



The ethnic specificity of mental representation and social emotional competence in children

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Received 15 July 2014; received in revised form 21 November 2014; accepted 21 November 2014
Available online 28 November 2014

KEYWORDS

Ethnicity;
Social emotional
competence;
Prevention;
Aggression

Abstract

Cultural influences on socially competent behavior are well known and gain value during the ongoing globalization. This study compared socially competent behavior of children with different migration backgrounds as well as different native countries. 109 Children were selected from kindergartens (age 5–6 years) in Austria and in US with either Asian or Hispanic migration background. Social emotional competence was measured using story-completion-technique for a video-taped doll-play-interview and coded concerning socially competent behavior. The analyses showed significant differences in social emotional competence between the immigration backgrounds, nationalities, and gender in all of the categories coded during the interview. © 2014 Published by Elsevier GmbH.

Introduction

Behaviorism, the social learning theory, and the cognitive developmental theory propose that through daily interactions with their parents, young children learn social skills,

internalize parents' rules and develop social competence (Aronfreed, 1970; Bandura, 1986; Guralnick & Neville, 1997; Hartmann et al. 1976; McCollum & Chen, 2001). However, the criteria of socially competent behavior vary considerably across cultures and the cultural background. By early parent-child interaction children are socialized into a culture (McCollum & Yates, 2001). In times of increasing globalization, research on social emotional competence lack of cross-cultural influences as well as a greater understanding of the effects of culture on the development of competencies in children.

Because the interpretation of cross-cultural differences is difficult meaningful dimensions of cultural variability such

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as individualism and collectivism have been identified. Individualism and collectivism are antecedent values in societies or cultures for the explanation of social-emotional development (Hofstede, 1980). Individualism was more prevalent in Western societies than in the societies of developing countries, where collectivism was the dominant value (e.g. Inglehart, 1997; Sampson, 2000). Individualism or collectivism implies basic psychological functioning such as the expression of emotions, moral reasoning, the style of conflict resolution and social competence such as collaboration and conflict resolution style.

Social-emotional development takes place at the age of preschool/kindergarten (Benenson, Markovits, Roy, & Denko, 2003). Early childhood aggression (Gauthier, 2003; Tremblay, 2000; Tremblay, Brun, & Nadel, 2004) as well as emotional self-regulation, which prevents early childhood aggression, predominantly develop between 2 and 5 years of age (Donnellan, Trzesniewski, Robins, Moffit, & Caspi, 2005; Juen, Peham, Juen, & Benecke, 2007).

The development of social competence is affected by the varying degree of normativity and social values within societies and their subcultural variations (Nadler, Romek, & Shapira-Friedman, 1979). Hereby, the importance of social responsibility and moral reasoning differs across cultures and subcultures. In the USA, interpersonal responsiveness is less obligatory and more of a personal choice (Miller, Bersoff, & Harwood, 1990). European-American and Mexican-American children do not differ in regard to the degree of obligation. However, European-American children equate obligation to the family with high relationship quality and closeness to family whereas Mexican-American children show a similar obligation to the collective or group members as well (Freeberg & Stein, 1996). Concerning their conflict resolution style, European-American children prefer confronting others for conflict resolution and communicate and resolve conflicts in an individualistic mode (Oetzel, 1998a, 1998b). In contrast, Mexican-American children compromise more in handling conflicts with family and friends (Gabrielidis, Stephan, Ybarra, Dos Santos Pearson, & Villareal, 1997).

Concerning social interaction, African-American and European-American parents provide ample opportunity for their children to interact with other children their age and encourage them to make independent decisions and to choose their own friends. This encourages the children to venture out and feel confident about their ability to make new friends and to keep existing friends. Hispanic parents in contrast emphasize dependence of family and obedience to authority figures more than European-American parents. Chinese parents usually emphasize dependence on family and obedience to authority figures as well. Asian and Asian-Indian parents also encourage their children to be dependent on them for a prolonged period of time and do not encourage independent peer interaction and autonomous behavior (Jambunathan & Burts, 2003). European-American children are less likely to use equality norms in interactions with group members than Chinese children (Leung & Bond, 1982).

Focusing on social competence, most of the studies compared different ethnic groups living in the USA, or in the same country. To our knowledge, there are no studies comparing two European countries with different ethnicities

in the USA. In order to understand the effect globalization and being from different cultural backgrounds has on the differences in the social emotional conflict resolution of children of different ethnical backgrounds need to be explored.

To assess the beliefs, emotions, and self-regulation which underlay socially competent behavior, children's doll play narratives, especially story stem techniques, have shown themselves to be a promising approach to access inner world of children (Woolgar, Steele, Steele, Yabsley, & Fonagy, 2001). With this approach, ethnic differences are observed in different ethnicities concerning normative beliefs, expressed emotions, and interpersonal conflicts. Latin-American children reported higher levels of normative beliefs about aggression and expressed more aggressive fantasies but reported fewer fights than African-American children did (Samples, 1997). However, these cultural differences concerning aggression might depend on gender specificities. Well-supported findings in the research literature show that boys are more aggressive than girls (Crick, Casas, & Ku, 1999; Dodge & Coie, 1998; Eisenberg, 2000).

Children's way to resolve the conflict presented as well as their beliefs, emotions, and self-regulation in the narrative, were investigated as social emotional competence. Hereby, the different contents within the self-constructed narratives as well as the description of the different characters and interactions were analyzed. Based on the literature European-American children are high in individualism preferred confronting others and immediately taking a turn in group interaction tasks and communicate and resolve conflicts in an individualistic mode (Oetzel, 1998a, 1998b). In contrast, Mexican-American children high in collectivism preferred accommodation as a mode of handling conflicts with family and friends (Gabrielidis et al., 1997). European-American children were less likely to use equality norms in interactions with in-group members than Chinese children (Leung & Bond, 1982). Therefore, it can be hypothesized that Central-European children use more interpersonal conflicts than US immigrant children. US immigrant children, on the other hand, are expected to present more avoidance and more morality in their stories. Hereby Latin-American children with higher collectivism may strive for more compromises than the other children (H1) (Gabrielidis et al., 1997). Concerning *normative beliefs*, we can hypothesize that Latin-American children are more obliged to the collective and friends whereas Asian-American children focus more on individuality (H2) (Freeberg & Stein, 1996; Jambunathan & Burts, 2003; Leung & Bond, 1982). Concerning *aggression*, Latin-American children may show higher aggression compared to other groups (H3) (Samples, 1997).

Method

Participants

The study was conducted in a kindergarten class located in the USA (Oakland, California) and a kindergarten class in Central Europe (Innsbruck, Austria). Overall, 109 children, 59% males and 41% females, were selected to participate. All of the children in the American class were the offspring

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