



## Parent emotion socialisation practices and their associations with personality and emotion regulation

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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Received 15 February 2010

Received in revised form 26 May 2010

Accepted 31 May 2010

Available online 3 July 2010

#### Keywords:

Personality

Emotion

Parenting

Socialisation

### ABSTRACT

This study aimed to examine parent emotion socialisation practices and their association with personality and emotion regulation (ER). Mothers ( $n = 353$ ) and fathers ( $n = 206$ ) of children and adolescents ( $n = 372$ ; 10–18 years) completed measures of the five factor model of personality, ER, responses to child negative emotions, and emotional expressiveness. All five personality factors were related to parenting, with openness and agreeableness being most pertinent to socialisation practices. Although there were some significant associations between parent ER and emotion socialisation, ER explained very little variance in parenting after controlling for personality. The findings provide important insights into individual differences in emotion socialisation practices.

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### 1. Introduction

According to Belsky (1984) the determinants of parenting fall into three categories: parent characteristics, child characteristics and contextual factors. Of these, he argued that parent personality is the most important. Subsequently, researchers have utilised the five factor model of personality (neuroticism (N), extraversion (E), openness (O), agreeableness (A) and conscientiousness (C); McCrae & John, 1992) to investigate this proposition (Metsäpelto & Pulkkinen, 2003; Oliver, Guerin, & Coffman, 2009). Despite a growing body of research demonstrating important links between emotion socialisation practices and children's socioemotional functioning (Denham, Bassett, & Wyatt, 2007; Saarni, 2007), there have been very few studies investigating associations between parent characteristics and emotion socialisation.

Studies of parent personality have generally hypothesised that optimal parenting is associated with lower N and higher E, O, A and C. This is based on the assumption that these traits lead to positive parenting practices via their influence on factors such as emotional stability, enjoyment of and engagement in parent–child interactions, degree of restrictiveness regarding child behaviours and experiences, tendency toward compassion and the provision of structure (Belsky & Jaffee, 2006). Although there are some inconsistencies, existing studies of factors such as warmth, control,

communication and limit setting have found general support for the above hypothesis (e.g., Metsäpelto & Pulkkinen, 2003; Oliver et al., 2009). Moreover, a meta-analysis of 30 studies yielded small but significant effect sizes indicating that lower N and higher E, O, C and A were associated with greater parental warmth and behaviour control, while lower N and higher A were associated with greater autonomy support (Prinz, Stams, Dekovic, Reijntjes, & Belsky, 2009).

Emotion socialisation represents the various social agents that shape children's development of emotional competence (Denham et al., 2007). This can include direct influences occurring during parent–child interactions, or more indirect influences such as overall family emotional climate (Morris, Silk, Steinberg, Myers, & Robinson, 2007). Of relevance, Fabes and colleagues (Fabes, Leonard, Kupanoff, & Martin, 2001; Fabes, Poulin, Eisenberg, & Maden-Derdich, 2002; Jones, Eisenberg, Fabes, & MacKinnon, 2002) investigated the way in which parents respond to children's negative emotions. In general, they found that parents who responded by addressing the cause of their child's distress, by helping their child cope with the emotion, or by encouraging emotional expression had children with positive socioemotional outcomes. In contrast, parents who responded by minimising the child's experience, by punishing emotional expression or by becoming distressed themselves had children with poorer functioning. Studies investigating relationships between parent personality and these types of responses are needed.

Parents' valence and frequency of emotional expressiveness (EE) is thought to be a key aspect of family emotional climate

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and in turn related to child outcomes. Numerous studies support this, finding that parents who express more positive emotion and less negative emotion have children with greater emotion understanding, social competence and psychological well-being (Eisenberg et al., 2003; Halberstadt & Eaton, 2003). Furthermore, Smith et al. (2007) reported that greater positive EE was associated with mothers' higher E, O and A, while greater negative EE was associated with mothers' higher N and lower A and C.

Parents' emotion regulation (ER) may also be of relevance to emotion socialisation. ER refers to the processes through which emotional experience is evaluated, monitored, maintained and modified (Thompson, 1994). Gross and colleagues (Gross & John, 2003; Gross & Levenson, 1997; John & Gross, 2004) have investigated two specific ER strategies: cognitive reappraisal which involves changing the way one thinks about a situation and expressive suppression which involves hiding one's emotional response from others. Their findings have indicated that greater use of reappraisal and less use of suppression are associated with better psychological and interpersonal functioning. In addition, reappraisal and suppression have been found to be related to the five factor model of personality (Gross & John, 2003). Although it is feasible that parents who have more functional ER would use more constructive emotion socialisation practices, there is little empirical research examining this. In one related exception, Gottman, Katz, and Hooven (1996) reported that parent meta-emotion (i.e., the way parents feel about emotion) predicted parenting practices including warmth, praise and negative affect.

The current study aimed to examine associations between parent personality, ER, and two types of emotion socialisation practices: (1) the way parents respond to children's negative emotions and (2) the valence and frequency of parents' EE. It was hypothesised that positive socialisation practices (supportive responses, expressive encouragement, positive EE) would be associated with higher levels of E, O, A, C and reappraisal, and lower levels of N and suppression. In contrast, it was hypothesised that less positive socialisation practices (non-supportive responses, distress reactions, negative EE) would be associated with lower levels of E, O, A, C and reappraisal, and higher levels of N and suppression. The study further aimed to examine the incremental validity of ER in relation to emotion socialisation over and above that of personality. Although previous studies have reported differences in personality and parenting between men and women (e.g., women report higher O and A and more positive socialisation practices; Metsäpelto & Pulkkinen, 2003; Wong, McElwain, & Halberstadt, 2009), the investigated relationships were not expected to differ between mothers and fathers. Nevertheless, due to the lack of research in this field, mothers and fathers were examined separately.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants and procedures

Parents were recruited via their children who were participants in a longitudinal study of emotional development (see Gullone, Hughes, King, & Tonge, 2010). The study took place in Melbourne, Australia, and was approved by the institutional ethics committee. Data presented herein were collected during Wave 4, in which 846 children participated. Questionnaires were posted to parents who, at the time of providing written consent for their child's participation, indicated that they spoke English and would be interested in completing questionnaires. For families with two or more participating children, one child was randomly selected using a random number generator and parents were instructed to respond in relation to this child.

Of 518 eligible families, 383 (74%) female and 215 (42%) male caregivers completed questionnaires. Respondents were excluded if they were not the child's biological or step parent, lived with the child less than half the time, or if the child was outside the targeted age range (10–18 years). The final sample is described in Table 1. This represented 372 children of which 187 (50%) had two parents who completed questionnaires.

### 2.2. Measures

#### 2.2.1. NEO-Five Factor Inventory-3 (NEO-FFI-3)

The NEO-FFI-3 (McCrae & Costa, 2007) is a 60-item self-report measure assessing the five factor model of personality. Each item comprises a descriptive statement rated on a 5-point scale to indicate how much the respondent agrees the description is true of them (1 = *strongly disagree* 5 = *strongly agree*). The NEO-FFI-3 has high internal consistency ( $\alpha = .78-.86$ ), sound factor structure and convergence with the longer NEO-Personality Inventory (McCrae & Costa, 2007). Earlier versions of the NEO-FFI have been well validated including convergence with other measures of personality (Costa & McCrae, 1992). In the current study, internal consistency ranged from .73 (mother A) to .89 (father N).

#### 2.2.2. Emotion Regulation Questionnaire (ERQ)

The ERQ (Gross & John, 2003) comprises 10 items assessing the ER strategies cognitive reappraisal (six items) and expressive suppression (four items). In the current study, the 7-point response scale was reduced to a 5-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*) for consistency with the child version in the larger project. Higher scores on each scale indicate greater use of the corresponding strategy. The ERQ has been reported to have high internal consistency ( $\alpha = .79$  reappraisal, .73 suppression) and test-retest reliability ( $r = .69$  both scales), and sound convergent and discriminant validity (Gross & John, 2003; John & Gross, 2004). In the current study, internal consistency ranged from .64 (father suppression) to .84 (mother reappraisal).

#### 2.2.3. Coping with Children's Negative Emotions Scale (CCNES)

The CCNES (Fabes, Eisenberg, & Bernzweig, 1990) comprises 12 scenarios in which children express negative emotion. As the scenarios are designed for school-aged children, parents were asked to recall how they responded when the child was less than 10 years old (e.g., "If my child lost a favourite toy and reacted with tears, I would have..."). Each scenario includes six responses which parents rate regarding their likelihood of responding that way (1 = *very unlikely*, 7 = *very likely*). Responses include emotion-focused (e.g., "distracted my child by talking about happy things"), problem-focused (e.g., "helped my child to think of places they hadn't looked yet"), minimisation (e.g., "told my child they were

**Table 1**  
Sample characteristics.

	Mothers	Fathers
N	353	206
%		
Australian born	67	63
Married/De facto	83	98
Tertiary education	28	35
Household Income $\geq$ AUD\$100 k	27	19
Biological parent	99	93
Male child	44	41
M (SD); Range		
Age (years)	44.9 (5.5); 30–59	48.1 (6.5); 31–66
Child age (years)	14.8 (2.4); 10–18	14.8 (2.4); 10–18
Number of children	2.4 (1.0); 1–7	2.4 (1.0); 1–7

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