[1] Accordingly there is a myriad of definitions, some stressing more the biological roots, some more the cultural origins. Meanwhile there seems at least to be consensus that emotions are complex mental states which synthesize biological and cultural components, although the constituents and nature of this interaction is still unclear.[2,3] Emotions involve different dimensions, such as subjective experience, expressiveness, psychophysiological changes, and behaviour.

The biological base of emotions is regarded as expressed in the universal equipment with basic emotions, yet the presumed number differs between authors.[4,5,6] The founder of human ethology, Irenäus Eibl-Eibesfeldt extended the biological base to a universal grammar of human behaviour.[7] Nevertheless, the occurrence, the expression and the social regulation of emotions can differ substantially between cultures.

In this paper emotions are regarded as part of the human repertoire, yet embodying marked cultural differences in different domains.[3] Children participate from birth on in sociocultural

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encounters in which they co-construct their emotion system which is crucial for the definition of self and identity. Different cultural pathways of emotional development could be related to different conceptions of the self as grounded in wider cultural models. Cultural models are organized through particular definitions and combinations of autonomy and relatedness as two human basic needs as well as cultural constructs at the same time.

Subject

Understanding the cultural nature of emotions and their development is important for the unbiased understanding of children's development on a global scale. Emotions are differently interwoven with cognition, motivation and behaviour in different cultures. Socio-emotional development is centered around different lead emotions in different cultures, for example, positive emotionality in Western middle - class contexts[8] or shame in Chinese families.[9] Understanding these dynamics is crucial for meeting ethical standards of assessing and evaluating children's and caregiver's behaviours.

Problems

Research concerning children's development is still dominated by the WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, Democratic) world view. A tiny proportion of the world's population (estimations vary between 5 – 10%), who are basically different from other cultural groups, are regarded as representing humans globally.[10] The lack of cultural/cross-cultural studies is meanwhile recognized and admitted,[11,12,13] yet the reality of science and applications lags behind.

For example, classical attachment researchers accept as attachment research only studies applying procedures that have been developed by themselves, such as the Strange Situation Procedure in the original version.[14] The authors of these procedures all belong to WEIRD cultures. If adaptations are made, they are not far reaching enough, concerning, for example, only translations of observational protocols or interview questions. However, already the vocabulary may be different in different cultures, for example, there is no word for collaboration in Lamnso, the language of North West Cameroonian Nso people, where collaboration is not a social concept but a way of life (Melody Ngaidzeyuf Ndzenyuiy, PhD Candidate, personal communication, May 11, 2022).

Research Context

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Most of the research on early emotional development consists of observational situations. A parent, mostly the mother, is asked to play with her child in a standardized (mainly laboratory) or semi standardized (mainly at home) situation often with the seemingly paradoxical instruction: play as you would normally do. The situation is mainly defined as parent plays with child using toys. These usually short, 2 to 30 minutes on the average, situations are videotaped and the behavioural exchange is later coded with different, more or less standardized schemes by coders who should not be informed about the research questions and the background of the participants. This is of course not always to realize because of apparent phenotypical differences. Emotional expression of infants (and mothers) is often classified as positive, negative or neutral. Interrater agreement by mainly WEIRD coders is trained to reach a statistically acceptable level. [15] Another popular setting is confronting a child in a standardized laboratory arrangement with social or non-social stimuli which are supposed to trigger the expression of particular emotions. As an example, the still face paradigm instructs a mother to interrupt a face-to-face interaction with her baby by freezing any facial expression. Children's reactions are videotaped and coded.[16]

Key Research Questions

Research questions need to start with assessing the cultural conception of emotions in the particular community under study. This implies the local understanding of what emotions are, how they are embodied, how they are experienced and expressed and in which contextual conventions they are embedded. This knowledge must be the basis for studying cultural pathways of emotional development, which should ideally start with ethnographic longitudinal studies.

Recent Research Results

Early interactional situations following the WEIRD pattern of parent (mainly mother) – child communication mainly consist of cycles of exclusive dyadic face-to- face exchange with affectionate talking, smiling, increasing infant's arousal, and the use of toys (distal communication strategy). The expression of positive emotionality is crucial for co-regulation processes in this cultural context. This communication strategy is mostly absent in traditional rural cultures where proximate (body contact, body stimulation, rhythmical attunement) behavioural channels emphasize co-regulation, which is largely enacted non-verbally. Facial expressions are supposed to be neutral. Children grow up in multiple care networks where different caretakers may exert different caretaking functions or act interchangeably.[17] Children

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are often the main socialization agents in baby care. Gabriel Scheidecker, for example, observed in Madagascan villages that the peer group of 2 to 5 years of children were the dominant companions for children during the first three years of life from their second year on. Children in peer groups also show face to face contact and emotional expressions which in absent in the rare adult child encounters. Thus, these children acquire two social scripts at the same time.[18]

Emotional neutrality is also the social norm in this (and structurally similar) cultural context(s) when small children meet strangers for the first time. One-year-old Nso children reacted bodily welcoming (stretching their arms) to an approaching stranger with a neutral facial expression.[19] Children are socialized from early on to accept multiple people as part of the cooperative lifestyle.

Emotional development in early infancy can occur via multiple, culture-specific pathways as the comparative analysis of mother infant play situations during infants 4 to 12 weeks of age in Western middle-class families in Northern Italy, rural traditional Nso farmer families in Cameroon, and West African immigrant families in Northern Italy revealed. Longitudinal sequential analysis of maternal and infant behaviours showed that in Italian dyads mothers preferred the distal strategy, whereas the Cameroonian Nso mothers mainly used motor stimulation combined with rhythmic vocalizing, representing the proximate style. West African immigrant dyads showed a combination of both face-to-face and proximate co-regulated exchanges observed in their new and native cultures.[20] Another example concerns the definition of joint attention as infants looking to their mothers while jointly engaged with objects, accompanied by positive emotionality. Adopting a broader and more inclusive definition as coordinated joint engagement with any social partner involving social and non-social objects surrounded by any expression of emotionality (including neutrality) is helpful to avoid potential ethnocentric bias. Three human groups with one-year old focus children from urban families in the UK, Cameroonian Nso farmers and Aka foragers in the Central African Republic were observed in their natural surroundings (as well as three groups of chimpanzees living in diverse ecological settings). Joint attention (JA) with positive emotional tone was significantly more common in middle-class settings. Coordinated Joint Engagement (CJE) without specifying the emotional tone occurred frequently in all groups. Moreover, neither CJE or JA was found to be unique to humans.[21]

All together there is a growing body of evidence emphasizing that diverse eco-cultural experiences have significant impact on developmental outcomes of socio emotional as well as

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development in general. Developmental trajectories are embedded in broader cultural models that frame developmental goals in terms of culture specific conceptions of autonomy and relatedness.[8,22]

Research Gaps

The biggest research gap is certainly the lack of cultural conscious research. The study of emotions, as research in developmental and social sciences in general, is still dominated by WEIRD researchers, studying WEIRD subjects in WEIRD environments with WEIRD methods and protocols.[10,11,12,13] Although there is substantial evidence from cultural psychology and anthropology that all dimensions of emotions vary substantially across cultural contexts, systematic research is lacking on cultural conceptions of emotions, the development of emotional experiences and expressions, their interrelatedness with other developmental domains, as well as their intracultural variation. This also implies the development of cultural conscious methodologies and infrastructures for enabling inclusive and participatory research programs.[23]

Conclusions

Cultural conscious research is crucial for overcoming the ethnocentric bias of mainstream theory and practice concerning emotions and emotional development. Only culture conscious research can contribute to a global developmental science. Acknowledging cultural differences is deeply interwoven with ethical issues since it necessitates abandoning the evaluation of diverse cultural practices with monocultural standards, mainly derived from a WEIRD understanding of human psychology. The narrative in different applied domains from education to family court decisions to early child care and education programs is, that what differs from the WEIRD way of life is a deficit.[24] The consequences of this perspective are devastating when, for example, children are placed in foster care because the educational agenda of their families/mothers deviates from a classical mainly attachment based understanding of responsiveness and child centeredness. Emotional expressiveness is crucial in this process.[8] Ghanaian psychologist Seth Oppong has convincingly outlined that “…how and why what is ethical in one culture becomes unethical in the Ghanaian context and what is unethical in the Ghanaian context becomes ethical in another culture.”.[24]

Implications for Parents, Services and Policy

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The next important step is a change of perspective from an evaluative framework to an inclusive one. There are different truths, different realities and different normative frameworks related to emotions and their development across cultures that cannot be classified along one standard of quality. The institutional early educational practice needs to distance itself from one definition of pedagogical quality and accept the educational visions and practices of families with different cultural models. Particularly the lack of emotional expressiveness, narrative brevity and avoidance of eye contact, representing the code of conduct in many cultural environments are often interpreted as psychiatric symptoms preventing proper and responsible care for children's well-being in family court decisions.

Global early childhood developmental programs aim at improving brain development of children in the global south with changing parenting practices without assessing the need and without taking local cultural socialization goals and practices into account.[25] Often science is contrasted with culture, where science is understood in WEIRD terms and culture as promoting deficits.[8] Besides services and policy, educational curricula for professionals working in these different domains need to be reformulated.

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