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Original article

How do children deal with socio-moral conflicts? Self-conscious emotions and conflict resolution in the narratives of institutionalized and noninstitutionalized children



Comment les enfants traitent-ils les conflits socio-moraux ? Les émotions auto-conscientes et la résolution des conflits dans les descriptions d'enfants institutionnalisés pour maltraitance et non institutionnalisés

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ABSTRACT

Introduction. – Self-conscious emotions play an important role in children's psychosocial functioning.
Objective. – To examine how institutionalized children who have been abused and noninstitutionalized children solve socio-moral conflicts and evoke self-conscious emotions to deal with these conflicts.
Method. – One hundred children aged 5 to 8 years old (50 placed in residential care after abuse and 50 nonabused living with their biological families) were asked to solve the socio-moral conflicts enacted by a set of five story-stems.
Results. – Institutionalized children describe less adjusted resolutions and less pride in their narratives than noninstitutionalized children do. Children maltreatment revealed no effect on self-conscious emotions of shame and guilt.
Conclusion. – Maltreatment influences the way children use their emotional and social resources to deal with socio-moral conflicts.

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R É S U M É

Introduction. – Les émotions auto-conscientes jouent un rôle important dans le fonctionnement psychosocial des enfants.
Objectif. – Examiner comment des enfants évoquent des émotions auto-conscientes en même temps qu'ils font face à des conflits socio-moraux.
Méthode. – Cent enfants âgés de 5 à 8 ans (50 enfants placés en accueil institutionnel à la suite de maltraitance et 50 non-maltraités vivant avec leurs familles biologiques) ont été invités à résoudre des conflits socio-moraux présentés par cinq débuts d'histoires.
Résultats. – Les enfants institutionnalisés décrivent des résolutions moins ajustées et rapportent moins de fierté dans leurs descriptions que les enfants non institutionnalisés. La maltraitance infligée aux enfants n'a révélé aucun effet sur les émotions auto-conscientes de honte et de culpabilité.
Conclusion. – La maltraitance influence la façon dont les enfants utilisent leurs ressources émotionnelles et sociales pour faire face aux conflits socio-moraux.

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Along their developmental pathway, children are challenged to deal with socio-moral conflicts. Socio-moral conflicts consist of dilemmas implying contradictory emotions. These dilemmas depict highly emotional, moral, and/or relationship-oriented scenarios to assess children's responses to and negotiation about rules and prohibitions (Bretherton & Oppenheim, 2003). The ability to solve socio-moral conflicts has an important role in social and emotional adjustment. Self-conscious emotions, such as guilt, shame or pride, consist of emotional experiences requiring objective self-awareness and the ability to evaluate behaviour according to internalized standards, rules and goals (Lewis, 1992; Lewis, 2007; Lewis, 2015). These emotions play an important role in the development of adaptive strategies to cope with socio-moral conflicts, as they guide social behaviours and moral decision-making (Macaulay & Cohen, 2014; Spruit, Schalkwijk, Vugt, & Stams, 2016). Self-conscious emotions monitor social interactions, encouraging behavior that conforms to social and moral standards and rules (Muris & Meesters, 2014; Tangney, Stuewig, & Mashek, 2007). Children who have difficulties in reading and responding appropriately to social cues have fewer positive interactions with others, which may lead to disruptive behavioral adjustment, namely to internalizing and externalizing problems, such as anxiety, depression and antisocial behavior (Bornstein, Chun-Shin Hahn, & Haynes, 2010).

Parents' typical attitudes and behaviours have been found to play an important role in children's emotional development (Zarra-Nezhad, Aunola, Kiuru, Mulla, & Moazami-Goodarzi, 2015). One of these behaviours is children's maltreatment, a marker for deviant parenting behaviours that are likely to have a negative impact on the development of the children's self and self-conscious emotions (Alessandri & Lewis, 1996a). Child maltreatment refers to a toxic relational environment that poses significant risks for maladaptation across biological and psychological domains of development (Chicchetti & Toth, 2005). Abusive parents' harshness, indifference, rejection and low responsiveness tend to compromise the development of children's self-conscious emotions (Alessandri & Lewis, 1996a; Bennett, Sullivan, & Lewis, 2005; Muris & Meesters, 2014; Stuewig & McCloskey, 2005). Maltreated children have to deal with the impairment of this emotional barometer, which may lead to difficulties in coping with socio-moral conflicts.

Some empirical evidence has shown that maltreated children describe less conflict resolution strategies (Macfie et al., 1999) and more conflict themes (Toth, Cicchetti, Macfie, Rogosch, & Maughan 2000) in their narratives than nonmaltreated children do. Additionally, the maltreatment experience has been related with the way children solve socio-moral conflicts enacted by story-stems (Warren, 2003). Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine how institutionalized and noninstitutionalized children solve socio-moral conflicts and evoke self-conscious emotions to deal with these conflicts based on narrative story-stem techniques.

Self-conscious emotions act as social and moral barometer as they help to deal with social interactions and encourage behaviour that conforms to social and moral standards (Muris & Meesters, 2014; Tangney et al., 2007). They enable the individual's ability to read social cues and adjust their behaviours accordingly. As maltreated children tend to show a disturbance in the development of self-conscious emotions (Alessandri & Lewis, 1996a), they are likely to experience difficulties in coping with socio-moral conflicts. In this study, shame, guilt and pride will be analysed.

Shame and guilt are negative emotional experiences associated with the perception of having violated socio-moral standards and rules (Lewis, 1992; Lewis, 2007; Lewis, 2015). According to the prevailing view on these two emotions, shame involves an evaluative process centred on the global self, while guilt results from an attribution to self-specific actions. Hence, while shame leads to self-depreciation and maladaptive behaviours (e.g., Lewis, 1971; Niedenthal, Tangney, & Gavanski, 1994; Tangney, 1991),

guilt is associated with pro-activity and reparative actions, tending to result into prosocial behaviour (Aksan & Goldsmith, 2003; Apavaloie, Page, & Marks, 2014; Niedenthal et al., 1994; Olthof, 2012; Tangney et al., 2007). However, recent studies on these two emotions show that shame could lead to constructive behaviours and that guilt is not always associated with prosocial behaviour (de Hooge, 2013; Leach & Cidam, 2015; Schmader & Lickel, 2006). Some of these studies indicate that shame might promote prosocial behavior (de Hooge, 2013), as feeling ashamed leads to focus on the damage inflicted to others. Additionally, research on guilt shows that this emotion can have negative consequences to social interactions, as this emotion can be associated with social withdrawal and be less relationship-oriented than initially thought (de Hooge, 2013).

Contrary to shame and guilt, pride is a positive emotional experience associated with the perception that behaviour has been successful in the light of socio-moral standards and rules (Lewis, 1992). It requires both the perception of being competent and the assumption of responsibility for the success. Pride encourages behaviour that conforms to social standards of worth or merit, reinforcing and rewarding the commitment to these standards and rules (Tangney et al., 2007). Self-conscious emotions have an important role in socioemotional adjustment. Although self-conscious emotions are considered functional and hence adaptive in nature, the dysregulation of these emotions is associated with various types of psychopathological symptoms, such as depression, post-traumatic disorder, anxiety disorders, suicidal and self-injurious behavior and substance abuse (Muris et al., 2014).

Maltreatment experience may compromise the development of self-conscious emotions (Alessandri & Lewis, 1996a). Empirical evidence based on a broad spectrum of methodological approaches has shown that maltreatment experience plays an important role in the development of shame, guilt and pride, as these emotional experiences are conditioned by parents' authoritarian practices and rejecting behaviours (Bennett et al., 2005; Mills, 2003). Alessandri and Lewis (1996b) have analysed expressed shame and pride in 42 maltreated children and 42 nonmaltreated children, between 4 and 5 years old. An interaction effect between maltreatment experience and the child's gender was found on the expression of shame and pride. Maltreated girls expressed more shame and less pride than nonmaltreated girls, whereas this effect was not observed in boys. In a sample of 117 children aged between 3 and 7 years old, Bennett et al. (2005) found an association between maltreatment and shame expressed by children in reaction to failure. Studies focusing on shame-proneness have shown that it is positively associated with emotional abuse and neglect (Bennett, Sullivan, & Lewis, 2010; Høglund & Nicholas, 1995; Stuewig & McCloskey, 2005). Research regarding guilt and maltreatment is scarce and reveals some inconsistencies. Some studies show that guilt is not associated with maltreatment (Høglund & Nicholas, 1995; Webb et al., 2013), while others show that there is an association between this emotion and abuse experience (Bennett et al., 2010). However, the literature has shown that abusive parents tend to be harsh, rejecting and hostile, which may lead to children's self-depreciation and low self-esteem. Therefore, maltreating parents induce children to attribute transgressions to the global self, and not to specific behaviour, which may lead to shame-proneness rather than to guilt-proneness (Bennett et al., 2010).

In sum, research offers some evidence supporting the association between maltreatment and self-conscious emotions. Additionally, empirical evidence on the association between guilt and maltreatment is scarce. However, most of the studies on self-conscious emotions rely on observations in experimental settings and on self-report questionnaires rather than on story-stems.

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