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Emerging adults' reports of maternal emotion socialization and their adjustment across cultures



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ABSTRACT

The relationship between parental emotion socialization and offspring adjustment during emerging adulthood across cultures has been understudied. We examined emerging adults' reports of maternal emotion socialization, their subjective experience, and their own current adjustment in India ($n = 238$) and USA ($n = 220$). Indians rated their mothers as providing more explanation-oriented responses and reported feeling more positive in response, and rated their mothers as providing all four nonsupportive responses (punitive, minimizing, scolding, and not talking) more, and reported feeling less negative in response than Americans. Reports of mothers' nonsupportive responses were positively related to emerging adults' adjustment problems in both cultures. In the US, mothers' supportive responses were directly negatively related to emerging adults' adjustment problems, while in India, maternal supportive responses were indirectly related to emerging adults' adjustment problems via their subjective experience. Culture moderated the relation between maternal expressive encouragement and emerging adult adjustment problems.

1. Introduction

During emerging adulthood (18–25 years), individuals in industrialized societies transition from adolescence to adulthood while pursuing higher education and delaying adult roles and responsibilities such as work, marriage, and parenthood (Arnett, 2000). Studies have shown that during this transition, emerging adults in Western cultures (i.e., the United States, Canada, United Kingdom) experience stress and adjustment problems at increasing rates (Asberg, Bowers, Renk, & McKinney, 2008; Dyson & Renk, 2006; Edwards, Herschberger, Russel, & Markert, 2001; Furr, Westefeld, McConnell, & Jenkins, 2001). Adjustment to college may be particularly stressful with increasing academic demands, new peer groups, relationships, and changes in one's environment. Among other factors, socialization experiences within one's family of origin likely contribute to emerging adults' adjustment. Indeed, retrospective reports of parenting behaviors experienced during childhood have been shown to be related to a variety of academic and emotional difficulties in college (Li, Costanzo, & Putallaz, 2010; Silva, Dorso, Azhar, & Renk, 2007).

Parental emotion socialization is a key domain of parenting, and a substantial body of literature has shown that parental socialization of emotion, in particular, parental responses to children's emotions are associated with a variety of child social-emotional outcomes across early childhood (Denham et al., 2000; McElwain, Halberstadt, & Volling, 2007),

middle childhood (Eisenberg, Losoya, et al., 2001; Suveg, Zeman, Flannery-Schroeder, & Cassano, 2005), and adolescence (Katz & Hunter, 2007; Klimes-Dougan et al., 2007) among White middle-class families in the United States (US), as well as among families in Asian cultures (Eisenberg, Pidada, and Liew, 2001; Tao, Zhou, & Wang, 2010). Parental responses to children's emotion are likely to continue to be relevant to child functioning during emerging adulthood, though, to the best of our knowledge, there have been no empirical examinations of the relationship between parental emotion socialization as recalled by emerging adults' and their own adjustment across cultures. What children learn about emotions while growing up is critical because difficulties with regulating emotion are associated with different forms of psychopathology, and thus, such research has implications for mental health (Thompson & Meyer, 2007). Moreover, although developmental theories conceptualize children as active agents contributing to their own functioning across the developmental spectrum (e.g., Sameroff, 2009), the role of how offspring experience parent behavior has rarely been empirically investigated in the field of emotion socialization. In the present study, we compared emerging adults' retrospective reports of their mothers' emotion socialization behaviors during childhood, and their subjective experience (how they felt in response to maternal behavior) across two different cultural contexts: India and the US. We also examined whether emerging adults' reports of their subjective experience of maternal behaviors mediate the relation between maternal emotion socialization and their own current adjustment in college.

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1.1. Parenting influences during emerging adulthood and the role of emotion socialization

In recent years, research attention has been devoted to emerging adults, including the role of parents during these years. Given high costs of post-secondary education and shifts in parent-child relationships, emerging adults in countries such as USA remain financially and emotionally dependent on their parents while in college (Arnett, 2000). Parents feel the need to guide their children through this period of exploration while allowing them the independence and autonomy they desire (Nelson, Padilla-Walker, Christensen, Evans, & Carroll, 2011). In Asian cultures such as India, emerging adults financially, socially, and emotionally depend on their parents while in college and sometimes beyond. Parents continue to provide guidance in important life decisions such as academics, career, and marriage (Seiter & Nelson, 2010).

An important aspect of parents' continued involvement is what parents teach their children about emotions. Parental socialization of children's emotion includes parents' beliefs, behaviors, and affective reactions concerning emotion, and how these processes relate to children's understanding, experience, and regulation of emotion (Eisenberg, Cumberland, & Spinrad, 1998). How children understand and regulate emotions is critical, given that difficulties in regulating emotions such as anger, sadness, and fear are implicated in anxiety, depression, and conduct problems (Thompson & Meyer, 2007). Undeniably, the process of emotion socialization is bidirectional such that parental socialization practices influence children's emotional and social competence and child characteristics elicit certain parental responses (Eisenberg et al., 2005; Parra, Olsen, Buckholdt, Jobe-Shields, & Davis, 2010; Wong, McElwain, & Halberstadt, 2009). Eisenberg and colleagues (Eisenberg et al., 1998) used a heuristic model to outline parental emotion socialization, demonstrating how child characteristics, parent characteristics, cultural factors, and context influence parental socialization behaviors in both directions. Three major methods were discussed through which parents socialize their children's emotions: parents' direct responses to children's emotions, parents' discussion of emotions, and parental modeling of their emotion regulation. Parental behavioral responses to the child's emotions (often categorized as supportive or non-supportive) have been the most studied, and are the focus of the present study.

Supportive responses such as emotion- or problem-focused coping serve to support the child's emotional expression, and help children to learn the skills for effective regulation (Eisenberg et al., 1998). In contrast, non-supportive responses such as punitive behaviors to control the display of the child's negative emotion or minimizing the child's distressed reaction may lead to children experiencing heightened emotional arousal, and lower likelihood of learning skills to regulate distress (Eisenberg et al., 1998). Specifically, evidence suggests that in White middle-class children in the US, parental supportive responses are associated with adaptive outcomes such as increased self-esteem in adolescents (Katz & Hunter, 2007), whereas parental non-supportive responses are related to externalizing problems (i.e., aggression, non-compliance) (Denham et al., 2000; Eisenberg et al., 2005) and internalizing problems (i.e., depression and anxiety) (Suveg et al., 2005) across preschool age to early adolescence. Further, studies have shown that parents' responses to children's emotions contribute to children's adjustment through the mediating role of children's emotion regulation in middle childhood (Blair et al., 2014; Ramsden & Hubbard, 2002). Much of this literature has focused on parental emotion socialization from early childhood through adolescence, with little work examining the relation between parental emotion socialization and emerging adult functioning. For example, in one study, the relationship between family expressiveness during childhood and college students' current adjustment was examined by college student report, and it was found that those who reported their families as less expressive had more adjustment difficulties than those from more expressive families (Johnson, Gans, Kerr, & LaValle, 2010).

1.2. Cultural context of emotion socialization and emerging adult functioning

Cultural models of self and self-other relationships are thought to impact psychological processes such as emotion, cognition, and motivation (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). In cultures where an independent or autonomous self is most salient (e.g., in Canada, UK, US), one is defined by inner attributes such as one's own thoughts and feelings, and is conceptualized as separate from other beings (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Given this self-definition, child socialization would further these aims through promotion of self-uniqueness, development of self-expressiveness as the basis for self-esteem, and the expression of emotion in children as a symbol of individuality (Keller & Otto, 2009). In contrast, in the cultural model of interdependent or related self that is most salient in Asia, Middle East, Africa, and South America, one is defined by the connectedness to others in the social context and the social tasks focus on fitting in with others (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Given the importance of sociocentric goals, parental socialization would focus on belongingness and promoting other-centered goals, and prioritizing the ability of self-restraint in maintenance of social harmony as the basis for self-satisfaction (Kâğıtçıbaşı, 2013; Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Children learn to regulate emotions that involve self-assertion or highlight separateness of self from others (e.g., anger, sadness, pride) because these emotions may threaten social harmony.

An emerging body of literature has investigated parents' reports of their responses to children's emotion across cultures, focusing on mothers as socialization agents, and the developmental periods of school-age through adolescence. In a descriptive study, Cole, Tamang, and Shrestha (2006) explored the socialization of anger and shame for preschool-age children in rural Nepal within two distinct ethnic communities, the Buddhist Tamang and the Hindu Brahman. The researchers argued that both communities share features such as reliance on farming, limited literacy, though the religious differences (egalitarian Buddhism and hierarchical Hinduism) contribute to differential emotion socialization processes. For example, Tamang adults employed more punitive responses to children's anger, whereas Brahmans responded to children's anger in a more nurturing and coaxing style. Interestingly, some of the responses of Nepali caregivers (i.e., coaxing, ignoring, reasoning) do not fit neatly into the various supportive and non-supportive parental responses that are typically investigated in emotion socialization studies. In another study, Chan, Bowes, and Wyver (2009) found that Chinese mothers' most frequent response to their six- to eight-year-old children's emotions was *chiao-shun*—training children through leadership and constantly supervising their behaviors, while also offering concern and involvement. These findings highlight the need for considering culturally unique combination of parent responses.

Similarly, in a mixed-methods study, Raval and Martini (2011) found that in response to their school-age children's anger or sadness, mothers in Hindu urban middle-class families in India described a socialization approach termed “making the child understand” that is psycho-educational in nature and is endorsed in daily familial interactions. Consistent with the cultural values in urban middle-class settings in Indian society, mothers believed that children should come to acceptance and adjustment in facing the situation rather than focusing on the emotion elicited by the situation or attempting to change the situation. Raval and Martini recommended distinguishing these explanation-oriented responses from problem-focused responses (e.g., helping the child to resolve the emotion-eliciting situation), emotion-focused responses (e.g., verbal or physical comforting with the aim of making the child feel better), and expressive encouragement (e.g., encouraging the expression of the child's emotion) that are typically investigated in studies of White American children and adolescents. In a subsequent comparative study, Indian mothers of school-age children reported providing these explanation-oriented responses more than US mothers did, while US mothers reported providing problem-focused

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