GENDER AND EMOTION EXPRESSION: A DEVELOPMENTAL CONTEXTUAL PERSPECTIVE

Nurullayeva Charos Ubaydullayeva
Senior teacher Vocational College 2 Tashkent region Bostonlik district
Charos@mail.ru Tel:+998 973435658

Abstract: *Small but significant gender differences in emotion expressions have been reported for adults, with women showing greater emotional expressivity, especially for positive emotions and internalizing negative emotions such as sadness. But when, developmentally, do these gender differences emerge? And what developmental and contextual factors influence their emergence? This article describes a developmental bio-psycho-social model of gender differences in emotion expression in childhood. Prior empirical research supporting the model, at least with mostly White middle-class U.S. samples of youth, is presented. Limitations to the extant literature and future directions for research on gender and child emotion are suggested.*

Keywords: *childhood, emotion, gender, sex differences*

Several research studies and meta-analyses have shown small but significant gender differences in the expression of emotion in adulthood in the US and some Western European countries, with women showing greater emotion expression overall (Brody & Hall, 1993; Kring & Gordon, 1998), and in particular for positive emotions (LaFrance, Hecht, & Levy Paluck, 2003) and internalizing negative emotions such as sadness and anxiety (e.g., Allen & Haccoun, 1976), but with men expressing greater levels of aggression and anger than women, in some contexts (Archer, 2004). Interestingly, although women may be more expressive of most emotions, at least in Western cultures, men show equal or greater levels of physiological arousal, for example with men showing greater blood pressure and cortisol responses to emotionally arousing stressors (e.g., Chaplin, Hong, Bergquist, & Sinha, 2008; Kirschbaum, Kudielka, Gaab, Schommer, & Hellhammer, 1999; but see Stroud, Salovey, & Epel, 2002). This may mean that men are aroused internally, but "keep in" emotions whereas women freely express emotions, as proposed by Buck and others (Buck, 1977, 1984; Levensen, Carstensen, & Gottman, 1994). In addition, women show greater rates of clinical depression and some forms of anxiety disorders than men starting in adolescence, disorders which involve in their etiology and in their description the experience and expression of high levels of internalizing negative emotions such as sadness, guilt, and fear (Chaplin & Cole,

2005; Keenan & Hipwell, 2005; Zahn-Waxler, Shirtcliff, & Marceau, 2008). In contrast, men show greater rates of antisocial behaviors and alcohol abuse than women (Nolen-Hoeksema & Hilt, 2006), which may involve expressions of anger (Chaplin & Cole, 2005) and have been associated with lower experience and expression of anxiety and sadness (Chaplin et al., 2008).

One key to better understand gender and emotion in adulthood and potential implications of these for psychological well-being is to take a developmental perspective. This article does this by describing general theories of gender and child development and then presenting a bio-psycho-social frame-work for understanding the development of gender differences (and similarities) in emotion expressions. We draw on recent research findings on emotion expression in children and adolescents of different ages, with a particular focus on meta-analytic findings, to examine potential evidence for this model. Notably, research to date on child emotion expression has focused largely on White middle and upper middle class youth from the United States, Canada, and some Western European countries. Thus, our theoretical model (and several past models) is based largely on data from these cultural groups and may not generalize to other cultures. Thus, after presenting our model, we discuss future directions for research on other cultural groups and discuss potential applications of our model to understanding of gender and emotion in childhood in different cultural contexts.

The present article focuses on emotion expression, which is what youth show externally in the form of facial, vocal, and postural expressions to communicate (or to mask) their internal emotional states to others. All research that is presented on "emotion expression" examined observed facial, vocal, and/or postural expressions coded by reliable trained observers. The literature on gender and emotion regulation is not reviewed, but one can infer that regulation is occurring either consciously or subconsciously if, for example, girls express higher levels of happiness than boys when with a stranger, but not when alone. In this example, girls may be up-regulating happy expressions, perhaps in order to please the stranger or boys may be down-regulating happy expressions in order to appear more "calm and cool." It is difficult to measure children's actual regulation strategies as youth may not be aware of their strategies, but we can infer a great deal about real-life regulation by examining observed emotion expression in different situations and through multi-method studies examining a combination of emotion expression, subjective emotion experience, and physiological arousal in youth.

Several theories have been proposed to explain the emergence of gender differences in behavior, in general, in childhood. Three of the main theoretical models are: biological, social developmental, and social constructionist (although most theorists acknowledge that a combination of these theories most accurately explains child behavior). Below I describe the three models generally. In the next section, they will be described as applied to a bio-psycho-social model of gender differences in emotion expression.

Biological theorists propose that girls and boys show innate differences that are related to biological factors, existing either prenatally and/or at birth (e.g., genetic differences existing prenatally that may underlie behaviors that emerge at birth or unfold in later development) or that occur at a later point in development (e.g., differential increases in androgens and estrogens at puberty, activating neural emotional arousal systems). These biologically related differences would then contribute to gender differences in behavior. For example, boys have been shown to have higher levels of arousal than girls in infancy and boys show less language ability and inhibitory control than girls in early childhood (see Brody, 1999). These early gender differences have been found to be strongly influenced by biological factors, such as sex differences in gene expression and the influence of sex hormones (e.g., testosterone) in utero, which lead to brain and body differences between boys and girls (for reviews, see Baron-Cohen, 2002; or Zahn-Waxler et al., 2008). Boys' lower language and inhibitory control abilities may then lead to difficulty inhibiting the expression of several behaviors, including negative emotions, lower likelihood of using language to regulate emotion expressions, and greater likelihood of expressing un-modulated negative emotions. Of course, the type of unmodulated negative emotion that is expressed may be due to a biological propensity for boys to show anger or due to socialization factors that are more allowing of anger among males (or due to a combination of biology and socialization).

Psychosocial developmental theorists propose that children learn gender-role-consistent behaviors over time through cognitive learning, socialization, and experience (Liben & Bigler, 2002). Gender schema theory is one social-developmental theory that proposes that boys and girls develop cognitive schemas for gender based on observing their environments (Martin & Halverson, 1981). Such schemas include the behaviors and traits associated with being a boy or girl (such as "boys are active and tough"). With time, children develop a schema for their "own" sex (boy or girl) and proceed to select activities and environments that fit with their own sex schemas (e.g., "I'm a boy, so I am tough. I will play superhero

instead of having a tea party"), which further reinforce those schemas. Indeed, boy peer groups have been shown to encourage rough and tumble play, whereas girl peer groups tend to emphasize quiet and cooperative play (Maccoby, 1990; Rose & Rudolph, 2006).

Social learning/socialization theories are another example of psychosocial developmental theories. Social learning theories posit that children are encouraged either through explicit teaching, through modeling, or through subtle encouragement of certain behaviors by socialization agents, to adopt gender-role consistent behaviors (e.g., Bandura, 1969). Then, once gender roles for behaviors are internalized by youth, social learning/ socialization theorists propose that gender-role consistent behaviors may be expressed or not expressed depending on the particular situation or environment. For example, mothers may model for girls a pattern of "feminine" emotion expression that involves expressing cheeriness even when it is unfelt and girls may follow this pattern of feminine emotion expression within contexts where it may be adaptive (such as when in front of unfamiliar adults who may expect feminine behavior). As another example, parents may, possibly unknowingly, show greater attention to their child's gender-role consistent emotions. For example, Chaplin, Cole, and Zahn-Waxler (2005) conducted an observational study of parent–child interactions with primarily White middle-class U.S. preschoolers. They found that fathers (but, interestingly, not mothers) showed greater contingent responses to in-the-moment sadness and anxiety expressions by girls than boys and greater contingent responses to anger and disharmonious emotion expressions by boys than girls. This may have subtly socialized girls to increase sadness expressions but limit anger, at least in some contexts. Chaplin et al. (2005) indeed found that higher father responses to sadness and anxiety expressions at age 4 predicted greater increases in sadness and anxiety expressions by the children during parent–child interactions from age.

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