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The Role of Gender in the Socialization of Emotion: Key Concepts and Critical Issues

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Abstract

Given the omnipresent role of gender in children's and adolescents' development, it seems necessary to better understand how gender affects the process of emotion socialization. In this introductory chapter, the authors discuss the overarching themes and key concepts discussed in this volume, as well as outline the distinct contribution of each individual chapter. Each chapter within this volume underscores the important role that parents play in the socialization of emotion, and the impact gender-typed emotion socialization may have on later socioemotional adjustment. © Wiley Periodicals, Inc.

Emotions play a pivotal role in a multitude of areas of child and adolescent development, including social functioning, academic performance, and the development of psychopathology. Given the primary role that emotion plays across a wide range of developmental processes, it should not be surprising that researchers have focused on understanding the development of emotion over the past twenty years (see Izard, Youngstrom, Fine, Mostow, & Trentacosta, 2006 for relevant review). Although emotions are—in part—biological, the meanings of emotions and appropriateness of emotional expression are socialized; and, in the early years of life, socialization primarily takes place via interactions within the family, and characteristics of both parents and children may affect the process of emotion socialization. Gender is one critically important moderator of what and how children learn about emotion because culture determines the appropriateness of emotional displays for males and females.

Although it is known that mothers and fathers differ in their responses to children's emotions and that they differentiate their responses to emotions by child gender, we are only beginning to understand how these processes may be influenced by other factors and how they may predict later socioemotional development. Thus, a volume devoted to the topic of gender and the socialization of emotional competence seems timely.

The Development of Emotional Competence

When considering affective development, it is important to acknowledge that emotion encompasses a plethora of processes. Many researchers have focused on three areas of emotional development—the *understanding of emotion*, the *expression of emotion*, and the *regulation of emotion* (Denham, Bassett, & Wyatt, 2007; Eisenberg, Cumberland, & Spinrad, 1998; Saarni, 1985). *Emotion understanding* is thought to include both the comprehension of emotional experience, as well as the understanding of others' emotional expressions (Denham et al., 2003; Eisenberg and others, 1998). The *expression of emotion* has been defined as the propensity to display emotions in an effective and appropriate manner within given contexts and cultures (Denham et al., 2003; Eisenberg et al., 1998). Finally, the *regulation of emotion* has been defined as “the extrinsic and intrinsic processes responsible for monitoring, evaluating, and modifying emotional reactions to accomplish one's goals” (Thompson, 1994, p. 27).

Together, emotion understanding, emotion expression, and emotion regulation are thought to encompass the larger construct of *emotional competence* (Denham et al., 2003, 2007; Eisenberg et al., 1998). *Emotional competence* has been associated with processes beyond affective development, including the expression of socially competent behavior (Denham et al., 2003; Schmidt, DeMulder, & Denham, 2002) and

academic performance (Trentacosta & Izard, 2007). Although emotion understanding, expression, and regulation are collectively necessary for adaptive development, researchers have also demonstrated that each of these processes contributes separately to successful socioemotional development. For example, the ability to effectively understand emotions is paramount in the development of empathetic and sympathetic responding (Eisenberg, 2000; Zahn-Waxler, 2000). The expression of emotion is an essential part of social signaling and communication; this set of skills is particularly important in the early years of life when language skills have not fully developed (Tronick, Cohn, & Shea, 1986). Finally, the development of emotion regulation skills has been linked to a wide range of indices of adjustment and maladjustment including social competence and likeability in the peer group (for example, Denham et al., 2003), externalizing difficulties (for example, Cole et al., 1996), internalizing difficulties (for example, Rubin, Coplan, Fox, & Calkins, 1995), and the development of psychopathology (for example, Cicchetti, Ackerman, & Izard, 1995).

According to Denham et al. (2007), children learn about emotions via three primary modes of socialization: (a) witnessing others' feelings and emotions, (b) having their emotional displays responded to, and (c) the ways they are taught about their feelings and emotions. These forms of socialization are thought to impact children in direct and indirect ways (Denham, Mitchell-Copeland, Strandberg, Auerbach, & Blair, 1997; Eisenberg et al., 1998). Indirect socialization is thought to occur from the emotional climate within the family unit (Halberstadt, Crisp, & Eaton, 1999) and via parents' own expressiveness of emotion during family interaction (Valiente, Fabes, Eisenberg, & Spinrad, 2004). The expression of emotion within the family unit affords children with the opportunity to witness others' emotional expressions and evaluate the responses others receive after the display of specific emotions. Thus, when children watch the other family members display fear or anger, they gather information about the level of appropriateness for specific emotions. Indeed, children appear to internalize the information they gather from their family's affective climate. There is support for the relation between family expressiveness of emotion and child and adolescent emotional expressiveness and understanding (see Halberstadt and others, 1999 for review), as well as literature to suggest that family expressiveness of emotion impacts the development of emotion regulation (see Morris, Silk, Steinberg, Myers, & Robinson, 2007).

Direct socialization is thought to occur via parental reactions to emotions or parental discussion of emotions with their children. Typically, researchers have examined the different ways that parents respond to their children's emotions, and how different types of reactions affect children's social and emotional development. Parents' responses to children's emotions are typically characterized as supportive or

nonsupportive. Supportive reactions include warm, sensitive responses to children's emotions and have been associated with less negative emotionality (Crockenberg, 1987) and emotion understanding (Denham et al., 1997). Nonsupportive reactions, on the other hand, are described as punitive or dismissive responses to children's emotions (Eisenberg et al., 1998) and have been associated with emotion dysregulation, low levels of emotional expression, and less emotion understanding (Denham et al., 1997; Eisenberg & Fabes, 1994).

Of course, the socialization of emotion is impacted by other factors, including characteristics of both parents and children. One such characteristic is gender. The influence of gender is thought to be all-encompassing, and it has been stated that, "Virtually all of human functioning has a gendered cast—appearance, mannerisms, communication, temperament, activities at home and outside, aspirations, and values" (Ruble, Martin, & Berenbaum, 2006, p. 858). Thus, gender would seem to be an important factor to consider when examining the development of emotion.

Gender development is thought to be influenced by a multitude of factors (Ruble et al., 2006), including biology, cognition, and culture. One important way that children learn the rules for being a boy or a girl is via socialization by caretakers (Leaper, 2002). Indeed, parents' attitudes about gender roles (Tenenbaum & Leaper, 2002) and encouragement of gender-typed behaviors (Lytton & Romney, 1991) influence children's beliefs about gender and subsequent gender-typed behavior. Further, mothers and fathers also differ from one another in the ways they communicate with their children (see Leaper, Anderson, & Sanders, 1998 for review) and differ in the ways that they speak to and with their sons and their daughters (Fivush, 1989).

Parents socialize boys' and girls' emotions differently as the norms within a particular culture dictate the masculinity or femininity of specific emotions (Brody, 2000; Underwood, Coie, & Herbsman, 1992). In Western cultures, there is evidence that the expression of sadness and other internalizing affects are perceived to be nonmasculine in college-aged individuals. Men who display such emotions are viewed more negatively than women who display the same affect (Siegel & Alloy, 1990). On the other hand, emotions of an externalizing nature, such as anger, are considered more acceptable in males than females (Birnbaum & Croll, 1984). For instance, aggressive boys are viewed as more likeable by their peers than nonaggressive boys (Serbin et al., 1993), whereas aggressive girls are typically viewed more negatively than nonaggressive girls (Crick, 1997).

Therefore it should not be surprising that researchers have shown that parents encourage different emotions in their sons and daughters. For instance, mothers emphasize sadness and fear in conversations with their daughters, but not their sons (Adams, Kuebli, Boyle, & Fivush, 1995;

Fivush, 1989; Fivush, Brotman, Buckner, & Goodman, 2000). Further, when asked to discuss past events with their children, mothers discussed being angry with their young sons, but not their young daughters (Fivush, 1989). Moreover, there is also evidence that mothers and fathers differ from one another in their responses to children's emotions. For instance, Casano, Perry-Parrish, and Zeman (2007) reported that fathers responded to their children's sadness with minimizing responses ("Don't be such a cry baby.") more than mothers. In the same study, mothers reported that they would encourage ("It's okay to be upset.") their children's sadness more than fathers would. Thus, it seems reasonable to conclude that (a) parents encourage and discourage different emotions in their sons versus their daughters, and (b) mothers and fathers differ in the types of socialization strategies they utilize with their children. Although there is empirical work to suggest that these differences exist, we are just beginning to understand both the intricacies of these differences and how these differences impact the development of children's emotional competence.

In this volume, new directions and fresh perspectives on the role of gender in the development of emotional competence will be discussed. Each chapter will focus on a distinct area of gender and emotion socialization, all while contributing to the broad focus of this volume: *understanding how and why gender plays a role in the development of children's and adolescents' emotional competence*. In Chapter Two, Chaplin and colleagues examine gender and emotion socialization in an understudied population: low-income families. In Chapter Three, Denham and colleagues discuss the role of mothers and fathers in direct and indirect socialization of emotional expression, understanding, and regulation. Few studies have examined the socialization of specific negative (for example, fear and anger) and positive (for example, happiness) emotions by both mothers and fathers; Kennedy Root and Rubin examine these processes in Chapter Four. The literature on parental emotion socialization is largely focused on the early childhood years, and has left many to question how (and if) parents impact gender and emotional development beyond the early childhood years. Chapters Five and Six focus on this understudied age range. Zeman and colleagues address the role of gender in parent-child discussion of anger and sadness in middle childhood. Brand and Klimes-Dougan consider emotion socialization in adolescence, with a focus on the implications that gender-typed emotion socialization may have on individuals as they transition to adulthood. Finally, in Chapter Seven, Zahn-Waxler provides a closing commentary and outlines future directions for this area of study.

Several major themes are carried throughout the volume. They represent what we feel are some of the critical issues to better understanding the role of gender in emotion socialization and the development of emotional competence.

The Role of Fathers. The majority of the empirical work on gender differences in emotion socialization has involved maternal emotion socialization, with far fewer studies including the role of fathers. In the studies that have been conducted with fathers, it seems that fathers may play a distinct role in children's emotional development (for example, Cassano et al., 2007; Feldman, 2003); however, we are only beginning to understand how fathers socialize emotions, and how paternal emotion socialization impacts children's socioemotional development. Thus, it seems critical to better understand the role of fathers in emotion socialization and the development of emotional competence. Each of the chapters in this volume includes a commentary on the role of fathers in emotion socialization, and many (Chapters Three to Six) provide new empirical evidence for the unique—and important—role fathers play in children's emotional development.

The Socialization of Discrete Emotions. Over the past fifteen years, studies of emotion socialization have allowed for a better understanding of the development of affective behavior. However, much of the existing work is limited because there has been little focus on the socialization of specific emotions (for example, studying responses to anxiety and anger rather than an aggregate of negative emotions). Given that parents respond differently to how boys and girls display of the same emotion, it seems important to examine specific emotions when considering the role of gender in emotion socialization.

The Examination of Emotion Socialization Across Developmental Periods. As mentioned, a large portion of the empirical literature on the topic of emotion socialization has been focused on the infant through early childhood years. However, there is a growing interest in socialization of emotion in the middle childhood and early adolescent years (for example, the 2007 special issue of *Social Development: Emotion Socialization in Childhood and Adolescence*). With this interest in understanding the emotion socialization in older children and adolescents, it seems crucial to better understand the similarities and differences in parental emotion socialization from the early years of life through adolescence.

The Impact of Gender-Differentiated Socialization. Although there is a growing body of research on the role of gender in emotion socialization, the consequences of reinforcing different emotional expressions in boys and girls are still relatively understudied. Several researchers have argued that the different rules (and the resulting differing reactions) for boys' versus girls' emotional expression may result in maladaptive development for some children, especially those at risk. For instance, if a parent reprimands his or her son for expressing fear, the child may eventually learn to inhibit his display of fear; however, he may still *feel* fearful, but simply not *display* it (Buck, 1984). Consequently, the inhibition of his fear may lead to internal dysregulation, which may set the stage for the development of maladjustment—socially, emotionally, and academically.

Further, empirical evidence has illuminated the different ways that mothers and fathers react to different emotions in their sons and daughters; however, we are only beginning to understand the potentially unique roles that fathers and mothers play in their children's emotional development.

Conclusion

The goal of this sourcebook is to provide a comprehensive volume raising—and addressing—what we see as the critical issues in the study of gender, emotion socialization, and the development of emotional competence. Each of the chapters provides evidence for the pervasive role that gender plays in emotional development and provides a framework of how to better understand the development of emotion in boys and girls.

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