



Meta-emotion philosophy in early childhood teachers: Psychometric properties of the Crèche Educator Emotional Styles Questionnaire



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ABSTRACT

Meta-emotion philosophy has been theoretically conceptualized as an emotional connection between parents and children which reflects parents' awareness, acceptance, and regulation of their own emotions and their awareness, acceptance, and regulation of their children's emotions. The main aim of the current study was to develop and test the psychometric properties of a self-report questionnaire assessing meta-emotion philosophy in early childhood teachers (the Crèche Educator Emotional Style Questionnaire – CEESQ). CEESQ consisted of two sections: the first referred to children's emotions (CEESQ-Children's Emotions) and the second to early childhood educators' emotions (CEESQ-Individual Emotions). Participants were 306 early childhood teachers, recruited from 58 day care centers in the center and south of Italy. Exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses for the first section identified three dimensions: two styles used by early childhood teachers to deal with children's emotions (i.e., Coaching and Dismissing), and teachers' Self-efficacy as Emotional Socializers. Similar analyses for the second section identified two dimensions: Emotional Self-efficacy (i.e., teachers' awareness and ability to deal with their own emotions), and Denial of Emotion (i.e., teachers' lack of acceptance of their own emotions). Both CEESQ sections demonstrated an equivalence in structure considering having/not having own children, years of working experience, academic education level. No main or interaction effects pertaining to teachers' individual characteristics emerged in any of the CEESQ dimensions. Lastly, both Emotional Self-efficacy and Self-efficacy as an Emotional Socializer were positively associated with a Coaching style, with Self-efficacy as an Emotional Socializer playing a partial mediation role. Administering CEESQ and discussing its scores with teachers could work as a prompt in order to discuss and mentalize teachers' emotional work as emotional socializers.

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Introduction

In this paper, we tested the psychometric properties of a new instrument being developed to measure early childhood teachers' meta-emotion philosophy. The concept of parents' meta-emotion philosophy (Gottman, Katz, & Hooven, 1996, 1997) encompasses an organized set of feelings and thoughts (a philosophy of emotional expression and regulation) about their own and their children's emotions, and an approach to their own and their children's emotions. Meta-emotion philosophy relates to parenting behaviors, to children's ability to regulate emotions, and to children's emotional and social competence (Gottman et al., 1996, 1997).

To date, the construct of meta-emotion philosophy has only been studied in parents and not in other meaningful socializing agents, for instance, early childhood teachers. Research recently evidenced that early childhood teachers offer important socialization opportunities for children (Denham, Bassett, & Zinsler, 2012), and they perform many emotion-laden caregiving tasks (Ahn, 2005; Ahn & Stifter, 2006; Hyson, 2002; Mill & Romano-White, 1999). Considering that like parents, caregivers also play a role as socializers of emotional competence in children, we think that it is important to further understand teachers' perceptions about their own philosophy regarding how they socialize children to express and control their emotional responses, as well as how the teachers recognize, accept, and regulate their own individual emotions.

Meta-emotion philosophy in caregivers and its measurement

The meta-emotion philosophy construct (Gottman et al., 1996, 1997) provides an interesting conceptual framework for

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representing the way through which parents' thoughts and feelings about emotions in themselves and in their children are connected to how they socialize emotions in their children. That is to say, the meta-emotion model assumes that adults' beliefs and feelings about emotions are expressed through their behaviors toward children's emotions. The two main parenting styles concerning children's emotional socialization are emotion *coaching* and emotion *dismissing* (Gottman et al., 1996, 1997; Hooven, Gottman, & Katz, 1995; Lagacé-Séguin & Coplan, 2005; Lunkenheimer, Shields, & Cortina, 2007; Ramsden & Hubbard, 2002). Coaching children's emotions is a style in which parents are aware of both their own and their children's feelings, accept them empathically, and effectively help children to process and regulate emotions. Dismissing children's emotions is a parenting style characterized by a lack of awareness of both their own and their children's emotions, and by a deficiency in effectively solving emotional problems which results in devaluing, minimizing, and ignoring children's negative emotions.

According to this approach, parental meta-emotion philosophy is conceptualized as an emotional connection between parents and children which reflects parents' awareness, acceptance, and regulation of their own emotions and their awareness, acceptance, and regulation of their children's emotions. Gottman et al. (1996, 1997) developed a meta-emotion interview specifically focused on parents' awareness, acceptance, and regulation of their own, as well as their children's emotions. High levels of these three processes define a coaching style, whereas low levels define a dismissing style. In order to overcome some limits of this interview (e.g., 90 min required to administer it, specialized training to conduct it), Lagacé-Séguin and Coplan (2005) and Hakim-Larson, Parker, Lee, Goodwin, and Voelker (2006) created and validated two self-report questionnaires specifically focused on emotional parenting styles, referring exclusively to the parental socializing of children's emotions.

The aim of the current study was twofold. First, we aimed to develop a self-report questionnaire based on Gottman and colleagues' (1996, 1997) original interview in which the three processes of meta-emotion philosophy (i.e., awareness, acceptance, and regulation of emotions) were referred to children's emotions in terms of emotional styles as well as to the emotions of the caregivers. Second, in order to fill a sizeable gap in the literature, we focused on early childhood teachers, considering the important role they play as emotional socializers of children's emotions.

As stated, the construct of meta-emotion philosophy had only been referred to parents and not to other meaningful socializing agents, for instance, early childhood teachers. Even though the role of early childhood teachers as socializers of emotions has to a large extent been neglected, recent research has stressed that they offer important socialization opportunities for children (Denham et al., 2012), they spend a significant amount of time with the children (Innocenti Research Centre, 2008; Phillips & Adams, 2001), and perform many emotion-laden care-giving tasks (Ahn, 2005; Ahn & Stifter, 2006; Hyson, 2002; Mill & Romano-White, 1999). As Denham et al. (2012) asserted, early childhood teachers work as socializers of children's emotional competence as much as parents do, mainly by modeling or scaffolding, or by reacting to children's emotions. Furthermore, early childhood teachers can react to children's emotions by showing empathy or physical comfort, or distract and help children to cope with feelings by problem-solving, or ignore and give negative responses to the children's emotions (Ahn, 2005; Ahn & Stifter, 2006; Hyson, 2002; Meyer & Turner, 2007).

In fulfilling the aim of the current study, we considered it crucial to identify the nature of early childhood educators' beliefs about children's emotions, in terms of which practices they consider pertinent to their professional role, how they feel to be able to implement them (i.e., self-efficacy), and finally, how they perceive

the impact of their behaviors on children's emotional development. We were driven by the parenting literature in which parental self-efficacy and perceived impact emerge as important variables in explaining parental functioning across various domains (e.g., emotional availability, nurturance, physical childcare behaviors, play, discipline), as well as parental satisfaction (Bandura, 1986, 1997; Boivin et al., 2005; Bornstein, 2002; Coleman & Karraker, 1997, 2003; Teti & Gelfand, 1991). Moreover, our interest in teachers' beliefs about children's emotions was justified by a previous study by Hyson and Lee (1996) who developed a tool (the Caregiver's Beliefs About Feelings Survey – CBAF) for preschool educators, focused on dimensions like "Beliefs about adult labeling and talking about emotions with children" and "Beliefs about affectionate bond with children". Their model, specifically concerning beliefs, does not identify coherent behavioral styles among educators toward children's emotions, nor does it evaluate teachers' self-efficacy or perceived impact.

To summarize, in the present study, we tested the psychometric properties of a new tool developed in order to measure early childhood teachers' meta-emotion philosophy. The tool comprised two sections: the first referred to children's emotions and the second to early childhood educators' emotions. The first section was created in order to identify the styles used by early childhood teachers to deal with children's emotions, self-efficacy as emotional socializers, and their perceived impact in this task. The second section was created in order to identify the individual attitude of early childhood teachers toward their own emotions. In so doing, we were inspired by instruments addressing parental meta-emotion philosophy (Gottman et al., 1996, 1997; Katz & Windecker-Nelson, 2004; Lagacé-Séguin & Coplan, 2005), and parental beliefs about their role as parents (Boivin et al., 2005; Coleman & Karraker, 2003; Teti & Gelfand, 1991).

The impact of teachers' emotions in teaching

A further rationale for this study derived from a review of the extant research, mainly focusing on primary school teachers, about the impact of emotions in teaching. Several studies have provided evidence that teachers' emotional competence (i.e., being aware of their own emotions, accurately perceiving others' emotions, managing emotions and using them to facilitate thought and action; Mayer, Salovey, Caruso, & Sitarenios, 2001) is related to their perception of effectiveness in their role and in their practices (Day & Leitch, 2001; Penrose, Perry, & Ball, 2007; Perry & Ball, 2008; Sutton & Wheatley, 2003; Winograd, 2003; Zembylas, 2007). According to Bandura's postulation (1997), experiences of efficacy as well as emotional states enhance or impair beliefs about the self, because they are a source of information on individual self-efficacy. Moreover, teachers' efficacy is affected by the variance in their emotionality and emotion regulation (Sutton & Wheatley, 2003). Research about teachers' emotions recently recognized that the emotional labor teachers are required to perform when they regulate their own feelings in teaching has an impact on the emotional quality of the interactions between teachers and students, parents and colleagues, on the sense of the teachers' personal and professional identities, and finally on the caring ethics of teaching (Schutz & Zembylas, 2009; Sutton, 2004; Yin & Lee, 2012). In other words, teachers can be seen as emotional workers, who intentionally use their emotional experience to fit professional and ethical norms in teaching.

To date, few studies have investigated the impact of teachers' emotions on the quality of the caregiver-child relationship and on the socialization of emotions in preschool children (de Schipper, Riksen-Walraven, Geurts, & Derksen, 2008; Ersay, 2007). In particular, Ersay (2007) found that preschool teachers who were more aware of their own emotions were also less likely to ignore or

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