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The disappointing gift: Dispositional and situational moderators of emotional expressions

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ABSTRACT

Inferences about emotions in children are limited by studies that rely on only one research method. Convergence across methods provides a stronger basis for inference by identifying method variance. This multimethod study of 116 children (mean age = 8.21 years) examined emotional displays during social exchange. Each child received a desirable gift and later an undesirable gift after performing tasks, with or without mother present. Children's reactions were observed and coded. Children displayed more positive affect with mother present than with mother absent. Independent ratings of children by adults revealed that children lower in the personality dimension of Agreeableness displayed more negative emotion than their peers following the receipt of an undesirable gift. A curvilinear interaction between Agreeableness and mother condition predicted negative affect displays. Emotional assessment is discussed in terms of links to social exchange and the development of expressive behavior.

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Introduction

The study of emotion in children is complex and multifaceted. Conceptual ambiguity underlies the construct of emotion in part because it refers to potential for behavior that may or may not translate into overt behavior. Like other predispositions, emotions require specific eliciting conditions for the potential to be activated. To understand emotional processes, and by extension emotional assessment, it is necessary to specify contextual variables that activate emotion-related structures. Specification of

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these conditions goes hand-in-glove with the nature of the emotion in question (Cole, Martin, & Dennis, 2004). For example, if the focal process is negative emotion, then frustrating conditions will probably be more effective elicitors than will reward conditions. This characterization may apply better to emotional traits than to emotional states. That is, a predisposition to negative emotionality or regulation of negative emotion may require specification of multiple comparative eliciting conditions to a greater extent than would a single negative emotional display. Even here, however, conditions that could and could not elicit the display would be of interest to researchers.

Taken together, this line of reasoning implies that experiments may be a prime tool for assessing emotional processes in children. Experiments are not commonly regarded as tools in the assessment arsenal, but these procedures allow children to be randomly assigned to conditions in which contextual variables are manipulated and not merely correlated. If the hypotheses are correct, then variations in conditions will elicit emotional relations relative to another control condition. Experiments are the most powerful method when causal inference is the main goal of research (e.g., Shadish, Cook, & Campbell, 2002; West, Biesanz, & Pitts, 2000). Nevertheless, experiments are not without their critics. Perhaps the most common criticism is that outcomes of laboratory experiments lack external validity. That is, they are constrained, artificial, and unlikely to generalize beyond the confines of the laboratory walls, if even that far. Recently, theorists have noted that external validity is more important than previously recognized because outcomes that do not generalize have implications for larger questions of boundary conditions and construct validity (e.g., Shadish & Cook, 2009; Shadish et al., 2002; West & Graziano, *in press*).

One step toward a resolution involves the recognition of the need for convergence across multiple methodologies. Every methodology contains potential limitations, so outcomes that appear across methodologies imply that the outcome transcends method variance. In the case of emotional assessment in children, this logic implies that experimental paradigms may be especially valuable for manipulating eliciting conditions for emotional displays in children and making stronger causal inference (Cole et al., 2004). When experimental methods are combined with observational and correlation methodologies, however, alternative explanations centered on constraining measures, artificiality, and lack of generality outside the laboratory are weakened, if not largely eliminated, as plausible explanations (Zeman, Klimes-Dougan, Cassano, & Adrian, 2007).

The research presented here used a converging multimethod study to probe hypotheses about emotional assessment in children. In particular, we used experimental and correlation procedures, combined with observational coding and reports of mothers and knowledgeable adult informants, to examine emotional displays in children. Substantively, this research focused on emotional displays and their variation as a function of eliciting conditions. Presumably, if a child exhibits one display in Setting A but a different one in Setting B, the difference could be a manifestation of emotion regulation. It could also be the result of several other processes such as differential sensitivity to the eliciting conditions.

To probe all of these processes, it is important to have a working definition of emotion regulation. Thompson (1994) observed that implicit notions of emotion regulation are so powerful that researchers often do not provide a clear explicit definition of the phenomenon. He then offered this working definition: "Emotion regulation consists of the extrinsic and intrinsic processes responsible for monitoring, evaluating, and modifying emotional reactions, especially their intensive and temporal features, to accomplish their goals" (pp. 27–28). Ultimately, Thompson suggested that emotion regulation is not easily defined because it refers to a range of dynamic processes, "each of which may have its own catalysts and control processes" (p. 52). Subsequent analysis by Cole and colleagues (2004) came to similar conclusions about the elusiveness of a consensus definition. Until such consensus is reached, emotion regulation researchers must provide working definitions through discussion of their key constructs.

This research focused on the assessment of emotion and emotion regulation within the context of social exchanges because they represent an opportunity for multimethod research. They can be observed naturalistically, described by third parties, and manipulated experimentally. Perhaps more important, social exchange is recognized as a universal forum in which emotion regulation is required (Laursen & Graziano, 2002). Anthropologists identify social exchange as a panhuman experience, noting that children in every known culture must learn rules for the giving and receiving of gifts (Harris,

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