



Chinese fathers' emotion socialization profiles and adolescents' emotion regulation

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ABSTRACT

The present study examined the various configurations of Chinese fathers' emotion socialization behaviors and how these configurations relate to adolescents' emotion regulation (ER). A total of 731 Chinese secondary school students completed measures of paternal reactions to their negative emotions, their use of cognitive reappraisal and expressive suppression strategies, and overall ER ability. Four profiles of paternal emotion socialization were identified: the *supportive* (high supportive, low punitive, and moderate minimization responses to adolescents' negative emotions), the *balanced* (moderate warmth/responsiveness and nonsupportive reactions, and below-average levels of expressive encouragement), the *disengaged* (low across the four paternal emotion socialization practices), and the *harsh* (low supportive and high nonsupportive responses) profiles. Chinese adolescents with *supportive* and *balanced* fathers reported greater use of cognitive reappraisal than did those with *disengaged* and *harsh* fathers. Overall ER ability was the highest among adolescents with *supportive* fathers and the lowest among those with *harsh* fathers. Expressive suppression did not differ across four profiles. These findings highlight the importance of adopting person-centered approaches in understanding parental emotion socialization strategies and their associations with adolescents' emotion regulation.

1. Introduction

Emotion regulation (ER), the ability to monitor, evaluate, and modify emotional reactions (Thompson, 1994), has been demonstrated to play an essential role in adolescents' mental health, social relationships, and academic success (Compas et al., 2017). Theories and empirical evidence share the premise that the development of ER is profoundly influenced by how parents respond to their negative emotional expression in their everyday life, which is a critical aspect of parental emotion socialization (Eisenberg, Cumberland, & Spinrad, 1998). However, extant research predominantly adopted variable-centered approaches, treating different parental emotion socialization behaviors as isolated and/or competing predictors of youth's developmental outcomes without considering the interdependencies between these socialization behaviors. Given that parents may simultaneously use various strategies to respond to youth's distress, empirical examination of potential patterns of parents' reactions to adolescents' distress and how various patterns of responses are associated with adolescents' ER may provide nuanced understanding of the emotion socialization processes.

In the present study, we adopted a person-centered approach to investigate Chinese fathers' emotion socialization profiles and their relations to adolescents' ER.

1.1. Parental reactions to youth's negative emotions

Previous studies have identified two categories of parental reactions to their children's negative emotions that have great implications for the development of ER (Eisenberg et al., 1998; Fabes, Poulin, Eisenberg, & Madden-Derdich, 2002). When exposed to youth's negative emotions, parents may respond in supportive ways, including problem-focused reactions (i.e., solving emotion-eliciting problems together), emotion-focused reactions (i.e., comforting and smoothing over the negative feelings), and expressive encouragement (i.e., encouraging the expression of negative emotions). By providing guidance and assistance, parents can scaffold children's regulation of negative feelings (Gottman, Katz, & Hooven, 1996) and teach them effective skills to deal with distress. These supportive responses may facilitate youth's acquisition of adaptive regulatory strategies, such as reinterpreting unpleasant

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situations in positive ways (i.e., reappraisal) and direct problem solving (Eisenberg, Fabes, & Murphy, 1996; Gunzenhauser, Fäsche, Friedlmeier, & von Suchodoletz, 2014). In contrast, parents may also respond with nonsupportive/invalidating behaviors, such as punishment or minimizing the legitimacy of their children's distressful feelings. These reactions may hinder youth's exploration of emotions and also might communicate to youth that negative emotions are unacceptable (Eisenberg et al., 1998). Thus, nonsupportive responses may lead to children's suppression of negative feelings and ultimately impede their socioemotional development (e.g., Gunzenhauser et al., 2014; Hurrell, Hudson, & Schniering, 2015).

Most research on the implications of parental emotion socialization focused on preschoolers' and school-age children's ER. Considering that adolescents are experiencing heightened emotional lability and most of them may have difficulties in coping with increased negative emotions (Steinberg, 2005), parents may continue to play a pivotal role in their children's development of ER during adolescence (Miller-Slough & Dunsmore, 2016). Results of the slim body of research that has examined the relation between parental emotion socialization and adolescents' ER are equivocal. Some studies have suggested that parents' supportive responses may be less beneficial for older children who have better coping skills and even prevent them from dealing with stressors independently (Nelson & Boyer, 2018). It has also been suggested that parents' nonsupportive responses may become less detrimental and even promote socioemotional development as children age, given that nonsupportiveness may imply parents' higher expectations for older children's self-regulation and thereby facilitating their coping efficiency (Nelson & Boyer, 2018). However, other studies with adolescent samples showed that parental supportiveness contributed to teenagers' better ER whereas parental nonsupportiveness was related to youth's poorer socioemotional functioning (for a review, see Miller-Slough & Dunsmore, 2016). Thus, more research attention on how parental emotion socialization contributes to adolescents' ER is necessary.

Furthermore, as emotion norms vary by culture, it is likely that parental emotion socialization behaviors may have different meanings and result in distinctive consequences in different cultural contexts. However, research to date has been predominantly conducted in America and Western Europe and little is known about parents' emotion socialization in China (and other East Asian countries). Open expressions of emotion are highly acceptable in Western cultures whereas suppression/inhibition of emotion expression for the sake of maintaining harmony is attached greater values in Chinese culture (Matsumoto et al., 2008). Therefore, parental expressive encouragement may be less adaptive whereas minimization reactions may be considered as more acceptable strategies to soothe children's negative emotions in Chinese culture (Tao, Zhou, & Wang, 2010).

Research findings regarding Chinese parents' emotion socialization and children's ER also are ambivalent. For example, Tao et al. (2010) found that Chinese parents' encouragement and minimization of emotion expression were unrelated to school-age children's internalizing and externalizing problems. Similarly, Han, Qian, Gao, and Dong (2015) found that Chinese parents' invalidating reactions did not relate to 7- to 12-year-old children's adaptive ER. However, studies on the overall effects of supportive and unsupportive responses in relation to children's ER revealed different results. Specifically, two studies with Chinese children aged 6–12 years (Jin, Zhang, & Han, 2017) and Korean first graders (Song & Trommsdorff, 2016) yielded similar results as those found among Western families, such that parents' supportiveness was associated with children's adaptive ER and parental unsupportiveness was related to children's emotional negativity/lability. However, these two studies may obscure the unique consequences of expressive encouragement and minimization responses in Chinese culture. The inconsistent findings suggest that different types of parental responses and how parents use these strategies in combination with each other may have distinctive effects on children's ER in China due to different culture norms.

1.2. Profiles of parental reactions to youth's negative emotions

Previous research findings have suggested that parents may simultaneously use positive and negative parenting practices to socialize their children (e.g., Lunkenheimer, Shields, & Cortina, 2007; Miller, Dunsmore, & Smith, 2015). Thus, the effects of a specific parental emotion socialization strategy on adolescents' ER may depend on how it is used in combinations with other strategies. For example, parental minimization of youth's negative emotions, a less harsh type of unsupportive responses, is more likely to be perceived by adolescents as effective in helping them manage emotions in the presence of supportive responses. In support of this idea, Lunkenheimer et al. (2007) found that 3rd to 5th graders whose parents coached and dismissed their emotions exhibited lower levels of emotional lability/negativity than did those with parents merely using emotion coaching strategies. This finding highlighted the necessity of identifying patterns of parental emotion socialization by using person-centered approaches and examining how different parental profiles are related to children's ER and adjustment.

However, profiles of parental emotion socialization and their relations to adolescents' ER are not well understood. Two studies provide important implications for understanding these questions. Dunbar and colleagues (Dunbar, Perry, Cavanaugh, & Leerkes, 2015) examined African American mothers' and fathers' profiles of racial and emotion socialization and their associations with young adults' depressive symptoms and anger expression. However, this study mainly focused on racial socialization rather than emotion socialization among individuals with racial discrimination experiences. Additionally, Dunbar and colleagues' use of two composite scores to index parental emotion socialization (i.e., supportiveness and nonsupportiveness) may be less relevant in Chinese contexts, as Chinese (vs. Western) youth may interpret specific types of parental reactions (expressive encouragement and minimization) in a different way. Using five reactions (i.e., problem-focused reactions, emotion-focused reactions, expressive encouragement, punishment, and minimization) may be more valuable to identify optimal parental emotion socialization profiles for Chinese youth's socioemotional development. Miller and colleagues (Miller et al., 2015) used cluster analyses to identify American parents' emotion socialization patterns based on their reports of emotion coaching, emotion dismissing, positive expressivity, and negative expressivity. A high-involvement profile characterized by higher scores on all four practices and a low-involvement profile characterized by lower levels of all four practices emerged in this study, with the high-involvement (vs. low-involvement) profile being linked to children's increased regulatory capacities over time. However, the sample size of this study ($N = 76$) was small, which may limit the possibility of identifying more diverse profiles and the generalizability of the findings.

1.3. The current study

The present study aims to identify Chinese fathers' emotion socialization profiles, and to examine how these profiles are related to adolescents' ER. We focused on paternal emotion socialization because of an overlook of fathers in the existing literature. Increasing amount of studies has indicated that fathers have unique contributions to youth's emotional functioning above and beyond maternal influences. Moreover, fathers (vs. mothers) may provide more opportunities for their adolescent children to develop ER skills because father-child interactions tend to be more emotional aroused (Brand & Klimes-Dougan, 2010). Unlike mothers who are generally more supportive when responding to children's negative emotions, fathers tend to punish or ignore youth's distressful feelings (Brand & Klimes-Dougan, 2010). This may be particularly true for Chinese fathers who act as the role model within the family to socialize children's inhibition of emotional expression (Shwalb, Shwalb, & Lamb, 2013). Therefore, we expected to find at least three profiles of Chinese fathers' responses to adolescent

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